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Friends Do

(A sequel to "No Way Down")

-by Angie

You shall judge of a man by his foes as well as by his friends.

- Joseph Conrad

Isaac waited until he was sure Catherine and Vincent were well away, then worked to manhandle the heavy metal door back into place. He guessed that Howie had helped Vincent open it. Moving it across the gritty floor strained every muscle he had, but inch by inch, he narrowed the gap and with one enormous heave, he got it to close and heard the satisfying click when its rusty latch connected. He wondered what the hell the hotel had kept behind it in the old days – caviar, French wines he couldn't pronounce? He took a deep breath, then scuffed up the dirty floor to make sure no tracks led to the door.

He leaned against a wall and allowed himself to think. He had seen the face of Catherine's friend, had understood then why she had been so adamant that they find him. Her attitude towards this man indicated he was more than a friend. He guessed that her arrival at his studio to learn self-defense had been related as well. This man had saved her life, she said. Isaac had glimpsed someone else beyond Vincent – an older man in a lighted tunnel entrance. So there were others down there.

Suddenly a whole lot of other things clicked into place. Catherine had come to him for information on the subway vigilante a few weeks ago. But she had seemed less interested in justice for his victims, or even in the people he saved, than the beast with the claws. He had sensed there was more than she was telling, that she had been afraid of something, or for someone. Now he understood. She had been afraid that Vincent was the vigilante. And he, Isaac, had taken her to the very man who would detect that fear and wonder at it.

Jason. He'd bet that Jason's disappearance was somehow connected to Vincent too. Jason who had used those clawed gloves to wreak his own kind of justice. He would have been fascinated, had he known of Vincent – and somehow he had learned. He had probably had Catherine followed as a precaution. Something had happened. Jason's white hats swore they knew nothing – hadn't seen him for weeks. He guessed this time they were telling the truth. But Catherine knew. From little things he'd heard, she'd been with Jason just before he disappeared. She had visited him in his studio.

Isaac sighed and looked around the dim basement, then at the two bodies on the floor. Howie was lying on top of Chris, holding him in a death hug that said everything, even without the large dark stain on the back of his silk suit. At the last, Howie had saved Vincent. He had no doubt of it. Catherine and he would have been too late to stop Chris from killing him. That meant that Howie has seen something worthwhile in Vincent, even injured as he had been. Vincent would not have been able to escape without help. The Silks had a rep. Isaac had no time for thugs – and no sorrow at all that these ones were dead.

But Howie was different. Isaac knew him as a man who had been taunted for his size and slow mental abilities – but he was not a fool and he had been a decent, gentle man. He had fallen in with the Silks because they treated him as one of them – he had never had friends. The big man had not deserved to die for them.

Something caught the dim light on the floor by Howie's hand and he walked over to pick it up. It was a tiny snow globe - the kind of thing Howie would like. He found value where no one else would look twice – including people. With another sigh, Isaac put the glass globe in his pocket, then moved swiftly up the stairs to the lobby.

The two Silks women were gone, but the other, the prostitute whom they had brought with them, was still there, huddled and weeping at the bottom of a flight of marble stairs. Isaac touched her shoulder and saw her look at him with a face that sagged in despair. He spoke softly. There were a lot of ghosts in this place now. It had the silence of a crypt.

“Come on, now. There's nothing to cry about. The Silk men are all dead. They didn't kill no one but each other.”

At this last, the woman looked at him with an expression that was almost joy.

“He ... he ... got away? Is he safe? I showed him how to get here ... he couldn't see. I tried to stall, to give him time ... but I had to tell Chris. He would have killed me.”

She blubbered into a sleeve.

“I was afraid they killed him.”

Isaac gave her a hand to help her get to her feet.

“Well, you did good. He's safe now with a friend of mine. And you were smart not to cross Chris. Dead is forever. Come on, I'll help you home.”

As they left the old hotel, the woman told Isaac her name and how she had found Vincent huddled by her door. Lucy was obviously ashamed that she had feared him, injured as he had been. Isaac was not sure how he would have reacted under the circumstances, and said so.

When they reached Lucy's place, Isaac declined her invitation for a drink and left her. He had thinking to do. It did not pay to be too curious in his business, but Catherine Chandler was a special case. If there was something going on under the streets, maybe he could help - if he knew what it was.

