



## One Night

By JessicaRae

*"Halloween is a day in which some people choose to wear a mask...  
... while others finally feel safe to take theirs off." Steve Maraboli*

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He watched the children running through the streets, their faces covered in their mask of choice, a reflection of their childhood dreams and wishes. There were capes and dresses and feathers and masks of all colors and characters. Their laughter was contagious as they ran from house to house swinging their arms windmill fashion in excitement, and promptly bartering candy with each other after each visit to the city porches.

"I am glad you came Above with me tonight," Catherine said, one hand gracefully holding her long pink dress up with one hand, the other on Vincent's elbow as they made their way through Central Park. "I hope I didn't hurt you by coming as the Fairy Godmother from the Wizard of Oz. People will think you are the Cowardly Lion."

"You look lovely, and I do not mind their assumptions. It creates less questions," Vincent observed quietly, as he walked along the sidewalk, instinctively staying close to the shadows. "Listen." They paused for a moment, hearing the shouts and cheers from the children already swarming through the area. "The laughter of the children is music to hear. They seem so innocent and happy."

"It's the gift of imagination. Vincent. Tonight, they get a chance to dream and be whatever their heart desires, if just for a few hours, with no judgement." Catherine replied just as quietly, glancing up at the man beside her. "You know what a gift that truly is."

"I do, certainly," Vincent replied, his voice slightly wistful. "This Halloween night gives me the opportunity to come Above and face the world, if only under the mask of untruth. But I never had the chance to be anything other than myself. Yet, others do not perceive that this is my true appearance, and strangely, it bothers them little tonight."

Catherine leaned closer toward him comfortingly and sighed. "That had to be very difficult for you as a child, and even now. All the other children could change who they were just for a night, but you would have had to always be the same thing every time."

"You have to admit," Vincent laughed shortly. "Long nails and sharp teeth are hard to hide, and a lion is the only creature they easily resemble."

"Do you truly regret what you look like, then?" Catherine asked gently, wrapping her hands around his broad arm and dropping the hem of her skirt now that they had reached the stable surface of the sidewalk. "Would you wish to look different, if you could?"

How he wished he could tell her otherwise, but as he looked down into the honest eyes that smiled up at him, he knew the truth was not hidden from her.

"Sometimes it is my greatest desire and my greatest pain."

"I know, Vincent." Her voice was comforting, and accepting, but it didn't take away the tiny ache in his heart. "I can feel it in you. I wish there was something I could do to make it better."

"You have," he replied sincerely. "You accept me for who I am."

"Excuse me?" A tiny voice interrupted their moment, and immediately Vincent stepped backward, lowering his head to the shadows of his cloak.

A tiny girl appeared on the sidewalk before them, miniature braids sticking out sideways, and a blue gingham dress peeking out from under her pink puffed coat.

"Can you - help me?"

"Sure," Catherine spoke softly, crouching down in front of the small person and smiled. "What seems to be the matter?"

"I got lost," the child pouted, sticking out her lower lip effectively portraying her dismay. "The mean man at the corner shouted at us to get off his - "she paused, her eyes growing wide. "I can't say what he said - but he wanted us to get off his - *porch*."

Catherine gave the disgruntled child an understanding glance and held out her hand. "And I assume that all the other brave ones ran away and left you here alone?"

The child nodded, her face growing concerned then worried. "And I don't know how to get home!"

Catherine took the child's hand and shook her head. "Now, no worries. Your fairy godmother is here, and we will make sure you get home. Dorothy can always depend on her fairy godmother, right?"

The child's eyes lit up and she threw her arms around Catherine's neck. "*Glinda!* Please, please, please take me home?"

Catherine glanced up at Vincent, still standing close by, but in the shadows. "Absolutely, *Dorothy*, I will take you home."

"Can the lion come too?" The small child reached a hand in the direction Vincent stood, seemingly unbothered by his lionlike appearance. "You will need to help him find courage after you take me home. That's all he ever wanted anyway."

Vincent stepped forward, kneeling, and laying a hand on Catherine's shoulder. "Dorothy, you are brave to allow me to come along with you on your journey home. Your bravery gives me all the courage that I need to join you."

A bright smile crossed the miniature Dorothy's face, and she released her hold on Catherine's neck, this time moving to Vincent and vaulting herself into his lap. He nearly fell backward at the sudden movement, trying to catch the small creature so she didn't fall onto the concrete, while not hurting her with his long nails, and at the same time trying to squash the immediate onslaught of warning bells going off in his head. Those bells had gone off so many times, that they sent adrenaline surging through his veins and he wanted to toss the child Catherine's direction and run, retreating to the darkest tunnel that existed in their world to calm his sudden rapid breathing.

"Aw, don't be afraid, lion," the little Dorothy was saying as he slowly returned his thoughts to the present situation. "Dorothy and Glinda will take care of you. We have a Toto too, but mommy wouldn't let me bring him trick'r'treatin' with us. Well, he isn't really Toto, he's a chi-chihu- something and his name is Tony, but we call him Toto and my brother was the Tin Man. He's probably home by now, eating his candy already, and we always trade first because I hate smarties, and he loves them, but he hates KitKats and I love those and I always get more m and m's than him, but I give them to him because he gives me his popcorn balls, because I like those better, and my mom says that makes me a weird kid. Do you think that makes me a weird kid?"

