

A GREATER LOVE HAS NEVER BEEN

by Pat Ryan

(from Tales of Love and Hope 2)

"Catherine...I told you, I don't know where he is!" Father swore in a rather aggrieved tone.

"Father...It is important...I need to speak with him, please," Catherine pleaded with great need.

Father saw her urgency and softened just a bit. "Catherine... I have long worried that something like this might happen. It has been my hope that your relationship with my son would not get this far. Vincent is totally aware of the consequences, and yet he still allows you to push at him so...You must understand he is not a normal man...You cannot ask of him that which he must not do. It would be devastating to him... It already has been, don't you see?"

Catherine's brow grew deep with furrows. Her eyes red and swollen from the torment of the last 48 hours. She stared blindly at the floor, not returning the knowing look of the gentleman before her. Her only thought was to make better what had gone so wrong. She turned back to the elderly man and began her explanation.

"Father...You don't understand... Vincent didn't hurt me... I fell. I tripped over my own two feet, that's all. It was Vincent who started thinking he had injured me. I couldn't explain it to him before he disappeared from my balcony... I need to see him...please!"

Father sat back into his chair and reflected a disgusted frown. He felt the woman's lesser anguish, but also remembered the sight of his son's face as he passed him in the tunnels that night. Father now felt extremely torn between the love he had for his son, and his concern for the frailty that graced his presence. He waited a moment, rubbing his bearded chin. His heart melted little by little as he saw Catherine begin to cry.

"Catherine... please believe me... I know not where my son has gone... He will need time to collect his thoughts. It would be appropriate for you to give him that time. I suggest you go home now and wait until Vincent contacts you. It would be for the best."

"And if he doesn't contact me...What then?" she asked weepy eyed and shaking.

"Then perhaps you should consider it his answer. Catherine, you and I know the pain Vincent has suffered because of his differences. If you truly love him as much as you say, then maybe you should look at what is really best for him. Vincent was not in this turmoil before he met you."

Father saw her tears coming down but didn't stop his investigative results. "We both have seen great changes in him this last year. Changes that, I must say, I have dreaded from the first moment on. Sometimes sacrifice is the truest form of love we can offer. Surely in your and Vincent's case, a truer love has never been... Unfortunately... it is that love that is destroying my son..."

"NO!" Catherine replied into his words.

With little more than a blank stare, the small woman turned to leave. She headed out a short distance, then realized she didn't know her way back to her apartment. Feeling very sad and confused, she sat down in the midst of the tunnels and cried for more than an hour. A child would come to her rescue and lead Catherine home, but until then she had nothing else to do but consider Father's words to her.

Vincent sat very still in the darkness of one of the deepest chambers. There was little light, and absolutely no sound, save that of his own diminished breathing. His heavy sobs, echoed throughout the chamber, making an eerie feeling reflect back at his already burdened soul. The quiet did little to stop the memories that threatened his very sanity. Those memories were of that night, of how he had hurt the one beautiful thing in his life, with his differentness.

Vincent sat lazily enjoying the moon and the stars on Catherine's balcony. They popped intermittently out from behind the clouds that threatened rain. He watched in wonder at the changing sky and allowed himself to dream a brief second. He thought of how wonderful it would be to be walking arm-in-arm with Catherine at that moment, beneath that very sky. How concealing it would be, how safe. Vincent didn't toil in these thoughts. He waited quietly for his beauty's return.

Catherine had gone inside to make them both some tea. It was only moments until her return, though to Vincent it seemed an eternity. He waited patiently, feeling a bit on edge by their separation. He concentrated his mind on hers, as she worked. Vincent took enjoyment in the innocence he found there.

Shortly she returned, the night was early and their fondness for each other's company was growing stronger and stronger. A sudden flash of lightning split the sky, just after Catherine sat down. With it came the first few drops of a heavy downpour. Instinctively, Vincent shielded Catherine as she gathered the tea set to go indoors.

Once through the doorway, Catherine put it down upon the coffee table. Abruptly she turned, when a sense told her that Vincent hadn't followed her inside. Sure enough, there he stood in the rain, his cloak drooping down about his face.

