

WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR?

by Lorraine Cirelli Gupton

The artificial brightness of the streetlamps illuminated the endless line of apartment buildings. Doormen casually paced the carpeted entrances, preparing for a long evening's work. Designer delis and specialty boutiques closed for business hours ago, were strategically placed along the tree-lined street. A lone dog walker, attracted by the creative window display, stopped momentarily at a clothing store, before hurrying into his building.

Hidden in the dark corners of this quiet, upscale neighborhood were the residents of this City who had no homes; lost, tormented souls who wandered the streets without refuge from the buffeting winds and merciless weather. One could almost understand why the community, and even the City, overlooked them. It wasn't surprising that one more person, huddled in those dark corners, was virtually ignored by all concerned.

Jamie shivered in the cold, damp courtyard and raised a tentative finger to the bruise on her lip. She still couldn't believe he'd hit her. Okay, he'd been angry, but that didn't justify his striking her! If anyone had the right to be upset, it was she!

Like a ghostly admonition, the warnings they had stressed came floating back to her - '*A Topsider, Jamie. Belongs Above, not Below.*' She recalled the insistence that she think hard before leaving, before leaping into the unknown. It hurt to admit that, after all this time, that they had been proven right. With a mournful shake of her hand, she began to sob quietly, reliving in her mind the events of that night.

She hadn't been thinking when she ran into the streets, out of the warmth of their three bedroom condominium. She didn't even stop to take her coat, and the sweat suit she had on certainly didn't protect her from the chilly November air. She cursed her impetuous nature; in the past, it had gotten her into trouble more than a few times.

Suddenly, a deep feeling of loss overwhelmed her. She had spent such a wonderful day Below with Father and Mary; it was just like old times. Visiting the Tunnels healed her, reinforced her commitment to life, which sometimes was tarnished by living Above.

Jamie actually had been looking forward to spending a quiet evening with her husband. Then, she'd casually walked into their apartment and discovered Paul and his assistant entwined on the rug in a passionate embrace. He had been cheating on her again.

Boy, was he ever smooth! After casually donning a robe, he escorted the woman to the elevator, and ordered Jamie not to make a scene. He promised they would talk after he'd taken a shower.

Stunned, Jamie watched Paul stroll into the bedroom. '*They'd talk after he takes a shower??*' She didn't want to talk, damn it! She was tired of talking. All she'd hear was another excuse. Another insincere apology.

Jamie threw herself on the couch and crossed her arms defiantly. She was determined he wouldn't talk his way out of this one. By the time Paul reappeared, she was steaming and all it took was one look at the smirk on his face and she let go of all the hurt, the humiliation ... all her wasted dreams.

Jumping to her feet, and alternately screaming and crying, Jamie called him every name she could think of - and the other woman a few she didn't realize she knew - until her voice was hoarse.

Through it all, Paul casually and emotionally towelled himself dry.

He coldly asked her if she was finished. When she didn't respond, he started to turn away toward the bedroom. Jamie began to panic - she wasn't getting through to him! Instead of calming her down and soothing her fears as he always did, he was walking away! Grabbing his arm, she begged him to talk to her. Without warning, he whirled around and slapped her hard across the face, knocking her down.

She'd threatened to leave him then. Such a rash thing to do. What did she expect him to say? That he needed her; that he loved her; that he'd die without her?

Just as she'd expected, he merely laughed in response. Where could she go? Back home? Prove that they'd been right? Just stick her tail between her legs and suffer through their '*I told you so*' looks?

The brisk wind whipped around the corner of the building. '*I shouldn't stand still*' Jamie thought, '*or I'll freeze my butt off. Have to keep moving.*' She looked up longingly at their apartment and saw his silhouette at the bedroom window - just before he switched off the light.

'*How could I have believed this marriage would work out?*' For the first time, Jamie admitted to herself that she may have made a mistake. '*I should have known, should have listened.*'

It wasn't only Father who had misgivings about this relationship, but Mary, too. Mary, who never had a harsh word for anyone, had also tried to persuade Jamie to wait a while until she got to know Paul better, and Paul got to know the community. As William had said repeatedly, just because Paul's father had been a Helper, doesn't mean that Paul could ever be one.

