

Rest, Friend

- by Angie

Rest in soft peace ...

- Ben Jonson

A small group of people were gathered around the Mirror Pool, silent and attentive. It was Halloween, a suitable night for what had been planned.

The occasion was a solemn one – the interring of a companion. The eulogy would be delivered by the man who had known this friend best. Those assembled knew it would be special.

The tall man with the long, golden mane and leonine face had many friends, but none as constant as this one. He had thought long and hard about what to say about this associate.

He had wanted the ceremony to be private, but this had become impossible. He had asked for help, and before long the whole plan was known to everyone.

He felt a little naked here, without his cloak, but it would only be for a short while - and there was no danger here in this place, among his family and friends.

He sighed and looked out over the Mirror Pool, where torchlight sparkled and danced with the stars reflected in the waters. He could not see himself in the still pool, but he did not need to. All his life he had hidden from unfriendly eyes under those same stars, yet here it did not matter. He no longer despised his reflection. Everyone here knew him well - and no one feared him.

At last he turned to look at those assembled, and at what Catherine held. This ceremony had been her idea - and he needed closure.

He spoke at last, in that deep, silken voice the Tunnel dwellers knew well. It defined him, as his silent presence in the shadows above defined him there.

"Dear friend, you have been my shield. You have never forsaken me.

"You came to me when I was eager to go above. You made that freedom possible - a gift beyond price. Your presence allowed me to find Catherine, on that dark, foggy night so long ago.

You were with me as I read to her, told her about our community - and why I lived here. Later, when she took off her bandages and saw me for the first time, you comforted me. You tried to disguise me, but she saw me as no one had seen me before.

Yet, although I did not afterwards need to hide from Catherine, still I needed you. That much could not change.

“Over the long years, you stayed with me. I needed you more than ever, as I assisted Catherine, kept her safe, held her in my arms. You warmed us both when necessary. Your presence was a priceless blessing.

“I was a creature of the night and you made me one with it. I was the dark ghost of the streets, the avenger, the watcher, the protector. With you, I was able to help many, yet remain safe above and below. You made me formidable, secretive, stronger.

“You have always been close to me, ready at a moment’s notice, staying with me until I returned to the safety of the tunnels and my family. You were my first, and being the first, you have a special place in my heart.

“I had assumed you would be with me always. I did not notice how you aged during those halcyon years, when I was above more than at any time in my life.

“Then one day, you could help me no more. Catherine has brought you, with honour, to this place. She realized what I did not – that you deserved to be placed to rest, not just by myself, who had been closest to you, but by all of us. I have been defined by my life here underground, by this place and all who have lived here.

“But for you, my friend, my life would have been very different - hollow, despairing, isolated. Even the love of this community could not have overcome the pain of the aloneness that defined me before I found Catherine. You and she helped me reach my potential.

“Although you will soon be gone from me, I will never forget you. You have been rained upon, gathered snow, hit with rocks, been seared by fire and explosions, scraped, torn, shot, bloodied, captured and liberated – as I have. The years have sat heavily upon you.

“I will give you rest ... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

As he finished, there was a slight gasp around the group. The full moon was shining into the Mirror Pool, casting a beautiful silver glow around the cavern. Vincent gazed at the reflection for long moments, remembering the many times he had been in the world above under such a moon, and the very first time he had done so. He sighed quietly again, then continued with the ceremony.

Vincent took the neatly-folded, black cloak from Catherine, amazed, as always, at how light it was. In the magical moonlit cavern, he could see how battered his best friend had become.

He placed the garment in a wooden chest held by - and found by - Mouse and repaired and restored by Cullen. As he closed the lid and pulled down the clasp, he felt as if part of himself had been interred inside. So many memories and emotions clung to this cloak. Each mark had a story.

The ceremony ended a chapter. His life was simpler now, but also more complete and wonderful. This relic of his wilder, dangerous days, had to be put aside so that he could move on unencumbered.

Vincent relieved Mouse of the box, and then moved to hand it to Narcissa, who had appeared unexpectedly, her presence giving the ceremony additional gravity. She placed it reverently in the nook prepared for it in the wall of the cavern. He had requested this concession and received unanimous approval from his tunnel family. This cavern had defined him from his early days, its waters the only mirror he had known for many years, and he had always worn this cloak. Here, it would be a peaceful guardian - as he was now.

He watched as Narcissa cast some powder over the box and heard her mutter a few unintelligible words. He waited until she had stiffly arisen. She moved slightly aside her blind eyes watching him.

Vincent nodded to Kanin, who lifted up an uneven slab of rock and fitted it into the niche, giving it a few

short, muffled taps with a rubber mallet. Then Kanin returned to the small gathering and waited.

Vincent regarded the rock slab and his mouth twitched upwards. That slab had defined him even longer than the cloak. So many memories, and that one precious, for being the first time he had used a knife. He looked over at Devin, who stood nearby, and caught his brother's grin in return.

His brother had watched as he carved that stone, but he had made a couple of errors before deciding to carve his name further down, where a small ledge served as a straight line to guide him. Even so, his name curved slightly upwards, he realized now.

Some years ago, after Devin had come to visit, that entry had needed some repair. Vincent had taken the opportunity to cement over his scratched errors, leaving only his name. It seemed to belong there by then. He had carried Catherine through that culvert entry that very first time, and often met her there as their friendship grew. It was also the entry Devin chose to return to. But, like other less pleasant memories, that stone could now be put to rest.

He turned then and walked over to Father, who received a bundle from Mary. Vincent bowed his head in thanks as Father handed him his new cloak. He put it on, feeling it swing around his legs, enclosing him, comforting in its new, slightly heavier weight on his shoulders. Yet it felt familiar and looked much like his old friend too. He had insisted on that. He knew it as he knew his hands. He did not want to have to adapt to a strange garment.

A poem from Wordsworth came to him then, and he quoted it softly but clearly into the silence of the cavern. He reflected that no mother could have protected him as well as his cloak, so the verses seemed singularly appropriate.

"A slumber did my spirit seal

I had no human fears

She seemed a thing that could not feel

The touch of earthly years

No motion has she now, no force;

She neither hears nor sees;

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,

With rocks, and stones, and trees."

"Amen", rang around the cavern, and Vincent looked around at the small group and smiled ruefully.

Father shifted and rapped his cane on the stone floor, a not-too-subtle signal that he needed to either move or sit down.

"Indeed. Amen," Vincent remarked softly. "An end and a beginning."

He extended his arm to Catherine and they led the way back to the home tunnels.

As he passed the rock slab, he felt a touch of sadness. It had been carefully removed and replaced with new unblemished cement. Perhaps some other boy, or girl, would mark it someday.

Vincent reflected that his name now would guard the cloak, their roles reversed at last. The memorial would look over the still waters and the reflected stars in peace, until the end of time.

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