"Vincent...come in out of the rain!" Catherine exclaimed and came immediately back to the door.

"I cannot," Vincent replied and backed a step further out into the weather.

Catherine started out after him, the wind and water drenched her light clothing quickly, revealing to Vincent more than he wished to see. Gently Catherine tugged on his arm. She hoped to coax him inside, a feat to this point, that had not been accomplished.

"Please Vincent... The night is still quite early. Come inside, out of the rain." Catherine began pulling on his sleeve. The droplets made her words a bit garbled, her hair hanging heavily in her face.

Vincent became mesmerized by the sight. With one hand, he absently brushed the dampened strands from her face. All the while, Vincent allowed himself to be pulled closer and closer to the door. He was totally unaware of his surroundings, lost in a wonderful dream-like state.

Two steps inside the door, Catherine felt her insistence growing less. Vincent was now leading her. He had taken her arm, in a strangely masculine way. A change that both surprised and excited her deep from within. Not until they stood facing one another in the center of her living room, did Catherine realize that her dreams were about to come true. She sent out those feelings heavily through their bond, hoping they would support Vincent's own needs.

Instead, they acted quickly to awaken him from that fairy-tale dream. He woke to find himself standing in the one place he felt not allowed to him. His features turned shocked as he saw Catherine's face so close. As he felt how his arms had clasped themselves about her tiny frame. Shocking him even more was the fact that his mind could have been so easily detoured from his prime objective - that of keeping Catherine safe, mostly from his differences, which were more of a threat at this moment than all the murders in the city of New York.

Now, standing here, Vincent could feel his fears rising quickly. He paused, his mind frantically searching for a mode of escape. With a swift sweeping movement, Vincent released Catherine and backed away. She held tightly to his cloak, and was dragged a few steps in his wake. Catching her heel in the carpet, Catherine fell quickly to the ground, losing her hold upon the material. Her hands did little to brace her body. Her arm scraping the edge of the table as she went down.

Vincent rushed quickly to her side. He saw the injury almost immediately and reflected a look of horror to his beloved Catherine. A small trickle of blood stood boldly against the paleness of her skin. The cut only a few inches in length, however to Vincent it seemed a deadly injury. Catherine saw his look and quickly moved to counter.

"It's nothing Vincent... Just a scratch." Catherine tried to move her arm, but Vincent had it in a tight grip. His eyes never left the mark, as if being hypnotized by the very sight of it.

Again Catherine countered. "Vincent..." She took her other hand out from beneath her body and tried to lift his eyes to hers, without result. "I'm okay... really."

After what seemed an excruciatingly long moment, Vincent returned his eyes to Catherine's face. He held a blank stare deep within those dark blue orbs, and was loathed to speak the words his mind was being bombarded with.

Slowly, he helped Catherine to her feet. With a swift and almost commanding motion, he turned and headed for the door, uttering only, "I must go!"

Catherine gave chase, running after what she could not possibly catch. Within a heartbeat, Vincent had disappeared over her wall and what would seem out of her life. His last sight of Catherine was of her standing before him. Her bloody arm held into her small frame for support.

That was two days ago. Since then Vincent desired not to have contact with any other life, save that of the rats and the bats that inhabited this space, far below the city. It was the quiet he sought now. Vincent needed the time to think and make decisions that had been threatening to take over his mind, for these last several months. Now what he feared had come to pass. His feelings for Catherine had finally injured her. The sight of the blood played heavily on his mind.

Why did I let myself go like that? his thoughts chided at him as if a mother to her naughty son. *How could I have hurt the very person I swore I would never harm?* his thoughts became aloud, as Vincent searched his mind for the answers. He would search long into the night and again the next day without finding the reassurance he truly needed right now.

It would be four more days before Vincent would return home. His father finally found him sitting aimlessly at his writing table trying to put into written form the feelings that were now coming through. Defeated, Vincent would pick up and put down his writing quill several times. Father noticed this quality and eased his way slowly into the room. He did not approach Vincent, no more than to sit down in a chair beside him. The candle that burned brightly upon his desk cast an eerie shadow into Vincent's already weary features. A sign that caused Father to look up with loving concern and worry. He remained quite a long moment awaiting his son's first response.

