

A Friend Indeed

by Angie

"The only way to have a friend is to be one."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Vincent approached the apartment of a helper somewhat uncertainly. He had been informed that there would be someone there who would like to meet him. He had no real objection to meeting people recommended by tunnel supporters, but experience had told him that the reactions could be less than ... pleasant.

Nevertheless, he climbed the stairs – the elevator was out of order, again – and knocked on the door softly, not wanting to awaken any curious tenants. It was late, but the helper was a night owl and didn't mind late visits.

Andrew opened the door and silently beckoned him inside, moving carefully on his canes so as not to make undue noise on the old wooden floor. The sitting room was lit by only two small table lamps, but Vincent could see someone sitting on one of the easy chairs. He had not removed his hood, so entered slowly and sat in his customary chair between the two lamps, while Andrew sat in a recliner that gave his back some relief.

"This is Amad, Vincent," Andrew stated after he was settled.

Amad rose and approached Vincent, looking intently at him and obviously trying to see through the shadows cast by the hood. Vincent gave an internal sigh and pushed it back. He stood up to meet the other and found the man was almost as tall as himself, with the darker skin and slim build of eastern Mediterranean races. They shook hands and Vincent was glad he had thought to wear his gloves.

Amad did not flinch, or even raise his eyebrows. He merely nodded, smiled a welcome, and returned to his seat. Nevertheless, he continued to examine Vincent openly.

"Amad is a baker of fine Middle Eastern desserts," Andrew commented. "I thought you might be interested in trying some, so I had him bring a sample."

"It's called basbousa," Amad commented, and lifted up a covered plate and removed the lid. He stood and passed the plate around, both Andrew and Vincent taking a square. Andrew took a bite instantly. Vincent looked at the cake and could find nothing he recognized. He did however recognize the smell of roses.

"Rosewater?" he queried Amad.

"Yes. It's traditional in baked goods in my homeland, Egypt. Many countries make a similar dessert."

"It's my favourite," Andrew commented, taking another bite.

Vincent bit into it carefully, trying not to show his canines and enjoyed the sweet rose taste too.

"Very nice," he remarked.

Andrew nodded, expecting that reaction. "Amad says it's very easy to make and I thought William might want to try it. The recipe can make a lot, at very little cost."

"I would be happy to take the recipe to him," Vincent offered, taking another bite. For such a

simple dessert, it was delicious. Lots of almonds on top and he could taste coconut too.

"I wrote it out for you," Amad said, getting up and handing him a file card with neat writing on it. Vincent thanked him.

Finished the cake, Vincent looked at Amad, and wondered if he dared ask the obvious question. He decided he could.

"Why did you want to meet me? Surely it was not just to have me sample your dessert."

Amad chuckled. "Andrew told me about you, although not in detail, and I guessed you were different in a unique way. Having seen you, I can see why. You remind me of one of the old gods of my country, a lion-headed deity, Mahes, often depicted with a man's body and a lion's head. Although he was fierce, the lord of massacre, he was also a protector of the innocent and a god of healing."

Vincent absorbed this silently for a few moments. He could not deny that massacres were known to him, for he had been responsible for some, to his shame. The other qualities suited him better, but being a protector was the reason for his more violent actions.

"I don't think I am capable of much healing," he remarked a little wryly, looking down at his gloved hands.

"But you bring healing to many associated with your people, do you not?"

Vincent started and remembered the pouch of medicine for Andrew, the real purpose of his visit. He pulled the paper package out of his pocket with a mild oath and rose to put it on the table next to Andrew, who smiled him thanks. The herbs from Wong's shop, boiled and strained into a broth, would help his arthritis.

"I deliver it," Vincent said at last when he was seated again, "but I do not prepare it."

"It is unlikely that a god would do so either," Amad remarked with a laugh. "They just take credit."

Vincent chuckled and nodded, enjoying Amad's humour.

Andrew suddenly cursed and rose. "I forgot the tea!" Amad signalled to him to stay seated and rose and went into the kitchen. They heard him rummaging around and he returned quickly with three cups and a teapot. He held the tray for Andrew and Vincent, who both took a cup. On a plate were three more pieces of cake and they took one of those too.

They exchanged small talk about the weather and the Mets for a few minutes. Amad cleared his throat and looked at Vincent.

"Would it be possible for me to visit your world? I do not know where it is, but I would like to see a place where you feel safe. Andrew has not said much, except that it is a place apart."

"I am not the only one kept safe," Vincent corrected mildly. "We have many people who the world above has discarded, or disregarded. However, I cannot give permission on my own. We discuss any potential new visitor at a council meeting. What would you like me to say about you?"

Amad looked thoughtful for a few moments. "I can bake, of course, but I also have some experience in cooking for a large number of people. I can also teach anyone Arabic who might wish to know. I was a teacher in Egypt, but prefer to just read and bake here."

Vincent nodded and rose from his chair. It was time he returned to the tunnels.

"Thank you for the lovely dessert, Amad. I will present your case, and let you know the decision through Andrew here."

"Thank-you," Amad said, as he rose and presented his hand to Vincent again.

Vincent nodded, shook his hand, and smiled at Andrew then left the apartment. Amad closed the door softly behind him.



A few weeks later, the tunnel community was treated to basbousa. Amad had provided a bottle of rosewater, something William had never thought to have on hand. Catherine nearly smacked her lips as she finished off her slice. She took a sip of tea, the perfect accompaniment.

“Why have I never had this before?” she mused to Vincent. She looked over at Amad, who was beaming happily as he handed out slices. William, uncharacteristically, was sitting at a nearby table eating a piece, his eyes closed in ecstasy.

“It is, I understand, a very easy to make, everyday treat,” Vincent replied. “So common in Middle Eastern bakeries that no one thinks it special. William is obviously ... pleased.”

“Then I can look forward to more of it?” Catherine asked. She had seen the cake sliced and waiting on the sideboard. It tasted even better than it looked. The subtle taste of rosewater was delightful.

“William made enough for several meals,” Vincent told her.

Catherine sighed in happiness. Sometimes simple WAS best.

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