Tender Churl

by Angie

Vincent and Catherine were sitting in the brownstone's den, enjoying the first fireplace heat of the Fall. They had replaced the original fireplace with a more environmentally-friendly electric one, which looked almost real. They both missed the smell of real burning pine or cedar ... but not the smoke that went with it. Decades of candle smoke Below had made both of them happy to forgo that.

Catherine was leafing through a lovely little Heron Books version of Shakespeare's Sonnets. She was wistfully recalling the first note from Vincent, on her balcony. That book was in their library, this one had been found in a charity thrift recently, and she was enjoying reading them.

Vincent regarded her, seeing her slight smile, and knowing she was likely thinking of him.

"Penny for your thoughts, Catherine?" he asked her softly.

She looked over at him, relaxing in the big overstuffed chair he preferred, and smiled.

"Long ago, you told me that 'Shakespeare knew everything'," she remarked. "How many of these sonnets do you know well?" They had never really discussed them, but now she wanted to.

Vincent's mouth quirked a little as he answered her. "I have memorized many of them – perhaps most of them. Every one spoke to me about my life, or that of my family below, throughout the years."

"Can you quote the very first one?"

"Yes, but the end couplet is the important one, Catherine. It sums up the whole sonnet so elegantly."

"That's true," Catherine agreed, knowing that once memorized, a poem is seldom forgotten. She could still quote most of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* - from so long ago, it made her feel ancient as well.

She leafed back to the first Sonnet, and smiled at him, waiting.

His lovely voice stroked her heart as he quoted,

"Pity the world, or else this glutton be,

To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee."

The words seem to hang in the air. His voice had that effect, every time.

"And what did Shakespeare know in that one," she asked, curious.

Vincent looked down at his hands. "That one could have been written about myself and Lisa, first when we were children, and later when she became a famous ballet dancer, and then when she returned to us – when you met her."

Catherine read the sonnet again, and nodded. Now why hadn't she seen that? She read out some of the lines:

But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,

Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,

Then later:

Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel:

Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament,

She looked over at Vincent, whose face was still. He was obviously remembering.

"She was more than an ornament to me," he said softly. "But she didn't need me, not as I needed her."

Catherine nodded. Lisa was definitely someone who knew what she wanted and went for it, using a prodigious talent to her advantage. Yet, she had proven to be something more, a person of integrity, albeit of necessity.

Vincent recited, then, as if his thoughts were running alont the same lines:

Within thine own bud buriest thy content,

And tender churl mak'st waste in niggarding:

He looked at Catherine, knowing her so well, and that she was very different to Lisa. He would never have been happy with Lisa, even had that been possible, whereas Catherine, busy as she often was in her working years, never failed to make time for him whenever she could. Their hearts were one.

"'Fairest creatures'," he remarked slowly, "accept all, give little, thinking it their due."

"The world allows them that, for their talents," Catherine remarked.

"Yes."

"Sometimes that's all there is."

Vincent nodded, but said nothing.

Catherine realized he had no more to say, so she returned to the sonnets.

The END