Vincent quietly looked over to the man beside him. He saw the kindness in his face, and the worry in his eyes. Dark circles had formed just below those gentle eyes, denoting many a sleepless night. Vincent quickly blamed himself again for causing harm to another person he loved very deeply.

"I didn't mean to cause you worry, Father...", Vincent started and was ashamed by his thoughtlessness. "I needed some time to think."

"I know that Vincent," Father returned lovingly. He placed a hand on his son's arm. "Sometimes we

all need time to ourselves."

"It seems as though..." Vincent turned his head away from the graying older man. "My actions always touch someone else. I can't help but hurt the ones I love."

"No, Vincent, that is not true. You could no more hurt any one of us, than hate us. You are a kind and loving soul." Father's hand squeezed gently on his son's arm to emphasize his point.

"I have hurt you, Father," Vincent's response was low and sullen.

"No...you haven't...Vincent. I am not hurt." Father attempted to reassure him.

"I left without even an explanation. I didn't answer your calls for me and I knew full well that you wouldn't sleep until I returned, and yet I stayed away, Father. Can you still tell me that I did not hurt you."

Vincent looked deep into the old man's eyes. He saw a hint of guilt there as his father tried to hide his own weariness from his son.

"Vincent. You were in pain. You were not thinking clearly. You did not deliberately plan to cause anyone any harm. Those qualities are not in your nature, I assure you." Father leaned forward and looked deep into his son's soul. "I would not sleep because I was concerned about you. I love you and have always loved you as if you were my own flesh and blood. I know of your troubles, Vincent, and I want to help, if I can."

Vincent looked down upon the script before him. The writing reflected a shaky quality that was not usually there in his calligraphy. Vincent wasn't sure if that reflected his own weariness or was it more symbolic of his unsureness over the situation with Catherine. Either way he didn't want to know.

Softly, he asked, "Father...Catherine has been looking for me...hasn't she?"

"Yes Vincent...Catherine has been very worried that you mistook what happened that night." Father replied unsure why he sounded like he was on the woman's side.

"I injured her, Father... How can I help but understand that fact? It is all I have thought about for days!" Vincent faced his ledger, not wanting to show the tears that were forming from the memory.

"From what she tells me, she stumbled and fell. You had nothing to do with it." Father again reflected support for the couple.

"I pulled away from her, Father. I pulled away to keep from injuring her... and I hurt her anyway..."

Vincent slammed his fists hard against the table, shaking many of the items laying there. The candle toppled to and fro, but didn't fall completely. Its rocking motions quieted quickly and Father pressed on.

"Why did you pull away from her, Vincent?" he asked, knowing little of what happened, save Catherine declaring it was an accident. "What happened above that made you pull away?"

Vincent began his low admission. He reflected to Father the night and how he felt a dream-like state about him. He spoke of the storm and of his first thoughts upon seeing Catherine soaked beneath the darkened sky.

"Father...I didn't realize where I was, only that she was near and that I wanted so desperately to be with her. I didn't want to go into her apartment... I have never felt as though I belonged there... It is so different from anything here below... So delicate and fragile, I felt as though I would just cause some damage by my presence."

Vincent continued his tale, while Father listened on in total interest.

"At that moment, we weren't there... We were somewhere else far away... In a land that I was

meant to be in and she was there beside me... I could feel her acceptance of me so vividly. It intoxicated my mind with a sweetness, I was lost to her loving ways. I felt her hand on my arm, pulling me closer into the wonderment. At first I resisted, but it seemed all too soon, the surroundings became too overwhelmingly beautiful to escape. I found myself totally engrossed in the idea of being there alone... with her."

Vincent bowed his head a bit ashamed by his lustful admission.

He waited, gauging his father's reaction with only his senses tuned in the older man's direction. Father remained silent a moment, trying to understand the situation from Vincent's point of view. He saw his son's hesitation and responded quickly, wanting to hear further how this incident turned dreadfully wrong.

