

Meeting the Lion Man

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

"I think it's time, Catherine," Vincent said a few weeks later, seriously looking deep into her eyes when they finished their tea one afternoon.

"For what?" she asked with a tired voice.

Despite all efforts, with more than three months since his birth, Vincent, Diana and the Helpers Above hadn't been able to find the baby kidnapped by Gabriel.

Both, Catherine and Vincent were feeling deep sorrow inside but neither of them was willing to stop searching for their child, the most precious and wondrous miracle, born out of their deep and boundaries-breaking love for each other.

"Time to let someone else from Above know about our secret and our son. Someone who has helped you many times before, who has the resources, knows the right people, has access to information, someone who you *really* trust..." Vincent continued, having an exact person in mind.

Catherine, sitting on the bed in a resigned fashion, with him kneeling in front of her holding her hands, tried to think whom he meant for a moment. Suddenly it dawned on her...

"Joe...", she whispered, scolding herself. Why she didn't think of him sooner?

"Yes," Vincent confirmed her guess. "After all the times he has covered for you without asking questions, completely trusting you, been a loyal friend. I think he is the person whom you... who *we* can trust with our secret, who would understand. I think he *deserves* to know."

"You're right.... There were so many times when I wanted to tell him so badly ... but I guess him being so close to the police, I was afraid something might go wrong, and he would endanger you terribly... "

"I know, but I also think if he understood the most important reason for the need to catch Gabriel ... he could be our last real chance, Catherine," Vincent concluded, with an assured quiet tone.

Looking into his eyes, she saw the truth behind his words. The time had come.

Back in Peter's house, Catherine dialled Joe's number on her phone.

Since her recovery from almost being overdosed with an unknown drug by Gabriel, she was still hiding down Below. Her apartment was maintained by Peter, for when she could (and *if* she wanted to) return to it, but as Gabriel was still out there, she couldn't be seen Above. Therefore, Vincent had asked Peter if she could make a phone call to Joe from his phone.

It was already after 9 pm when Catherine entered Peter's house from his basement, where Vincent was waiting for her. Joe was ecstatic when she reappeared after seven months missing and two months presumed

dead. Peter told him about her being kidnapped because of the black book Joe entrusted to her care when she visited him in the hospital (which Joe felt very guilty about). He couldn't tell him the real reason for her being held hostage, that shortly before reappearing, she had just given birth. He couldn't because he would have to explain the rest...

The phone rang three times before Joe picked up. "Yep?"

The familiar (after a long time) cheerful tone of his voice made her smile.

"Hey, Joe, it's Radcliffe, I need to talk to you. What would you say to a walk in Central Park?"

Joe Maxwell, the hidden (or buried?) pride of the New York District Attorney's office, was walking across Central Park to the meeting place Catherine had suggested. He wasn't sure whether it was the right place to walk around if she needed to remain unseen, but as he knew Cathy, she surely had a good reason and he had to trust her. Joe didn't complain much, though. Since he had learned that Catherine was alive, he was trying to figure out a way to find the man who was responsible for her kidnapping. And it wasn't exactly against his will if he could get out of his cold and impersonal office, the never-ending ringing of his phone and piles of cases to be dealt with, and get some fresh air.

When he saw Catherine standing at the agreed spot in the shade of an old oak tree, he smiled cheerfully.

"Radcliffe!" he cried and gave her a big heartfelt hug and felt a tear running down his cheek.

"Joe, you have no idea how glad I am to see you again!" Catherine replied with a smile, genuinely moved by his response.

His smile was as wide as possible, making his brown eyes appear almost tiny when he pulled back from the hug.

God, how I've missed you....

Then, he looked around to reassure himself no one was watching them and turned down the volume of his voice with care.

"So how are you feeling, Cathy?"

He was still shaken by her experience in the past months but tried to not depress her more by his worry about her.

"I'm fine, thank you, Joe," Catherine smiled.

"Diana has been breaking her neck over trying to find Gabriel, with me helping when circumstances allow it, but he seems to have his minions everywhere, wiping his dirty tracks behind him..." Joe was visibly frustrated.

Catherine took his hand in hers and her look turned serious.

"I am truly grateful for your help, Joe. I haven't been completely honest with you though.... There have been certain things I haven't been able to share with you for some time, for a good reason, until now. Could you follow me, please?"

The serious look and plea in her big green eyes made him nod and remain silent, although too many questions were occupying his brain.

Catherine was leading him away from the tree towards the entrance of the drainage tunnel, which she had used so many times in the previous three years. She looked carefully around before she pulled Joe in.

Joe was a bit confused when they entered the tunnel.

"Where are we going?"

