

Beneath the hood

One friend in a lifetime is much. Friendship needs ... a community of thought.

- Henry Brook Adams

by Angie

(This story is written strictly for the free enjoyment of fans of the “Beauty and the Beast” television series (1987-1991). No copyright infringement is intended.)

The hooded man stood at the back of Father's chamber, listening to the patriarch argue with those who wanted to hunt down and kill the outsider gang. He sighed inwardly. He knew which way it would go and he could see that Vincent knew it too - he was too quiet. Why did Father always skirt around the obvious, always pretend there was another option? It had happened before.

Well, it was really none of his business. He had his work to do and would be busy for many hours – but he attended the Council sessions, even though he never contributed anything. He supposed his work made it important he be aware of the consequences of Council decisions - as if he could ever *not* be aware – especially ones like this. He listened to the pipes and knew most of what went on in the tunnel community – and when to prepare for work.

He shifted a little, restless, and the person next to him immediately moved away a little. This must be how Vincent felt sometimes, he thought, especially with new arrivals, as this person was. Vincent was always accepted in a relatively short time, though. The power of his compassion and fairness, his soft voice, his obvious humanity, always won over everyone. And who could really fear someone forced to hide below ground and wear a dark, hooded cloak even at night, anywhere outside the home tunnels?

Prejudices against himself could not be overcome so easily.

The hooded man sighed inwardly again. He had a name, Jordan, but not many people addressed him. Like Vincent, he was a prisoner below, but it was his profession which set him apart – and he had taken it on willingly.

Above, he had once been an undertaker, the man who prepared the dearly-departed for open casket funeral services. Then he had accepted a different position when it was offered – that of the man who cremated the bodies when all the fuss was over. There was no graveyard in New York that would now accept bodies. There was simply no more room.

Jordan had taken pride in his work, treated each client with respect and dignity. But somehow, the scent of the mortician hung about him, even in the crematorium. He had no friends and women shunned him. Finally, it had all become too much. Every time he left work, he seemed more alone and found less reason to go home – just to sit alone, yet again. Even his one addiction, books, borrowed in great piles from the local library, were no comfort.

Somewhere, he had thought, there must be people who would accept him, or at least give him a chance. Either that, or he would have to live where such things didn't matter. Was there such a place in this country? Would he have to move abroad, where death and its preparations were more accepted? He had not wanted to leave New York. He loved the city, even though he led a lonely existence. He especially loved Central Park.

He had walked around the Park quite often at dusk, after work, or in that half dark time before sunrise. It was always fragrant and gave his nose a break from the embalming fluid, which, like ammonia, seemed present even when it wasn't.

Then, walking past a culvert one dim morning, he had heard a metal grinding noise from inside it. Curious, he ran softly inside and was just in time to see a massive door close with impressive finality, behind a heavy gate of iron bars.

After that he went there often, looking for a way to open that door. Then one day he found it, but didn't try it then. A few days later, he quit his job, returned all his library books, and went to a local thrift store to find some suitable clothing. He found a large, rough, dark grey blanket and a well-aged leather satchel. He hand-sewed himself a hooded cloak out of the blanket over the next few days, using skills he had learned as an undertaker, then put some clothing and a few personal items in the satchel. He locked his apartment, slipped the key under the bottom of the door and walked to the Park. It was near the end of the month. He knew his landlord would quickly seize what remained in his apartment when the rent was not forthcoming. He didn't care. There was nothing there he wanted.

He had considered there might be danger in approaching whoever used that secret door, but rationalized that he had not heard of any unexplained violence in the Park, or indeed any suggestions of a secretive gang in the area. Whoever these people were, they didn't want to draw attention. There could be more than one reason for that, of course, but he had felt some hope, just the same.

As Father droned on and some of the others said their piece about the current problem, Jordan remembered that day he had decided to act - the day his life took an unexpected turn.

The culvert door had opened when he pushed down the lever he had discovered behind a maintenance panel on the wall of the dimly-lit culvert junction. He had run in quickly, found the matching lever inside and closed the door. Looking down the tunnel, he had seen no one, or any sign that anyone was watching. He ran, wanting to get as far as he could before someone intercepted him. He was sure they would. Those levers spoke of organization – and a secret that people wanted to protect.