"You were lost in a dream?... It all seems so pleasant Vincent, how did Catherine get hurt?" Father turned back to his son and awaited the rest.

"In that dream, I saw Catherine as I had never seen her before. She was a vision, enchanting and inviting to me. I felt as though there was nothing I couldn't do. I came to her... I pulled her close to me. I felt her breath upon my skin as I bent to take her lips to mine." Vincent's voice grew low and shaky, lost in the memory that was still very vivid in his mind.

"And?" Father urged, dying to know the rest.

"And then a flash of lightning brought me back to the present. I found myself standing in the middle of Catherine's living room, holding her in my arms. Our faces were only an inch apart and I saw her eyes closed..." Vincent paused. The guilt of that moment thrashed heavily upon his senses, causing in him an almost uncontrollable shiver.

Father surmised the difficulty Vincent was having and questioned on, trying to investigate further. "Did Catherine seem frightened by this situation, Vincent?"

Vincent thought a moment, then replied, "No... she seemed to want it to occur."

"Then why did you pull away?" Father questioned.

Vincent looked at his parent in shock. Father of all people, knew of his past and of how he injured Lisa with his passions. Why now would he ask this question so nonchalantly?

Vincent tried to formulate an answer. "I pulled away because I didn't want to hurt her, like I hurt Lisa. I pulled away before my mind lost all control. Father, wouldn't you have advised me to do the very same?"

Father thought a moment, then replied. "I don't know Vincent. I know of Catherine's great love for you. I know also of your love for her. I can't say that you would have hurt her if you had continued along that path... I just can't say!"

Vincent appeared even more confused. "Father... you told me many years ago, after the incident with Lisa, that I wasn't like other men. That to have a relationship with a woman, to be a lover was not in my ability. You made me realize my mistake those many years ago. Why now are you changing your opinion?"

Father thought long and hard. He watched as his son's demanding eyes begged for enlightenment.

Slowly and with a defeated voice, Father continued. "Vincent... what happened all those many years ago was a tragic thing. It came at a time in your and Lisa's lives when you were both too young to understand what steps you were taking. There was also the point that your desires and Lisa's were not the same. You worshipped her and she was only very fond of you. What happened between you two could have easily happened between any two other teenagers below."

"But Father, my differences..." Vincent interrupted and was stopped by a parental hand before him.

"Vincent... I have long reminded you of your differences, in the hopes that you would learn to adjust to them. It was important for you to know that your differences could be dangerous to others, especially when you were just a toddler and were chewing and scratching on anything you could get a hold of. It was important that this lesson be embedded in your subconscious, so that you could live as one with the rest of the community. It was necessary, and well-learned."

Father hesitated a moment. "Maybe too well-learned... I never intended to have you chained to a life of loneliness. I guess I just assumed this issue would never come up. Now that it has, I think instead of running from it, you must confront it head on."

"I don't understand Father," Vincent replied, a bit stunned by his latest admission.

"Vincent... I truly believe in my heart that you have a great capacity to love and be loved. It would be a waste... a tragic waste for you to lose that which it seems is your destiny. Catherine is a beautiful and courageous woman. One who holds only the greatest of loves for you. I believe that if you don't try, you'll never know the happiness you could have shared. To lock yourself away from love in order to save her is a noble gesture, but it's also a foolish one. You must face your fears, Vincent... or you'll always be wondering."

Father placed a reassuring hand upon his son's shoulder before leaving. It was a long time before Vincent could move again. He felt the tugging on his heart and wondered if it was from Father's words to him or from another source. Finally decided, Vincent donned his cloak and moved out through the tunnels at a rapid pace. Before too long he was turning the final corner leading to the park.

Vincent stood in the corner of her balcony. The apartment was dark and abandoned. He searched through the curtains in vain for any trace or clue that would tell him of her whereabouts. Finally, Vincent decided to wait, knowing that eventually she would return.