After a turn, Catherine stopped at a barred gate.

"Joe, do you remember about me being attacked and cut on my face before I joined the D.A.'s office?"

Joe shuddered at the memory of reading the file about it. And he remembered that there were many holes in the report of that case. Holes which had never been filled...

"Of course, I do," he answered quietly in anticipation of where this was leading.

"The truth is, I was lying when I said I didn't remember who saved my life, or how exactly. It wasn't homeless people. It was someone.... very special. Someone whom I couldn't reveal to the world because it could mean the end of his existence.... Someone who has protected me from harm ever since, who has given me strength, kindness, devotion, wisdom and above all a love greater than I could have ever imagined... Someone I *love*..." Catherine paused briefly. "...with all that I am and ever could be..."

Joe's eyes narrowed in genuine curiousness and he asked, "Is this that someone in your life you told me about before you ---" He couldn't bring himself to remind her of the dreadful events of her kidnapping.

"Yes... You are my dear friend, Joe, I have absolute trust in you, always had. You have never betrayed me, you covered for me more times than I can count, without asking any questions as if you knew I could never give you answers to them.... There is so much more I need to tell you, to make things clear for you. And not only because I need your help, because *we* need your help...."

She went quiet, still looking deep into his eyes. Then she stepped to a grated iron door next to the gate, opening it and pulling a little lever inside before closing it again.

She opened the gate while the mechanism made the round steel door behind it open.

What Joe saw behind it made his jaw drop, open his eyes wide and hold his breath.

"Joe, this is Vincent...."

Catherine's eyes didn't leave Joe's face, desperately hoping she wouldn't see fear in it. To her relief, as so many times before, she could rely on her judgement of her boss and friend's character. The only thing she could see in his face was total astonishment.

Joe couldn't keep his eyes off the figure in front of him. Vincent's face was partially in the shade, because the hood of his cloak covered his head and the soft orange glow from the tunnel was behind him. However, Joe could still see the rough image of his face. Only one thought crossed Joe's mind.

Holy cow, that is absolutely..... stunning!

Before he could react more, Catherine pulled him through the threshold towards Vincent and closed the gate and then the steel door behind them by pulling another lever.

"Just to be on the safe side," Catherine explained her action.

Immediately, she realised that Joe might not be thinking this is the safe side for him to be right now, but she kept that thought to herself.

Joe and Vincent were now standing only about a metre apart from each other.

Vincent slowly pulled the hood of his cloak down and said with his usual calm and quiet, deep gravelly voice.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mr Maxwell."

This introduction didn't help Joe to recover his speech at all. He wasn't sure what he was expecting but surely not the most polite and human-like phrase he could ever think of from this... hat? He noticed Vincent didn't shake his hand but when his eyes quickly scanned the strange man's hands, he understood why – Vincent didn't want to scare him with the hair and his claws.

And he's got manners and empathy, too...

Suddenly, something clicked in his brain. *Those hands.... Vincent...*

In his memory, he was flipping through several reports from when Catherine was in danger and about the bodies found on the crime scenes.

Diana was right, it was him saving her life...

The time Joe had been silent was getting too long. Catherine gently touched his shoulder and said in concern.

"Joe.... say something, please..."

Joe suddenly woke up from the trance and decisively reached out his hand to Vincent.

"Please... it's Joe."

A hint of a smile appeared on Vincent's face as he accepted Joe's hand for a shake.

Joe noticed straight away that the lion man was holding back in his grip a lot. His height and build suggested that if he wanted, he could crush the D.A.'s assistant's hand to dust. The grip he gave Joe was firm, but at the same time soft and surprisingly not unpleasant. He could suddenly imagine Catherine's hand in this unusual hand very easily.

Vincent's intelligent and warm blue eyes and the serene and kind expression in his extraordinary, but stunning leonine face, made Joe finally relax and he smiled.

Catherine couldn't help it and with a beaming and grateful smile hugged Joe.

"Thank you!" she cried before pulling back from him.

"Okay, okay, Radcliffe, I don't want any trouble..." He chuckled and his eyes hinted at Vincent but the lion man just bowed his head with a bemused smile and Joe knew at that moment that there is no threat from the man next to him.

Vincent spoke first bringing them back to the point of their meeting.

"I think we should go to a more comfortable place to talk."

Joe nodded and let himself be led through what was about to become the most fascinating walk of his life, revealing places and things he wouldn't even dream of. As Vincent started leading the way, Catherine joined him, and Joe noticed her small soft hand slipping into Vincent's large clawed one holding it tight.