He rounded the first corner, turning right in a t-junction on impulse, skidding on the rough sand. He had tried to catch himself, and crashed into a large black shape. It had been Vincent, of course. Vincent who, as Jordan learned later, often scared off intruders. One look often sent them back where they came from – with a sentry escort at a discreet distance behind to make sure they got there. None of those people ever returned. None of them, though, had ever discovered the secret of the culvert entrance.

Jordan was not most people and did not run when he saw Vincent that first time. He dealt with death on a daily basis. It was life he sought, a better life. He knew himself a trespasser, but sensed no real danger in Vincent. If the big man had wanted to kill him, he rationalized, he would have been dead already.

He looked up and saw what Vincent's hood partially hid, and although his heart had missed a beat, he had seen much worse in his line of work. People did not always "go gently" to their final rest – and some faces were the stuff of nightmares or horror movies.

There had been something in Vincent's face he recognized - resignation, perhaps, the knowledge that he was different and that most people would see no further than those differences. Jordan saw a kindred spirit, a man who would know what it was to be shunned.

That day, almost two years ago, Jordan had stepped back, kept both hands in sight, and then extended his right hand in greeting. Vincent had shifted, as if uncertain what to do. Jordan guessed that intruders did not usually offer to introduce themselves. He had pushed on.

"My name is Jordan, and"

Jordan had heard his own voice and was dismayed. He had not thought about what he would say to anyone down here. What could he say?

"I ...," he continued, and stopped again. He suddenly doubted himself and his plan. Who lived down here, anyway? Why would they welcome him, whoever they were?

Then Vincent had spoken. "Why are you here?"

He was always direct, Vincent. Jordan had tried to get his thoughts in order.

"I'm an outcast back there." He used his thumb to indicate the way he had come.

"I found the door and ... I wanted to know where it led."

"It leads to many things," Vincent had told him softly, but with a hard edge to his voice. "To work, to hardship, to danger, to a place unlike any you could imagine."

"And are there more people there?" he had asked in curiosity.

He was sure Vincent did not live alone. He didn't look starved and was clean and well-dressed, albeit oddly, when he looked closely. No one could live below ground without a support network.

"Some," Vincent had conceded. "But they do not always welcome strangers. We demand much."

"I'll stay," Jordan promised.

"Then come with me. I warn you, though, the way is not easy. And once you are among us, you must make certain promises."

Vincent turned, and after a moment's hesitation, Jordan had followed, down the long tunnels, a windy, spiral metal staircase, a long stretch of stone steps, along narrow ledges, across rickety bridges over fantastic shafts, and into a world he knew he would never leave. He felt as if he had crossed the Styx, the river dividing life from death. In a way, he had.

He had been introduced to Father and told him something of his life, even to his profession. Father had looked interested at that, but said nothing, merely looking over at Vincent. Jordan had then been told the conditions under which he must abide – with a subtle hint of menace if he did not.

They had put him on the work roster and given him clothes. He always wore the cape he had made, though. It gave him some comfort to wear a garment he had made himself, one which reminded him of another life, even though it was one he had given up. He wore leather gloves too, for the hard labour was tough on hands not used to it. He kept them on, even when he no longer needed to. By that time, they had become part of his costume.

He was often teamed with Vincent because he had become well-muscled as an undertaker. While they worked, they had talked enough to discover they had much in common. Both loved to read – almost anything. Jordan could tell Vincent about some of the newer books available above. It had not taken him long to discover that Father's library, although huge, had few books that weren't many decades old. Vincent must have mentioned the titles to Catherine, for days or weeks later, Vincent would introduce one and they would discuss it. It made the hours of hard work pass swiftly. It was wonderful to have a friend to talk to, and in the process they each learned a great deal about each other.

Vincent's view of the world was quite different to his own, and probably that of any "topsider". There was much he didn't understand about the world Jordan had left. There were no supermarkets, gas stations, telephones, cinemas or banks below, and many of the tunnel dwellers had either left long ago or been born below. Vincent, he learned, had come to the tunnels as a baby. Some book references puzzled him and Jordan had been happy to explain them.

After a few months of work, Father had asked to speak to him, sending a message over the pipes. Jordan had been helping Vincent carve out a new addition to the hospital chamber. He apologized, put down his tools carefully, and went quickly to Father's chamber. The patriarch was sitting at his table in the library, a pot of tea at his elbow. He stood up as Jordan entered.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," Father greeted him, with a smile. "Would you like some tea?"