Over the next three days, Isaac watched Catherine's movements from a distance and learned her daily schedule. If she saw Vincent, it wasn't on the way to or

from work. Then, on the fourth afternoon, she went into Central Park after an afternoon spent at the courthouse. She moved swiftly, with deliberation, clearly not out for a late afternoon stroll. Isaac followed her, keeping well out of sight and almost lost her when she unexpectedly ran down a drainage culvert as the sun was setting. He followed noiselessly, and stood in the shadow of the culvert, listening. He heard a metal *graunch*, a click and then soft voices. He ran the rest of the way into the culvert and found what he had hoped. Vincent and Catherine together. Their embrace told him his hunch had been correct. They were more than friends.

Vincent suddenly stiffened and growled throatily, but pulled away only slightly, one arm still protectively around Catherine. He kept his face turned and hidden inside the dark hood of his cloak. Catherine turned quickly. Her mouth fell open.

“Isaac? What ...?”

Isaac spoke quickly, addressing Vincent, who seemed huge and dangerous.

“You must be Vincent. I’m Isaac Stubbs - Cathy’s punch bag when she comes to my studio.”

Catherine snorted and relaxed, Vincent turned to look at Isaac and revealed his face in the dim light. Isaac didn’t see anything he hadn’t expected. He waited. Vincent, relaxed slightly too. Isaac then realized he had been expecting some reaction.

“What do you want, Mr Stubbs?” Vincent’s voice was unexpectedly deep and soft.

Isaac found himself suddenly at a loss. What did he want? Well, best be honest.

“I’m curious – not a smart thing to be in my profession. I wasn’t smart when I took this lady to meet Jason. Maybe I wasn’t smart to help her when the Silks got you, but she’s a friend. Sometimes I don’t listen to my brain.

“I wanted you to know that I found Lucy upstairs after you left. She was feeling so bad that I told her you were safe, Vincent. She’s a rare one on the streets. She still cares about people.”

At the name Lucy, Vincent straightened. There was surprise in his voice.

“Lucy? She helped me find the hotel. I owe her my life.”

Catherine looked up at Vincent.

“Who is Lucy, Vincent? Why didn’t you mention her? Should we help her?”

Vincent looked at her and spoke softly.

“Catherine, there is much about that night I don’t remember – and much more that is painful.” He turned to Isaac.

“I think you should come inside, Mr Stubbs. It’s dangerous to us - and you - to stay here. Come.”

Vincent opened the gate, his left arm on Catherine’s shoulder as if he needed a prop, and led the way into a well-lit tunnel. He reached over to the wall and pulled a lever. A massive door grated shut and Isaac wondered what he was getting into. Too late to worry about that now, he told himself.

He followed behind the pair of them, noticing that Vincent walked a little tentatively. He was amazed the man could walk at all, so soon after that night.

At a junction, Vincent picked up a stone and tapped on a pipe running the length of the tunnel wall. A tapping sounded in response. Then he turned to Isaac.

“Mr Stubbs, I am taking you into my world. I believe we can trust you to keep our secret, but I warn you that it will not always be easy. Catherine knows this only too well. You mentioned Jason. He found his way here, running from me, after drawing me to him by holding Catherine hostage.”

Isaac couldn't resist. “And now, Jason is ... where?”

“Where no one can know, Mr Stubbs. He fell a long way, probably to his death – after he declined to send me to mine. We should talk.”

Vincent led onwards and as the passages narrowed, Catherine fell back to walk near Isaac. Even in the dim light of the tunnel, he could see that she looked haggard. Probably had not been sleeping well. She spoke quietly.

“I'm going to have to learn to be more careful. I think I'm the biggest risk to this community there is. Vincent will never admit it, but it's so. Maybe you can give me some pointers, Isaac. I don't want anyone else finding this place because of me.”

She got a worried expression as she watched Vincent. Isaac could see he was definitely not moving quickly or with a normal gait. He looked as if he was in pain and Isaac could hear his breath rasping. Broken ribs perhaps?

“Cathy, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come.”

“Well, you're here now, Isaac. You may as well see.”

The tunnels seemed to be going steadily downward and getting older. Then they went through an opening onto a rickety bridge over a vast chasm. Vincent paused just a short way out, putting his hand across to prevent the others from moving forward.

“It is not safe. We have to repair it. Mr Stubbs, this is where Jason fell – where I almost did. He could have forced it. Instead he jumped for that rope to escape and it broke. I wasn't quick enough to stop him. We don't know where the bottom of this shaft is – if it has one. No one has ever found it.”