Jamie never did anything in half measures, so it wasn't surprising she didn't listen to anyone's advice. She had even gone so far as to accuse Father and Mary of being prejudiced because Paul was wealthy.

Suddenly, Mouse's warning flashed across her brain; '*Paul not like Catherine, Jamie. Or Helpers. A Topsider, Jamie. Belongs Above, not Below.*'

She began walking and wasn't surprised to find herself inside the park. A soft voice called out to her, wafting along the night breeze. '*Come home,*' it said, '*Come back to us.*' Without giving herself time to change her mind, she hurried toward the drainage entrance. Better to have them find out now before he really hurt her; physically, that is. He'd already broken her heart, this time beyond repair, beyond forgiving. Hot tears streaking down her face, Jamie started to run toward safety and shelter and ... home. She urged her feet to move faster before that, too, becomes an impossible dream.

"Vincent? Are you busy?"

Father stepped into the large chamber and found his son asleep in his chair, an unfinished novel teetering precariously on the edge of his knee. Smiling, Father reached for the book and carefully closed it. Placing it on Vincent's desk, he turned to leave.

"I'm not asleep, Father," the deep voice said from behind.

"Of course not," the older man chuckled. "You were merely resting your eyes."

Vincent straightened up and rubbed his face wearily. "With Catherine away," he sighed, "I find time passes more slowly than usual."

"I know. Kipper commented just this morning on your lack of ... interest, shall we say, in the game of chess.

He's become quite good, you know, quite an accomplished player."

"That is why I declined, Father. He's bested me twice in the past two weeks."

"Well," Father grumbled good-naturedly, "It's high time someone else experienced the pains of defeat."

"You sound almost happy that I lost," Vincent accused his parent teasingly.

"Not at all," Father threw back, hiding a smile. "But surely you didn't expect to be the champion of the Tunnels forever."

"My mind is not on the game, Father," Vincent proffered. "When Catherine returns, I promise you Kipper will be faced with a more worthy opponent and will rue the day he ever decided to compete with me."

"And when is Catherine expected to come home?"

Vincent lowered his head thoughtfully. "In three days."

Father pulled up a vacant chair and sat down. "You miss her."

It was a statement, and one only had to look into Vincent's eyes to know his answer. Father still could not understand why she took on assignments that kept them apart for such long stretches of time. She obviously knew what it did to Vincent. His inability to protect her, should the need arise, was a constant torment to his son.

"She is safe," Vincent murmured, evidently reading the frustration on his Father's face. "I can feel it."

"She should refuse any case that takes her away from you, Vincent. She can't be blind to what it does to you!"

"I would never ask Catherine to do anything she does not wish to do. Her career is important to her and a few days apart may be good for us." Smiling softly, he continued, "Lately, we have become so wrapped up in one another, there has been little time for anything else."

Father nodded in agreement. He knew what Vincent was referring to. It didn't take a genius to realize what had occurred between them. For about six months now, Catherine no longer left the Tunnels at night to return Above. She chose to remain Below with Vincent in his chamber. *'And no doubt in his bed,'* Father surmised.

Though it went against his better judgment, Father was loathe to demand this final step they'd taken be retraced. By what right could he deny Vincent the very reason for his existence? Did he truly believe these two young people in love would not eventually overcome the boundaries life had placed before them?

"Are you content, my son?" he suddenly asked, placing a gentle hand on Vincent's arm. "Does the change in your relationship with Catherine make you happy?"

The question seemed to startle Vincent. *'Happy? Content?'* Those words failed miserably in conveying what Catherine's love had done for him. What making love to her did for him. It rejuvenated him, he came alive under her touch, and it was not something one could truly express in words. No amount of explaining could relate to Father what Catherine truly meant to him.

"Yes, Father," he replied, leaving it at that.

"Then I am happy for you both. And extremely tired." He rose to his feet. "Goodnight, Vincent."

"Goodnight, Father. Try not to worry."

An incredulous look was thrown his way. "Worry, Vincent? I've ceased worrying about you for a long time, now."