"No thanks, Father."

"Ah, well, please sit down, Jordan. I wanted to welcome you officially to our world. You have worked hard and Vincent tells me you are strong and able as well. How do you feel about staying here now?"

Jordan had sat down, curious. "I don't want to leave, Father. I'm happy here. I'm accepted and I like working with my hands."

"Yes, er, well, good! I have a proposition – a job - for you, Jordan. You don't have to accept it. We don't demand people do anything they find emotionally abhorrent, and this job fits that category."

Jordan was silent. He had learned a great deal about the tunnel community once he had learned the pipe codes. He also kept his ears open. He knew they had catacombs, but no one had died since his arrival, so he had no idea how they dealt with their deceased. He had not wanted to ask. He could guess what Father wanted. Could he stand it again - the solitude, the inevitable shunning, he wondered? Maybe that wouldn't happen here.

"You want me to be a mortician again," he stated bluntly.

Father looked at him, surprised.

"Yes. How did you guess?"

Jordan shrugged. "It wasn't so difficult. I didn't hear of anyone doing it, so I guessed there was no one, officially."

"That's correct. We don't have much mortality here, but our options are limited in dealing with them. Are you interested?"

Jordan was silent for a few moments. He had to be honest.

"Yes, but what facilities do you have here?"

"We've built an incinerator, the only option we have left, I'm afraid. We haven't used it for this purpose, not being experienced, but have used it to burn medical waste and to fire pottery. We fuel it with coal from a seam we found deep underground. Now, we need to consider cremation. Your expertise would be welcome. If you don't want to do this yourself, perhaps we can find you someone to train."

"I'll do it."

Jordan was surprised at himself, but it felt right. He did owe this community a lot. He had felt alive for the first time in his life, part of something larger than himself. He knew most of the tunnel dwellers, although he had no real friends besides Vincent. He wasn't surprised – he had known he was on probation until Father approved his

becoming an official part of the community.

He had looked across Father's study and to his surprise saw Vincent in the doorway, looking at him. Jordan smiled at him and Vincent nodded in acknowledgement - probably remembering their first meeting.

So he had taken on the task of mortician. Of course, there was none of the preparation used in the world above. No makeup, no embalming fluid, no ornate caskets. Here, the deceased was bathed by those closest to him or her, then wrapped unclothed in a simple shroud, often a patched sheet too thin to be used for anything else. Fabric had value here and could not be destroyed needlessly. The body was then carefully placed in the long metal box Jordan had designed and constructed with the help of Mouse and others. The box went into the incinerator and the resulting ashes were carefully emptied, to be used to feed the community's experimental underground garden. Mixed into the composter and supplemented with scraps from the kitchen, they also helped to fertilize the mushrooms William grew in a warm chamber.

Each departed person was remembered with a little ceramic plaque and these were installed in a new chamber excavated near the catacombs, a kind of chapel or shrine.

Jordan liked the ceremony at the Mirror Pool. He always attended and wrote a letter of his own. He remembered when that tradition had begun. That had been a bad time.

This one was worse, though. Everyone except Father seemed to realize that these most recent intruders, a very violent gang, were not going to leave easily. There would be no negotiating with them, but Jordan hoped there would not be too many casualties among the people he thought of as family. He had to clear out his preparation chamber to make room, just in case. He was sure he would see the rest of the intruders, in a professional capacity, before long. Father did not admit to that either – at least in the presence of the Council.

Jordan was the last out the door when the meeting adjourned and heard part of the exchange between Vincent and Father. It chilled him with its reminder that Vincent's differences were as much internal as external. Vincent's obvious resignation, in the face of the inevitable, made his heart lurch for his friend.

Jordan thoughts were gloomy as he waited in his chamber, which was in the lowest level, not far from the incinerator area.

A day or so later, after the evacuation of the children had begun, the whole matter suddenly came to a head and Vincent had raced off to rescue Catherine from the intruders. Jordan had been helping pack community goods for a move to a safer, lower level at the time. Vincent's exit put a stop to everything. Pascal had turned pale and confessed he had forgotten to pass along the message to Catherine that the evacuation had been aborted. Naturally, she had entered the tunnels, trying to find out what was wrong, afraid for Vincent.