It was a dark night. The street lights stood sharply against the texture of its velvety blackness. The coolness of the bricks that lined her stoop sent chills cutting through Vincent's weariness. His mind reached out, calling for his beloved to come back to him. Within a short time, Vincent began to pace. The close confines of the area, began whirling feverishly in his thoughts. Vincent started to imagine Catherine never returning and wondered if his own selfishness had driven her from his life forever. Hours passed, only making Vincent all the more frantic to see her face once again.

Vincent's mind turned sullen, as he looked sadly through the thin sheers, and beyond. He imagined the new life Catherine could have, if only he would not keep her to himself. He then remembered the violence, that her then companion didn't keep her from and was torn between the two rights presented before him. He wondered if his presence here tonight, was only to comfort himself, or was it really to assure that she was well. A rattling of keys and the lock turning, quickly broke Vincent's train of thought.

Catherine entered the room. Her clothes were casual, a rain coat hanging slightly unkempt about her shoulders. Vincent watched as she threw her purse upon the soft and made her way into the room. From where he stood, Vincent could only note a difference in her stance. He felt her extreme sadness and wanted nothing more than to rush in and protect her from whatever it was that had made her so. He hesitated only a moment longer, to see Catherine wiped her eyes along her sleeve, then acted.

With a light touch, Vincent tapped a claw upon the glass. He watched as Catherine turned quickly and ran to the door. Without a second thought, Catherine threw the doors open and ran head first into Vincent's strong arms. She clung heavily to him, not wanting to realize that this closeness was new to their relationship. All she wanted was to hold him close and feel his nearness to her. Tears flowed as she finally found the relief from her worry and fears. Vincent faltered a moment, then

wrapped his arms about her protectively. He rested his head upon hers lightly, releasing a sigh, as he felt her muscles ease beneath his substantial touch.

"Vincent..." Her voice was weak and weepy. "I thought I had lost you forever."

"You could never lose me, Catherine. I am with you always," he replied feeling her sadness fade bit by bit with each passing second.

"I've been so worried. You've been gone for days... Where did you go?" Catherine asked, her eyes closed and her mind listening only to the beat of his heart.

"I needed time to think... I went to a place where I would not be disturbed." Vincent seemed almost reflective, and Catherine wondered what his time alone had done.

"And?" she asked, almost pleading.

"And I have decided I must have more time to make a decision," Vincent seemed abstract in his words.

Catherine leaned back and looked directly into his eyes. "Does... this mean, you don't want to... see me for awhile?" her words held a multitude of tears between them.

Vincent acted quickly to halt her suffering. **"NO!..."** He looked deep into her eyes and found himself lost within their emerald green hue. "I could not live without you..." he sighed. "I am just not ready for the turn our lives are about to take. I have great fears, that I will not be able to be for you what you want me to be and I cannot live with the idea of losing you to another."

Vincent tilted his head, to afford himself a better view of her soft features. "I will need time to find the courage to try."

"Vincent... I want no more than your presence in my life. I want us to be together always and I am willing to wait for you, no matter how long it takes. I love you, Vincent... Can't you see that?"

Vincent took a long look into his beloved's eyes. For the first time, he saw there a deep commitment to the words she was saying. He wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms, and hold her close.

His only reaction was a soft nod and a soft admission. "Yes...I can..." Vincent took her by the hands. He watched as her features eased and were blessed with a soft smile of relief.

"Catherine... I promised to be here for you... forever. All I ask is that you give me the time to learn to be what you want of me. I want nothing more than to be with you always, I just don't know how yet..."

Catherine stepped forward and laid her head once more upon his chest. "I'll be here, Vincent... I'm not going anywhere... I'll be here to guide you... to help you and mostly to love and support you through the many roads we are about to travel... that is if you'll let me?" she ended meekly.

Vincent hugged her close, feeling all her warmth penetrating the coldness that had for days turned his body to ice. It melted his reserves and lent him a strength to replace the weariness that threatened to overtake him. "I could have no better teacher, Catherine...or friend."

Vincent and Catherine stood very still a long time. They held each other close and accepted the strength that was offered. Vincent reflected upon her courage and daring to fear not the road ahead.

A greater love he thought... Surely had never been.

END