

A Lion Among Ladies

by Angie

“And thereby hangs a tale”

- William Shakespeare

Catherine was fiercely protective of Vincent, so much so that she often saw offense where none was intended. She knew this about herself, as did Vincent and Father, but neither man would ever embarrass her by saying so. A look, a rolling of the eyes between the two, was all the hint a good lawyer really needed.

But it was a difficult habit to break. She knew that he was not ashamed of what he was – and that his distress, when she had seen his face for the first time and screamed, had been long forgiven. He was dignified and without pride, both qualities which she found immensely attractive.

However, she had foreseen no trepidation when she agreed to help with a production of *‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’*. It would involve just about everyone in some capacity, if only as the audience for the play within the play.

Perhaps it shouldn’t have surprised her when Vincent was propositioned to play the role of Snug, and therefore the Lion. She had bristled when she learned of his acceptance, wondering why on earth he had agreed to such a blatantly unfair characterization.

He had looked at her, puzzled, when she expressed this reservation one evening as they sat on the bed in his chamber, discussing the progress of the production.

“Catherine, look at me. Who could be more suitable? I won’t need a costume – in fact, I will probably be wearing less than I usually do. And I can also roar convincingly!”

Her anger had sputtered out, and now she was taken aback by his apparent willingness to play the role. Vincent regarded his love with concern. Did she really think he was so lacking in humour, or so in denial of his obvious resemblance to that noble beast?

“A goose for his discretion,” muttered Catherine, quoting Theseus.

Vincent couldn’t help himself. He laughed so hard that he almost fell off the bed. Catherine was as shocked at his laughter as she was by the reason for it. She had never heard him laugh like this, not in all the years she had known him.

“Though she be but little, she is fierce!” Vincent managed to get out, at last, gasping.

She now looked offended as well. Vincent turned and gathered her into a hug. In his soft dulcet tones, he quoted from the lion’s longest speech.

“For, if I should as lion come in strife/ Into this place, ‘twere pity on my life.”

She looked at his face as they separated, and managed a smile. It was true. He could hardly be considered a fearful beast, and certainly no dreadful *‘lion among ladies’* – well, at least not in the sense the play meant it. But that got her thinking along a slightly different track, and not for the first time.

“Vincent, have you ever been the focus of female attention?”

“As in a *‘lion among ladies is a dreadful thing’*, do you mean, Catherine?”

He couldn’t help it, he had to smile as he said this. He had caught her curiosity and had no doubt that the play had inspired the question. After all, the lion’s role was quite small, although important.

She nodded, hoping she might learn something interesting. It had puzzled her that he had been unattached when he met her, even considering the disastrous incident with Lisa. The incident with Lena had merely confirmed that not all other women were blind to his charms. Even Father couldn’t be everywhere – and Vincent was an integral part of the community.

Vincent tried to put on a sober expression, as befit a serious question. He wasn’t quite sure how to answer it. He had been alone for so many years before he had found Catherine, but they hadn’t been empty years.

Their tunnel community had grown to many times the size it had been when he was introduced as a baby. While Devin had been present in those early years, he was older. Vincent had often been part of the small group of younger tunnel children who had played together. No one had ever considered him as other than he was. No one pretended he was ‘normal’, but neither did they treat him badly – except Mitch. But then Mitch seemed to hate everyone.

The children lived in the tunnel community because they had no other place, like himself. Some had been born here, of course, but most had not, and the majority were orphans. Certainly, they could go above and he could not, but that wasn’t really material. In those days, adults had impressed upon them the importance of staying away from the world above, where they might be challenged or endangered, or captured by well-meaning members of the social services establishment. Father had been very clear about that.

Devin, being older, had regularly ignored the stricture, but he usually did so alone. He had related his tall tales to his little brother upon his return, hiding under the covers in the big bed they shared. They had whispered long into the night. Not surprisingly, it had been Devin who had educated him, somewhat, about girls.

Catherine waited while Vincent ruminated. She was used to him doing this, but wondered what on earth he was thinking. When he finally looked at her, it was with a very slight smile.

“Catherine, I have had friends among the opposite sex for as long as I can remember. But we are all family here, and they are like sisters rather than girlfriends. Except for Lisa – and she encouraged me. I would not have become so enamoured of her, otherwise.”

“You mean that no one pursued you for yourself?”

“Not since I was very small. There were little girls who found me “cuddly”.

Catherine nodded. Cuddly he certainly was, still. She gave him a grin that left no doubt where her mind had wandered. But the answer wasn’t satisfactory.

“Are you telling me that not one teenaged girl or adult woman looked upon you as more than a friend?”

Vincent chose his words carefully. Truth to tell, there had been ‘incidents’, but they had failed more because of his own reticence, than because of any lack of interest from women. How could he explain this?

“Catherine, you know I am empathic. I know the difference between prurient interest and genuine friendship. The former, like that of Lena initially, was often motivated by uncertainty. Lena is now a true friend, but they didn’t all evolve that way. Some made me very uncomfortable. I had to be blunt to some of my admirers.”

“And Lisa?”

Vincent sighed. “Lisa was my first real love. I didn’t know much about romance, but I knew she was happy with me, and liked me. I did not feel love from her, but she danced for me and I wanted her to be happy. That was everything to me then. I knew she would leave me behind one day.”

Catherine nodded. "So, to return to the present, why are you playing Snug? I don't understand."

Vincent looked at her and recited a line he particularly liked.

"I am no such (lion). I am a man as other men are."

Catherine quipped back, *"This lion is a very fox for his valour."*

Vincent laughed and nodded. "Now you see."



Catherine saw even more when the players were dressing themselves for the big event, which would take place in Father's library. Vincent was in his chamber, naked from the waist up. She caught her breath as she saw the muscle rippling under the fine covering of fur on his torso.

"Are you going like that?" she managed, when she was finally able to take breath enough to speak.

Vincent looked at her and blushed a little. "No. I was told my costume had been delivered, but I cannot see it."

"What does it look like?" she asked, looking around. Vincent was very neat and there were never any clothes lying around.

"I have no idea. Mouse said he had brought it from Mary."

Catherine walked around the chamber, even looking in places where surely not even Mouse would leave a garment. Could it have fallen down behind something? She looked behind the juke box and bent down to pick up what she saw there.

"Would this be it, perhaps?"

Vincent walked over to her and took the garment. It was a sheepskin vest, generous in size. He laughed when he realized what it was.

"A lion in sheep's clothing," Catherine muttered. Vincent looked at her and gave her a feral grin.

"His discretion, I am sure, cannot carry his valour," he quoted

"Then, *let us listen to the moon.*" Catherine quipped in return.

"At least we will not have to worry about that problem," Vincent remarked, referring to the concerns of the players in the first Act.

"No. As long as Mouse doesn't try to duplicate it in some novel way."

"Mouse will be too busy with sound effects," Vincent replied. "We all agreed that they were far more important. I just hope our ears survive it."

I just hope I can survive this production without my mouth falling open, Catherine thought. She looked at Vincent and sighed. He caught her mild arousal and grinned.

"*Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,*" he quoted in response.

"*The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was,*" was Catherine's rejoinder.

Vincent looked at her with surprise. "I think that should have been my line," he whispered as he gathered her to him. She sighed deeply.

Softly he recited his favourite sonnet from the play.

*"Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name."*

"Catherine," he said, after a pause, in that voice she loved, deep, sexy and hers.

"Vincent."

His name was everything, and she hugged him tighter. There was nothing more to say and no words could do justice to the love that whirled between and through them.

END