"So, I see," his son quipped, rising and moving toward the bed. "Forgive me for misjudging your reason for

coming here."

"My '*reason*' for coming was to simply wish you goodnight." There was an edge to his voice.

"Of course, Father," Vincent agreed with a deadpan look, "and now you have said it."

"Yes. Well, now - now, I suppose I shall leave," Father stammered.

Vincent approached him and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. "I love you, Father."

"I love you, too, Vincent. And I assure you, I only came to wish you a pleasant night's rest," he explained in a huff.

As Father left the chamber, he knew in his heart he hadn't been the least bit convincing. He was worried - he would always worry. He really should try to make it less apparent.

"Mouse hates sentry duty," he told Arthur. "Why does Father make Mouse do this, when Mouse hates it? It's boring. Things to do, things to fix. Should be there, not here!"

As if to agree with him, the raccoon jumped out of his arms and waddled down the Tunnel corridor.

"Come back, Arthur. Watch not over yet." Arthur turned the corner and vanished from sight. Nodding his head in understanding, Mouse mumbled, "Arthur hates sentry duty, too."

Suddenly, he heard footsteps behind him. Startled, he called out, "Who's there?" A figure came racing toward him, bumping into Mouse as it passed. Losing his balance, he reached out and grabbed the intruder, the extra weight causing him to stumble against the wall.

"Jamie?" he inquired in disbelief, as he recognized the disheveled young woman. "Why you running? Father won't like it. Catches you running, he'll be mad."

"Let go of me!" Jamie wrenched herself from his grasp, knowing only that she had to get farther Below. 'She had to go ... where?' she questioned herself. She no longer had a chamber here. She couldn't go to Vincent, she knew what 'he' would do.

Suddenly, Jamie realized she just needed to be alone, some place where she could think. She wasn't ready to face all the unwanted questions, all the sympathetic faces of those Below. Blindly, she headed for the Whispering Gallery, a place she'd visited all the times she needed to search her heart.

Mouse rubbed the soreness from his bruised arm and grumbled, "Jamie could have stayed and talked to Mouse. Left just like Arthur." Frowning to himself, he added, "Something wrong. Jamie crying. Gotta find Vincent."

Vincent knew exactly where she'd be. Over the years, the Whispering Gallery was a place both of them spent many a troubled time. He found her sitting in the middle of the bridge, arms wrapped around a wooden support, feet dangling aimlessly over the side. Jamie was sobbing and the pitiful sound pierced his heart.

Wordlessly, he sat beside her and she flung herself against him. He wrapped her in the folds of his cape, her thin form shaking with the cold. Knowing she needed the release, Vincent let her cry.

"Tell me."

With a shuddering sigh, Jamie leaned away from the comfort of Vincent's shoulder and sent him a weak smile. Only then did he notice the darkening bruise on her cheek and her swollen lip. Ashamed, she looked away, but Vincent caught her chin and gently forced her to face him again.

"Did he do this?" he asked, anger lacing his deep voice.

She winced, quickly covering the telltale mark. "It's nothing, Vincent," she whispered.

Rage flared in his eyes and Jamie cringed, retreating into silence once again. She didn't need this right now. She needed to talk, and needed him to listen.

Visibly calming himself, Vincent took her hand and squeezed it encouragingly. "Tell me what happened, Jamie."

As if those few words opened the floodgates, the agony of the Vincent didn't say a word, just listened until she finished. '

How can someone profess to love another and treat that person so cruelly?' he wondered. Living Below all his life had shielded him somewhat from the callous attitudes toward relationships prevalent in the world Above. To learn that Jamie had suffered in silence for over six months infuriated him, and hurt him terribly. He gave no recriminations, however, and offered no advice.

Exhausted, she rested her head against his shoulder, feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from her.

"Jamie, you know you have a place here. This will always be your home, if that is what you wish."

"I don't know what I want." She threw out her hands in confusion. "And I sure don't know what to do, Vincent. After the first time I caught him, he promised it wouldn't happen again. I fooled myself into believing he wanted to make it work."

"Did he hit you then?"

"No," she shook her head in denial. "Tonight was the first time."