Yes, exactly as I imagined it... Joe thought, and although he knew that according to the rules of his world, he should be worried sick, probably outraged, panicked or in denial, about the obvious connection the two figures ahead of him shared, a smile appeared on his face.

Over two hours later, Joe was sitting in Vincent's chair in his chamber, with Catherine sitting comfortably on the bed opposite to him. Vincent went to get some coffee for Joe and herb tea for Catherine from William's

kitchen as he thought, after the conversation they just had, especially Joe needed something to help him process everything.

And there was *a lot* to process, Joe thought to himself. Especially the child part...

Before Catherine disappeared, Joe did notice in the last weeks that she had changed her fashion style, started wearing more loose clothes and coats, but didn't think much about it. Now it all made sense.

And yes, *the baby*...

Joe didn't ask what the child looked like, he was too decent to be so obvious (and rude), but Vincent knew exactly what he was thinking about and answered his unasked question with absolute calmness and no sign of offence in his voice.

No, our son doesn't look like me.

Joe remembered how stunned he was at this remark. He had always known Catherine was smart, kind and caring, above all for the beautiful things of the world. But the more Vincent spoke, the more Joe realised that the intelligence, knowledge of life, empathy, kindness, gentleness, care, honesty and loyalty of this man-beast, was the very reason why Cathy had fallen in love with him, seeing past all his physical imperfections, and his other, darker side. He was as impressive and majestic as anyone could ever be. Despite the great hardship he had suffered in his life, Vincent had more love, passion, nobility, sense of justice and care for people in a single finger of his clawed hand, than most of the people Joe had known in his life.

Apart from Catherine...

Yes, they were a perfect match. And he had no doubt that he would do anything to help them find their child.

"Are you all right, Joe?" Catherine interrupted the flow of his thoughts with care.

Joe smiled at her. "Sure, Cathy," then he shook his head and chuckled.

"You were right, he's definitely not... a *type*."

Catherine laughed remembering one of their conversations almost two years ago and replied dreamily.

"No, he's not, he's... he's Vincent..."

The scale of love Joe could feel from her voice and see in her eyes and from her smile, was all he needed to know how much Vincent meant to her. He remembered she had exactly the same dreamy look on her face during that same conversation two years ago. when he told her she needed a more solid, down-to-earth kind of a guy.

Of course, it all made perfect sense now, and he knew how he had hit the nail on the head back then. Joe could tell, though, that it reached far beyond a simple life-saver adoration.

The way Catherine and Vincent looked at each other, it was as if there was a silver thread joining them, and their love was vibrating through it for everyone to see. The small yet tender touches between them were in contrast with any 'Above' forms of showing affection, but they were more sensual than anything Joe had ever seen. And the way Vincent was always - even if unconsciously - in a protective position by her side. spoke volumes of how he saw himself with regards to her and how much she meant to him. This was love in its purest and deepest form, a love which knows no boundaries, no hurdles, no end.

There would have been times when Joe would envy a man in Cathy's life, but not this time, not Vincent; not after he got to know this magnificent gentle giant and had to admit that he was the perfect man for Catherine. Yes, a *man*...

“Thank you for telling me, Cathy... for trusting me,” Joe spoke more seriously, with genuine gratitude.

Catherine smiled.

“It was Vincent’s idea actually... and trust me, there were so many times before I wanted to tell you but---”

“---but you were afraid for his life and I am too close to those who might destroy him because of what he is and what he did so many times...,” Joe finished for her and she could see total understanding in his honest brown eyes.

Catherine just nodded before adding, “... To protect me.”

“You mustn’t worry, Cathy, I would never betray him or this incredible world. I would never betray neither of you.”

The tone of his voice was firm, truthful and honest. She knew he wouldn’t lie to her and smiled at him.

“I know.”

At that moment, Vincent appeared, carefully yet skilfully carrying a tray with a mug of coffee, a pot of herb tea, two cups and a small plate of ham and cheese sandwiches. He put them on the table, handed the coffee mug to Joe and then pointed at the sandwiches.

“I think we made you miss your lunch break, so in case you are hungry ...”

He poured a cup of tea and handed it to Catherine. She thanked him with a tender look and smile. Then he poured a cup for himself and sat next to her.

Joe felt like he was in an alternative universe, taken out of some fairy-tale book. And the thing was, he liked it, very much.

“I want you to know I will help you in any way I can, the unofficial way, of course. Thank you for trusting me with your secret and allowing me to get a new perspective of things... I know some more people who owe me some favours. I’ll approach them right away and hopefully, it’ll help us somehow.”

“Thank you, Joe,” Catherine said with deep gratitude and Vincent nodded in appreciation. “We are very grateful for everything you have been doing.”

