

THE NIGHTMARE

by Janet Rivenbark

A soft hand shaking him and a feminine voice in his ear brought him back to himself.

Vincent jerked upright; his body pumped with adrenaline. At first, he didn't know where he was. His head was pounding, his shoulder hurt and he was covered in cold sweat as he peered into the dimness around him. He didn't see the candles, the stained-glass window, or any of the things he'd collected over the years. All he could see was the scene from his dream and feel the dread that he wouldn't be able to reach them in time.

The soft voice brought him back to the present, and he remembered where he was. His own chamber with Catherine, who had insisted on staying with him after Father had treated and dressed his wound.

Right now, she was staring at him with a worried look on her lovely face.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "I can feel your anxiety and fear - I've never felt anything like it before!"

She'd been sleeping beside him on a cot Mouse had set up next to his bed. Vincent remembered offering to take the cot — he was used to sleeping rough, and he didn't want her to be uncomfortable. But Catherine had insisted that she would take the cot. He was injured and needed the comfort of the bed more than she did. Now she moved and sat next to him on the side of the bed.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. *God, I'm a mess!* he added to himself.

His hands were shaking! He balled them into fists and crossed his arms over his bandaged chest protectively. *Damn dream!* It always made him feel confused and anxious whenever he had it, and it was always things, like what had happened during the previous few days, that seemed to trigger it.

"There's nothing to worry about — I share your pain," Catherine protested.

Her eyes had gone green; they always did when her emotions ran high — Vincent wondered if that meant she was truly picking up on his emotions. She had explained to him that although she wasn't empathic like him, she had occasionally picked up on what he was feeling when he was under great duress.

"Sorry," he said again. "I need to go for a walk or something. I can never sleep again after I have that dream."

"What dream?" She put her hand on his arm — his muscles were all bunched up, his biceps bulging with tension. "Tell me about it — please."

Vincent shook his head and looked down at his legs. He'd kicked off the covers and he'd begun to feel the chill. He was wearing his almost threadbare sweatpants, and the only thing covering his chest was the bandage Father had wrapped around him.

"You don't want to know. It's foolish, really — just a dream I have sometimes."

"Vincent..." She placed a soft hand on his jaw — which was clenched with tension — and turned his face so their eyes met. "Please — I want to help you," she said softly. "I want to help you *heal*, but you have to help and meet me in the middle. You have to tell me your trauma."

"It's not trauma — it's just a dream," he insisted. "Just a bad dream."

"A bad dream you have over and over again — am I right?" She looked at him, a slight frown creasing her forehead.

"Well..." Vincent cleared his throat. "I suppose."

"So, tell me about it. Maybe it will ease some of your pain — let me share your burden. You know what they say about a burden shared being halved."

Vincent was tempted to refuse her offer and dismiss her, maybe even send her home. He didn't need help, damn it! Everybody had bad dreams sometimes. What was the big deal?

But Catherine had always been there for him... and she'd rescued him from death as many times as he'd rescued her. He had to admit he owed her his life. The least he could do was talk about his dream — even if he *really* didn't want to.

"All right!" he said shortly. "I have this dream that I'm hiding in one of the sentry posts, protecting the community — trying to keep someone from getting past a barricade. Because I know if they do, they'll find the lower levels where all the women and children are hiding. And..."

He trailed off, having a difficult time continuing. Talking about it brought everything back, even worse than the dream itself.

"And?" Catherine prodded softly. Scooting closer to him on the bed, she placed one cool hand against his cheek. "Please, keep going," she murmured. "I want to help you bear this if I can, but I need you to tell me."

Vincent didn't see how she could help him, but he had to admit he liked the feel of her cool hand. Also, her scent was somehow comforting. Was it perfume? It blended so well with her natural scent. It made him feel... relaxed.

"Please, continue," Catherine murmured. "There were *intruders* — you were afraid they would break through to find where the women and children were hiding. Was there someone else, too?"

Vincent sighed and took a deep breath.

"Father, some of the older people."

"And you felt responsible for keeping them all safe?" She wondered if this had been something that really happened, or if it was just a fear he had. "Is this just a dream, or did it really happen?"

"It happened. I was almost eighteen. There was a group of intruders, and it was much like this time. Father wanted everyone to move to the lower levels and hide until the intruders tired of searching. But some of the others were worried that they wouldn't tire and would find our chambers as comfortable as we did and decide to stay. People were spread out in different small chambers on the lower levels - there hadn't been time to make it all the way down to the Great Hall."

"So, you were sent to discourage them," Catherine said tightly. She resented the attitude of some of the tunnel dwellers that Vincent was no more than a watchdog. They were always the ones who had suggested he go out when there was an intruder alert, like when the Tong had invaded, and again, this time when the band of vagrants had found their way below.