Neither one spoke for a long while, the echoing voices from Above swirling around them. "Tell me what to do, Vincent." She sighed heavily. "I don't know what to do."

Vincent tipped his head toward her, touching his forehead to hers, a slight smile on his face. "Only you can decide what is in your heart, and only you can decide your fate."

"I know, Vincent, I know." Jamie grinned back at him in understanding.

"What is it 'you' wish to do?"

She gazed pensively into the mist swirling below them. "What I want to do and what I have to do are two different things," Jamie chuckled humorlessly. With a self-deprecating smirk, she continued, "I'd like you to make everything all better, but I know I have to resolve this myself."

With a determined look on her face, she straightened her shoulders and rose. "I'm going back."

Vincent's eyes filled with concern. "Jamie..."

"Not to him," she quickly assured him, "But there are still things left unsaid... and I want to pack up my stuff and come home."

"I will come with you," he asserted, agilely getting to his feet.

"It's not necessary, Vincent. I can do this on my own. It's about time I started doing things myself, anyway," she stated with resolve.

"Jamie, don't leave without a coat. Mary should have something you can use."

Smiling for what seemed like the first time in months, she kissed him on the cheek and left the chamber. He watched her disappear from sight, and his head fell to his chest in defeat.

Mockingly, he said out loud, "Vincent, you are becoming more and more like Father every day - you know

you cannot let her go alone."

It was close to midnight when Jamie roused the super from his television-induced stupor, feigning having lost the key to her apartment. Tentatively, she entered the living room and flicked on the light. Glancing around the room, her eyes touched upon the wing chair they'd spent hours picking out, the portrait of Central Park they'd commissioned an up-and-coming artist to paint; and the quilt draped over the couch, so painstakingly and lovingly created by Mary, Olivia and Samantha. For the first time, what Jamie truly saw was not the happiness associated with these moments, but the complaints he made in the furniture store, the sarcastic comments about the quality of the painting, and the derisive remarks about the homespun quilt.

'How could she have been so blind?' She was never really happy here with him. She was so determined to prove Father wrong that she traded what she believed to be a stifling existence Below for what turned out to be a lifeless, loveless marriage.

The door to the bedroom opened and Paul staggered into the room. *"So,"* he sneered, *"you came crawling back. What happened? Did your precious Tunnel world turn its back on you?"*

Jamie was conscious of the odor of alcohol on his breath. By the slurring of his speech, she knew he'd been drinking for quite a while.

"I'm leaving you," she replied tonelessly. "I just came back for my things."

"You're not going anywhere," he snarled viciously, grabbing her arms and shaking her violently.

"Paul, you're hurting me," she grimaced, struggling futilely against his hold. Tapping an unknown reserve, she wrenched herself free from his grip. *"You're not doing this to me again, Paul, and I'm not referring to your hitting me. That was almost incidental."*

"There's no way you're gonna leave me," he boasted.

"Think what you like, but I will not waste any more of my life listening to your excuses." Jamie's voice contained a thread of steel, though her face was sad. "Fidelity is not an uncommon trait, even in this day and age. No one should have to go through what I've experienced these past six months. You don't care enough to work at his, and I'm tired of trying. I've given you enough second chances. And no, my 'Tunnel world', as you call it, did not turn its back on me. People who love you never turn their backs on you."

Jamie strode over to the coat closet and removed her ski parka before turning and facing her husband. "I'm leaving now," she stated, tossing the quilt from the couch over her arm for good measure. "I'll be back for the rest of my stuff tomorrow while you're at work."

Jamie marched across the room to the door. Over her shoulder, she made what she thought was one of the all-time great exit lines. "My lawyer will be in contact with you in a few days."

'Catherine's gonna love getting her teeth into this one,' she thought with a secret smile.

Vincent climbed down the drainpipe outside Jamie's apartment, hitting the carpeted balcony with a dull thud. He positioned himself carefully at the corner of the double doors. From here he could almost see the entire living room. *'This is what he's reduced to - spying,'* he thought, with a disgusted shake of his head. *'Father would be so proud.'*

He was surprised to see Jamie, arms loaded and obviously in a rush to leave, storm past her husband. Stopping momentarily at the door to the apartment, she threw one last look behind her, before reaching for the doorknob.