"Of course not," Vincent said convincingly, but the pathetically helpless glance he cast in Catherine's direction made her want to laugh. As the child continued babbling about the paint her brother had used for his tinman face, Vincent mouthed to Catherine, "What is a *popcorn ball?*"

"It's a ball that *rich* people go to and wear *only popcorn*," she mouthed back to him, mischievously. The expression on his face was priceless, and he couldn't react very well with a wobbly toddler balanced on his strong arms. But the look he gave her sent delightful chills down her spine. He was embarrassed, but there was something else there that wasn't embarrassment at all...

The child's fist was balled into his cloak, and the other hand was gently stroking his long, tawny hair as if it were that of a cat. "No, it's not," the little Dorothy exclaimed dramatically, "it has nothing to do with *clothes*. It's *eatable*. It starts with the popcorn, see, mommy makes it in the micro-micro – something and she puts syrup and cinna- *cinna-man* in hers and you *squash* it all together like this!" She twisted up the corner of Vincent's hood into a ball, unintentionally gathering locks of hair and his shirt into it, squashing it all into a ball. "Then you roll it all up and give it to people!"

Vincent nodded wisely, as if he understood everything she had said, his head leaning at an awkward angle to keep her from completely pulling his hair out. "That is - very clever," he agreed, smirking at Catherine, whose face had turned a becoming shade of red. "More clever than *Glinda's* version."

Dorothy giggled, releasing her handmade popcorn ball to Vincent's relief, and threw her arms around him, her head nestled under his chin. "I'm cleverer than *Glinda*?"

"Yes," Vincent replied, smiling deviously at Catherine, who's eyes widened in surprise and pretend offense. He was flirting and she knew it.

"Lion," she scolded playfully. "Behave yourself or I shall turn you into a popcorn ball. Dorothy, don't forget, it's the *unclever* godmother that has to get you home in one piece."

"Oh yes," Dorothy laughed. "I forgot about home. I live by the big hospital in the house on the corner with the blue fence."

"By St. Vincent's?" Catherine asked to confirm, sharing an undiscernible glance with Vincent.

"Yes!" the child exclaimed, and they headed that direction, the only sound the endless chatter of tin men, and lions, and witches.

"Here we are," Catherine spoke eventually, as they stood on the sidewalk outside of a cozy little house. "Time to say goodbye and go get those popcorn balls."

The little girl hugged Vincent tightly. "I think I would rather stay with the lion."

Vincent smiled kindly at the tiny face on the edge of tears. "Dorothy, you have completed your journey and found your way home. The lion still must find his courage. Next year, I will meet you here on this night, and tell you if I have found it."

This promise of meeting again seemed to cheer up the child, and she happily ran toward her house, where a warmly lit house awaited her.

As they left the child's home, the sound of relieved greetings and dog barking fading behind them, Vincent seemed to be far away. Catherine slipped a hand around his arm again, looking up into the shadowed hood of his cloak.

"What are you thinking, Vincent?"

"I was found at this hospital," he spoke softly, as they turned away to return to Central Park. "My story began here, so long ago. So much has changed, so much has been lost, and gained. Life – life seems to be a mystery that never quite gets all the answers."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But maybe only the truly important questions get answers."

"Perhaps," he echoed her thoughts. "It was strange to be accepted for myself, through the innocent eyes of a child. They don't have expectations, or requirements, before they share their love. They just do."

"The world would be a better place if we loved like they did," Catherine nodded in agreement.

"They don't see people for what they could or might be, but simply for who they are. Their innocence is beautiful, but in the real world, dangerous."

"You took that risk." He spoke abruptly, gruffly, and she knew he was feeling unworthy again of the love that not only the child had shown, but of her love as well.

"Vincent, stop," she spoke softly, tugging on his arm. He did as she asked, his head bent, and turned away from her. "I didn't love you for your face. I loved you for your heart. You may look like the cowardly lion on the outside, but inside you is a beautiful knight in shining silver armor that would defend anyone who needed it. That is the Vincent I fell in love with. And besides, the face of the lion is regal and brave, and to me it's the most beautiful face in the world."

Silently, he slipped his arms around her, and she rested her head on his broad chest just like the little Dorothy had done. Their journey was a hard one, full of lessons and experiences and joy and pain. But there was no one she would rather make that journey with.

"Some people choose to wear masks and disguises," he spoke barely above a whisper. Slowly, he withdrew the hood from his face, the amber streetlight falling across his sharp features.

"Tonight, I remove mine. The lion walks in courage tonight."

She smiled up at him, his whole world, his dream come true. He would be a man most miserable without the glimmer of hope and love that she had brought to his world.

"Now," he spoke, a bit more cheerfully, "It's a long walk back to Central Park. Suppose you tell me more about these *popcorn* balls...."