After the fight was over, Vincent retreated into his chamber and refused to come out, his arm in a sling from a bullet wound in his shoulder. The larger men in the community had brought the dead to Jordan's preparation chamber. All the tunnels where the fight had taken place were scrubbed, and the caves the gang had been using cleaned out. Any fabric found had been washed and given to him to use as shrouds for the gang. Not even economy would tempt anyone to use those.

Jordan sighed with relief when the last corpse was sewn into its shroud. Their bodies all bore testament to violence – and what Vincent could do with no weapons but his hands, when necessary. He knew Vincent was considered the community's protector, but this was the first time he had seen what that meant. He now understood a great deal more about the man he considered his saviour and friend. He had washed them all, since no one else would do so, and used the fabrics found with them. He had never been so busy.

No wonder Vincent agonized. No man with any decency would want to be forced to that extreme. Jordan found himself wishing he could help his friend, somehow. He heard on the pipes that Vincent had gone deep below ground and knew that he did this only when he was very upset. The tunnel grapevine had been buzzing with the news that he had even turned Catherine away.

Jordan guessed that Vincent felt trapped and isolated, unable to reconcile what he'd had to do with what he had hoped, against all logic. That gave Jordan an idea. Down here in the mortuary chamber, he was alone.

Jordan sent a message along the pipes, requesting that Vincent visit him. If he was in earshot of the pipes, he would come soon – or when he returned, if not. The message would be repeated until Vincent acknowledged it.

Jordan's chamber was far below that of anyone else. No one wanted to be too close to an incinerator cum

crematorium. The vent for the heat and gases was also separate from those used by the community. They had been able to link to an exhaust pipe for the subway's backup diesel generators.

His work did not have set hours. Jordan worked until it was done, and then he might not have anything to do for weeks. In between, he borrowed books from Father's library, prepared shrouds and helped Vincent with chamber excavations. The heavy labour helped him keep in shape. He also kept his own, special record of his "customers".

When he had set up his preparation chamber and was looking for trestles and table tops, he had found a dusty trunk filled with odds and ends of balsa wood, probably once used by children to make boats and airplanes. It had given him an idea, and he began carving a small figurine to represent each person who passed through his hands. The little carvings – none more than five inches tall - stood on shelves in a small annex next to his preparation chamber. He had felt strongly that everyone deserved to be remembered, no matter who they had been in life.

The carvings were recognizable to anyone familiar with the deceased, although very few tunnel dwellers had seen them. His visitors – as opposed to his customers - tended to leave rather more quickly than they had arrived. He was no great artist, but he put considerable effort into the face, while the hands, feet and clothing were rendered more roughly. He also had a good memory for faces and costume details.

He had made sketches of the outsider gang for use later, since he'd had to process them more quickly than was usual, in order to ensure they were cremated before they became a health hazard. He had finished carving the ragged boy and the gang leader, and was working on the large, hulking man when Vincent addressed him from the annex chamber doorway. He stood up, put aside the carving and smiled.

"Welcome, Vincent. I hope I didn't keep you from anything important. I just had a question for you."

Vincent nodded, saying nothing, but looked around, having never been in the chamber before. His eyes found the shelf where Jordan stored the most recent figurines and stopped. Some were awaiting plaques and would be installed in the memorial chamber in the catacombs. Others had become permanent residents.

They seemed to pull at Vincent and he moved closer to get a better look. His voice was a bit rough. No doubt he recognized them.

"Jordan, these are ... amazing. I didn't know you were an artist."

Jordan then realized that his friend had never visited the memorial chamber. But then why should he? Not many did, he guessed. It was either too painful, or of no interest.

"I'm not, Vincent. I just felt I should record the folks who pass through this chamber – with something more than a ledger entry."

Vincent looked down at the table where Jordan had been sitting and spotted the two completed carvings of the outsider gang and the pile of drawings. His face got stiff and he put both hands palm down on the table, then closed his eyes. He seemed rooted in place.

"I thought I should do them too" Jordan said, softly.

"Yes. Of course," Vincent spoke slowly, then straightened and turned to look at him. He seemed to suddenly remember why he was here. "You wanted me?"