Isaac looked down and saw nothing that could be called a bottom, just a gradual lessening of light until it became a dark circle, far below. The silence was heavy, the hole inviting almost. He shivered. That Vincent would have tried to save the man who had hunted him said everything. Ironic that Jason, who was not known for mercy and always careful, had shown the former and taken one risk too many - both within seconds of each other. Isaac shook his head in amazement.

Vincent turned then and herded them off the bridge, then led the way along more tunnels. He made a sudden left turn and Isaac found himself in a cave cluttered with an enough odds and ends – and books - to fill a fancy antique shop. There was furniture too - a bed, a table, a couple of chairs, wardrobes, bookshelves - and a stained glass semi-circle reflecting the golden glow from a lot of candles. It looked comfortable and Isaac could see Vincent relax. It was the kind of place

Isaac himself could feel at home in. It reminded him of his grandmother's place. He had never been long enough anywhere to collect anything. These days, he lived out of a suitcase in the back of his studio. He had nothing worth stealing except a load of punch bags and old mats – and an economy-sized roll of duct tape to repair them.

Vincent beckoned him to a chair and sat in a large one himself, sagging into it. Catherine sat on the enormous bed.

Vincent sighed and looked from Isaac to Catherine.

"I am glad you came, Mr Stubbs."

Isaac interrupted. "Call me Isaac, please."

"Isaac ... I am sorry I could not show you more. I got up for the first time today. Catherine has come here every night to watch me as I sleep. She thought I did not know." He gave her a small feral grin.

"She feels guilty, but what happened was not her fault. I followed her. I knew she was afraid that night. You see, Isaac, I can feel when she's in danger. We are ... connected.

"I wanted to send word to Lucy, to thank her, but I have no idea where she lives. I ... I was almost blind when she found me - and in great pain. I could hardly think. I frightened her, but she helped me anyway. She deserves more than our thanks."

Catherine, who had been listening to Vincent with obvious amazement, spoke up.

"Vincent, I didn't know. I haven't seen Isaac since that night. I'm so sorry Isaac. I should have paid a visit, if only to thank you. I've been so worried about Vincent - and I'm not the most popular person here right now. I've been expecting to be banned for life. It WAS my fault. I should never have agreed to meet a witness alone, at night, in such a place. It won't happen again. Joe – my boss – is right. I take too many chances. This time, Vincent paid the price. If he had been killed – I ... I wouldn't want to live."

Isaac looked from one to the other, saw the look Vincent's gave her. Hopeful – and something else. The expression was not easy to discern on that face, but he'd bet it was love. Catherine could not take her eyes off him – and her face was lit from within. Certainly, she loved him.

Isaac nodded, to himself, as much to them.

"I understand now. I'm your friend. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. I know where Lucy lives. I took her home ... after. I can bring her here if you tell me how and where. You can't use that hotel entrance anymore. I closed the door and I don't think dynamite would open it again. Anyhow, I heard the place was sold. The Silks women must have had the bodies removed, because I never heard nothing about them. Nobody talks about them. It's as if they never existed. New York's better without them and their kind anyhow."

Vincent looked at Isaac and then hung his head. His voice was soft, but full of pain.

“When I came to, after the explosion, they had me chained upright to a wall. I could hardly see or hear, but I could sense their hatred of what I am. I was just an animal to be tortured, something too weak to fight back. I broke free when one held a welding torch to me. I ... I killed him, I think.

“I chose not to speak. Howie guessed I could and spoke to me. He helped me open that door. Then he gave his life for me.”

Vincent looked over at Catherine. She had buried her face in her hands and her shoulders were shaking in silent misery. Isaac looked at his hands until Vincent spoke again.

“We are grateful to you, Isaac. That door is now welded shut and we sealed off our entrance. Does Howie have any family?”

“No, Vincent. Howie was an orphan, grew up on the streets. I had him in my studio a couple times. He was very strong, but slow. Those Silks, not one of them was over five foot ten. They used him for muscle. He made them feel important. They had a cheap protection racket.”

Isaac suddenly remembered something and unzipped a pocket in his jacket. He held out the miniature snow globe to Vincent.

“This belonged to Howie. I found it next to his hand. Have it to remember him by.”

Vincent took the tiny object and looked at it, curled his large hand around it. Isaac hardly noticed the long hair and sharp nails because tears were now running down Vincent’s cheeks. Vincent’s voice was a pained rasp as he looked at the globe.

“I heard him talk to the one called Chris. He offered this to him in exchange for letting me go. Howie blocked a bullet with his body - twice. I heard that too. Thank you ... Isaac. I’ll keep this in memory of him.