A frown appeared on Joe’s face. “Moreno will pay for this...”

Catherine’s worried look was intense. “Please, be extremely careful, not just for Vincent’s, but especially for your sake. You know by now what Gabriel is able to do, and if Moreno is acting on his behalf...”

Joe nodded seriously. “I can’t believe Diana has known about you for so long...,” he said then in awe, looking at Vincent.

“Diana is a very smart woman, and she very probably saved my life after the explosion,” Vincent replied and paused for a moment. “When I got the message saying I would find Gabriel on that boat, my reason was telling me to be cautious, but my heart and irrational desire for revenge got the better of me, unfortunately. Otherwise, I would have known it was a trap.”

Catherine squeezed his hand; her eyes were trying to comfort him before he continued.

“Diana is very loyal towards people she trusts and thinks they are worth her trust. She can help you much more now that you have the full picture,” Vincent said knowingly.

“I guess you’re right...”

Joe took a sip of his coffee and chuckled while shaking his head. He knew it was probably not appropriate considering the serious matter they were discussing just a while ago, but he couldn't help it.

"What is it, Joe?" Catherine asked.

"I never thought I would see you drink herb tea instead of coffee, Radcliffe... I guess love really can move mountains."

It was Vincent, this time, who chuckled before Catherine laughed and leaned her head against his shoulder. He put his arm gently around her waist and looked at her like a king at his beloved queen.

At that moment, Joe wished he would find a love like this himself one day.

Vincent pulled the lever opening the steel door leading out to Central Park.

Joe was staring at the barred gate behind it and suddenly he felt reluctant to leave. In his short time Below, he'd grown very fond of the safe haven of the tunnel world and the inhabitants he had passed briefly - especially the wondrous man standing now next to him.

Joe had never imagined he might like a man so much, but for a reason he couldn't identify yet, he felt very close to Vincent. The last time he felt that close to a man was with his father... But maybe it was like Cathy said, Vincent was very easy to love, for each person in different ways, but still... He remembered her words back in Vincent's chamber.

"I have always wished you two would become friends one day..."

"I know, I have a heart like his." Joe winked at her mirroring her words to him a long time ago. "I think your wish might not be that difficult to make come true, Radcliffe..."

Standing at the border dividing the world Below from the world Above now, Joe had to grin and shake his head.

Vincent tilted his head, curious as to why the man in front of him was so bemused.

Joe understood his look immediately. "You know, I really hope I won't wake up tomorrow and realise this was just a dream," he chuckled, then sighed.

Vincent smiled and his wisdom reached Joe once again, as so many times before that afternoon.

"It is the dreams that keep us living. They bring out the best in us, or the worst. It's only up to us which path we choose. Catherine's belief in our dream brought out the best in me."

Joe looked at him with admiration, noticing the deep love reflecting in his eyes at the last words.

"She was right, you know? I think we could become good friends... I'd really like that," he said with a smile.

In Joe's dark eyes, Vincent could see genuine warmth and honesty. He reached out his hand to him and spoke with his calm, gravelly voice, a warm smile reaching his eyes.

"A friend with an understanding heart is no less than a brother..." (1)

Joe accepted the furry hand gratefully and in a spur of a moment decided to hug his new friend, patting him on his broad back before pulling back.

I've just hugged a lion...

Vincent was only for a brief moment surprised by Joe's sign of genuine affection, but then returned his embrace and smiled.

Since Devin had left, despite having dear friends in Mouse, Pascal or Winslow throughout the years, he hadn't had a truly close male friend. Suddenly, he was on the verge of getting one, and his heart rejoiced because he knew Joe had the best recommendation - Catherine trusted him with her life.

Joe's face turned serious again. "I'll let you know through Diana how I'll get along, as soon as I have any news."

Vincent nodded and as Joe turned and pushed the gate open, the lion man spoke to him once more.

"Or you could deliver the news yourself, you're welcome here, any time. You know the way now, or you can signal on the pipes as Catherine showed you and I'll come."

Joe's look met the deep blue eyes twinkling in the semi-dark and his eyes turned misty.

"Thank you, Vincent...." He was truly moved.

He blinked a few times to recover and said in his usual casual way, his far-stretched smile reaching his eyes.

"So long, take care of Cathy... See ya, buddy."

Vincent chuckled and watched him disappear behind the bend of the drainage tunnel leading out. He pulled the lever to close the steel door and headed back to his chamber.

Yes, Joe Maxwell was certainly the kind of a man he would like to be friends with - kind, good-natured, grounded, empathic, fun to be around, loyal, devoted.

Just like Devin.

The END

(1) Homer: *The Odyssey*