"Yes. It's about them." Jordan nodded at the figures on the table. "They weren't part of our community, but they did die here. Where shall I put their carvings? I ... I don't want to upset anyone. I keep a lot of carvings here, as you see, but if anyone wants one, they're welcome to take them to the memorial chamber."

Vincent sat down in a chair next to the table and picked up the carving of the boy.

"How did this child become part of the gang?" he mused quietly. "Was he the son of one of those unfortunate women, or had he been found by them, somewhere – perhaps as I found Mouse?"

Vincent picked up the carving of the gang leader and his hand clutched it hard. "This man led them in ... atrocities. I heard his voice days before I saw him. He had no remorse, no kindness. What made him that way?"

Jordan knew Vincent didn't expect answers to any of the questions, but felt he should say something. He spoke carefully.

"Vincent, I have seen men, women and children in every state of grace – or disfavour – possible. These were

violent people who gave violence and expected no better in return. They revelled in it. Their lives meant nothing to them – they were completely degraded, lost. Nothing in the world could have reformed them, or excused what they had done. They would have destroyed everyone here without a thought - if not for you. You knew what they were and dealt with them the only way possible. They preyed on weakness and took advantage of any hesitation. If you hadn't met their violence head on, you could have died too."

"Yes. I felt their anger and hatred for all that we are – all that I am. I used that to fire my ... strength. I understand it. It's the same anger that comes upon me when I protect those I love."

Jordan kept his voice low. "No, Vincent, it isn't the same. You don't hate like they did, and you don't instigate violence. That's the difference. You don't kill just because you can. You also don't torture, as these did. They were no kinder to each other. Their bodies all showed evidence of old violence - terrible marks."

Vincent said nothing to that, turning the carving in his hand. He nodded at last.

"In answer to your question, I think you should keep these with your others, but turn their faces to the wall, as they had turned in life, away from humanity. They have nothing to tell us."

He sighed deeply and looked at Jordan. "Are you content, doing all ... this?"

Jordan was caught off guard and was at a loss for words. Something must have shown in his face, though, for Vincent looked grim and nodded again.

"I suspected so. I know what first impression I give people. I see you standing alone, at the back of Father's chamber, in every Council meeting. Your duty is one we don't like to think about. You deserve better treatment."

"Vincent, I knew what to expect when I accepted this job. My life here is still better than what I left above. I know I'm appreciated. People leave me small gifts and no one is unfriendly."

"But you have no visitors except on ... business – am I right? And no female friends?"

Jordan blushed and was unable to speak. He had few of the social skills women in the world above seemed to regard as essential - and they seemed to sense something unpleasant about him. Here, people tended to be individuals and did not force their presence on others. There were no cliques among the tunnel residents. He experienced a accepting silence - but a silence nevertheless.

Vincent nodded with understanding. Sometimes, he thought, his family were too careful, too quiet. No one wanted to intrude on another's space. Only the children were indulged – and that gave him inspiration.

"I think I have an idea, Jordan. You do have considerable skill as a carver. Cullen is good at it too, but is not fond of children. Would you like to teach them woodcarving?"

Jordan's surprise must have shown on his face.

"I ...I ... of course, Vincent. I don't have any formal training, you know. I'm not sure I can teach, but I'll try."

"Thank-you, Jordan. And thank you for showing me your carvings."

Vincent took a deep breath and let it out.

"I find it difficult to talk about ... what bothers me, what I feel inside, especially to Father. For much, there are no words. It's a darkness I fight, always. Catherine thinks she understands, but how can she? I am outside her experience – or anyone's. I don't want to frighten her. You are a friend, a good man. I can talk to you. Thank you."

Vincent rose slowly, said goodbye and promised to talk to Father about the classes.

Jordan began running over ideas in his mind, wondering where to begin. He went into his office area and sat down to make a list. He had to begin at the beginning, with basic drawing skills, he guessed. He jotted down some ideas and then sat back in his chair. Life was strange, he thought at last.

Here, below ground, he could be pleasantly surprised - something very rare in his old life. He had wanted to help Vincent, and been helped himself as well. He remembered an old proverb, which said that life without a friend was like death without a witness. It felt good to be both a friend and a witness.

He smiled, and felt a huge weight lift from his heart. Life and death were both good to him, he decided.

END