"Everyone *should* have been safe — they *would* have been if I'd done my job." Vincent scrubbed a hand over his face. He was deep in the memory now. "I... couldn't hold them back," he admitted at last. "They found another way in... found one of the hiding places."

He swallowed hard, pausing, fighting to keep his stomach from rebelling as it had that day. The invaders had found one of the hiding places and gone through it like a pack of rabid wolves, killing indiscriminately.

The broken bodies of women and children had been everywhere, and Vincent had been the one who had found them and had to look through all of them, so they would know who was among the dead, but not before he'd found the intruders and had killed them all. It had been the first time he'd killed. He'd known that he'd done it for all the right reasons, to protect his family and friends, but it had still weighed on his conscience.

He heard a soft moan and looked up to see the look of pain on Catherine's face. He hadn't realized that he'd actually been telling her what happened.

"Catherine..." Reaching up, he took her wrist and pulled her hand gently but firmly away from his face.

Catherine looked up, her eyes shiny with unshed tears.

"It wasn't your fault! I know you feel responsible, but it wasn't your fault," she whispered. "Vincent, I'm so sorry!"

"You don't need to feel sorry," he said shortly. "But you're wrong; it was my responsibility. I should have been stronger — one better. I should have kept them safe."

Catherine shook her head, and a tear slid down her cheek.

"You did all you could. You couldn't be in every place at once. If someone had helped you, it might have been avoided."

He was a little unnerved by her reaction — he'd never told anyone the whole story; only the people who had been Below back then knew any of it, but even they didn't know all of it. And he'd never told anyone, not even Father, about the dream. She was crying for his pain; it was almost like she was shedding the tears he couldn't bring himself to shed. But Catherine's next question surprised him even more.

"Will you let me hold you?" she asked earnestly, looking up at him

Vincent wasn't quite sure what to make of her request. He had never had anyone ask to hold him, not since he was a child. Now, it was usually he who did the holding, the comforting.

That was how Vincent usually preferred it... but he found himself intrigued. There had always been something comforting about Catherine — and not just because she was beautiful. There was something about her. She had told him that often, victims or witnesses would talk to her when they wouldn't talk to anyone else. Maybe she was more empathic than she gave herself credit for.

"Well... all right," he said at last, somewhat uncomfortably. "How?"

"Like this." Lying back against the pillows, she beckoned for him. "Come here. Put your head here." She put a hand on her chest. She was wearing an oversized white T-shirt. It looked like one of his since it was thin from repeated washings.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Come here." She beckoned to him again, and this time, he complied. Gingerly, he moved to her other side so he could lay on his right side, careful of his injured left shoulder, and rested his head carefully where she'd indicated. Her breasts were soft, and her warm, feminine scent filled his senses.

He wasn't quite sure what to do with his arms and hands, but Catherine reached down, took his arm, and placed it gently around the curve of her waist before tugging the covers up over both of them.

"Get as close as you can get," she directed.

Willingly, Vincent snuggled closer, pressing his hard, muscular body against her small one. He'd never laid in bed with a woman, cuddling like this. He and Catherine had cuddled, but always sitting up, and usually on the hard floor of her balcony.

“Good...” Catherine ran cool, soothing fingers through his hair and massaged the nape of his neck, easing some of the tension there.

Vincent groaned appreciatively. “That feels incredible.”

“Are you feeling better?” Catherine asked after a while.

He looked up. “Yes, I am. Usually, when I have that dream, I have to get up and run or do some kind of heavy work — *anything* — to push it out of my mind. But you made it go away - or at least the bad feelings that went with it. How did you do that?”

“You let me share your burden,” she said simply, stroking his hair again. “Do you think you can sleep now? We still have a few hours before breakfast.”

“I think so.” It was a new experience for him, feeling so calm after the dream. Usually, the dream would leave him unsettled and on edge for hours, if not days. But now, he could already feel his breathing slowing along with his heartbeat. How had Catherine done that for him?

He would figure it out later. For now, her breasts were the softest, sweetest pillow he’d ever pressed his face to, and the feeling of her slim, cool fingers combing through his hair and massaging his scalp was incredibly soothing.

“Sleep a little longer, love,” Catherine murmured. “I will hold the nightmares at bay.”

Amazingly, Vincent believed her. With a deep sigh, he let his eyes close as he pulled Catherine a little closer. It felt so good to hold her... and be held by her. She felt familiar and comforting. It didn’t really make much sense, but he accepted it.

Vincent decided not to worry about it. He slipped back into sleep, and this time, he had no dreams.