“Could you do me another favour, Isaac? Could you talk to Lucy and see if there is anything we can do to help her? She would trust you. Tell her I sent you. I cannot visit her and Catherine should not. I remember her saying that her mother wanted her to be a nurse. She has a good heart. It would not be a fast process, to join us. We have to be very careful. But if she is willing, we can begin her initiation. There is an entrance near your studio, under the overpass. You may use it any time you wish – with care.”

“A lesson I’d be advised to learn as well,” Catherine commented quietly as she looked at Vincent and wiped her face.

“This time, it was only me,” Isaac grinned – reminding Catherine of their first meeting.

She laughed, a bit hesitantly, and nodded. Vincent looked puzzled.

“It’s what Isaac told me when I wandered into his studio to ask about self-defense lessons, yelling and blundering about. I need a refresher course, I think.”

Isaac laughed, his voice booming in the chamber.

“Lady, you don’t need no refresher course. You proved that a few nights ago. You just need to be aware and motivated – and avoid distractions.”

Catherine rose and went to Vincent. She stroked his hair and rested her hand on his shoulder.

“Well, I guess you know who distracts me these days. I’d better show you out, Isaac. I know the way to the entry near your studio. I had Vincent show it to me weeks ago, just in case I needed to reach you ... unofficially. Vincent has to rest.”

She looked at him as she said this and he nodded acceptance, then looked at Isaac. He sounded tired.

“Thank you for coming, Isaac. I’m sure we will meet again. We might be able to use your skills to train some of our sentries, if you have time. We cannot pay money, but we have the best cook in New York, and you’re welcome to join us for dinner any time.

Catherine smiled and Isaac looked at them both. He grinned.

“Now that’s an offer I’m not likely to refuse. I’m the worst cook in New York. My only specialty is Italian beans.”

“Italian?” Vincent asked.

Catherine laughed. “He means out of a can, Vincent. The brand name sounds Italian.”

She took Isaac’s arm and led him away, waving at Vincent, a promise in her eyes which Isaac didn’t miss. He wondered if a woman would ever look at him that way and sighed to himself.

The route back did not take as long as trip in. He guessed there were many ways in this network of tunnels. He noted that they passed at least two sentry stations, that he could detect, and he felt his neck hairs twitch at several other points. These were careful people – and they had reason to be. He had not seen anyone but Vincent – and his cave – but that told him a lot. There was organization here. These people were civilized. He wanted to see more.

Catherine led him down a tunnel whose roof began to slope towards the floor. He had lost his sense of direction long ago, but he guessed they were now below the overpass. She reached her hand into a large crack where the roof met the wall and pulled. The wall swung inward with barely a noise, just enough to let them squeeze through. Isaac told himself he’d better lay off the burgers if he was to use this entrance. They emerged between two pillars and Catherine signaled him to wait a moment. He heard the wall scrape softly shut and without words, she showed him a hand-sized crack in a deep shadow at the top of the wall, matching that on the other side, then mimicked a push. He nodded and she led him out into the night air, around a right angle in the concrete he had not known existed. From the outside, it seemed joined to the road bed above. Clever.

When they reached his studio, Isaac stopped and turned to Catherine.

“I bet you don’t want to join me for my ‘special’, so I won’t ask. I’ll talk to Lucy tomorrow and send a message to Vincent. Is there an easy way to do that?”

She smiled.

“Well, you could drop it down the grate in the alley next door. That’s probably easiest. I’ll introduce you to some messengers one day. We’ll do lunch. ‘Bye Isaac – and thanks again.”

“Friends do for each other, Cathy. Remember? Take care of the big guy.”

“Oh, I will, Isaac - that you can depend on.”

Isaac watched her move back to the underpass and made sure she wasn’t observed. This part of the street was usually empty – and tonight was no exception. With a sigh, he unlocked his door and headed into his kitchen nook. The noise of the highway was a constant hum in the background. It had been so quiet in the tunnels, he’d just now realized how noisy his studio was. He guessed he would never feel quite at home in it again.

Catherine and Vincent had introduced something into his life he had never thought much about – magic and love. Neither had a place in his business, until now. He was grateful for the reminder that there was more than beans and duct tape in the world. Friends did that too.

He was smiling as he opened up another can of ‘special’. He really must vary his diet. Maybe this tunnel cook Vincent mentioned could give him some pointers. He’d be willing to trade those for self-defense lessons!

END