Almost in slow motion, his hearing deadened by the double panel doors, Vincent watched Jamie's husband follow her closely on her heels. Paul spun her around and pinned her against the wall, pushing her back viciously when she attempted to get away. The clothes she was carrying fell to the floor. Grabbing both lapels of her coat, he hauled her to the couch, bending her back against the arm rest until she lay flat against the sofa, her legs dangling uselessly above the carpet. Her muffled screams abruptly stopped when he slapped her brutally across the face.

Vincent's rage was palpable. Growling under his breath, he pushed the balcony doors opened and burst into the room. Paul froze in mid-slap when he viewed the imposing figure of Vincent, cape flying, lethal incisors exposed in a menacing growl.

Jamie struggled to her feet, appalled that Vincent had been a witness to Paul's violent attack, and mortally afraid that Vincent, in his anger, would do something he'd regret later. All she could think of was that Father would be furious with her for exposing Vincent to danger.

'It's amazing,' she thought distractedly, 'what you focus on during a traumatic event.'

"So, I suppose this is another one of those '*Vincent to the Rescue*' scenes," Paul mocked, facing Vincent defiantly. Without looking at her, Paul dragged Jamie off the couch by her arm. "It isn't polite, Jamie, to sit while we have a guest."

As he watched Jamie pull herself from Paul's grip, the fury of Vincent's anger flowed through his veins, making him breathless. The threads of control stretched to the limit, he visibly gathered his wits and commanded in a deadly, calm voice.

"Jamie, please leave us now." He led her away from a seething Paul and urged her toward the door.

"No, Vincent!" she cried clinging to the suede lashings on his cape. "He's not worth it. You come with me, too. We'll both go home."

Paul paused by the desk to shakily light a cigarette. Turning to face Vincent, he commented nastily, "Yes, Vincent. Why don't the both of you go home to that ***hellhole Below.***"

Jamie had her fingers locked around Vincent's arm, desperately trying to pull him out of the apartment.

Covering her fingers with one massive hand, he lowered his head and whispered gruffly, "Jamie. Go now. Everything will be all right."

Her terrified eyes met his vibrant blue gaze; those eyes, which over the years had watched her grow into adulthood, smiled at her happiness, sympathized with her pain, calmed her fears, and more importantly, never, ever lied to her.

She ran through the park, not even stopping when the cramp in her side became unbearable, because that pain didn't compare with the pain in her heart, in her soul. Not for Paul; his brutal actions had killed all the feeling she'd ever had for him. Her concern was all for Vincent.

He found her sitting in the middle of the bridge, arms wrapped around a wooden support, feet dangling aimlessly over the side. Only this time she wasn't sobbing, she was nervously biting her nails down to the nub.

Jamie looked up when she heard the familiar crunch of pebbles.

"Jamie, if Mary sees you biting your fingernails again, she will be disappointed."

Smiling, Vincent calmly stood at the top of the bridge, hands on his hips. Instinctively, she jumped up and ran across the planks, throwing herself into his comforting arms.

"You're all right? You *'are'* all right! Vincent, what happened?" She touched his arms anxiously, trying to convince herself that he was whole.

Vincent patiently stood still, steadying her slight weight against his imposing frame. "I'm fine, Jamie," he replied soothingly, guiding her back to her favorite seat on the bridge and sitting beside her.

"You *'are'* going to tell me what happened, aren't you?" she asked, concern showing in her voice.

Gazing out into the vastness of the Whispering Gallery, Vincent assembled his jumbled thoughts. "How do I explain what happened, when I don't even know what happened myself?

"Jamie, you do not have to worry about Paul anymore. Kanin, Pascal and Mouse will accompany you tomorrow to pick up your belongings. I've already informed Mary to arrange for you to have your old chamber back. It should take about a week to make it ready for you. Until then, you will be in the Guest Chamber. Father..."

"Vincent! Stop, for heaven's sake. I actually think you're babbling! And I've never heard you do that before. What happened, Vincent? Is Paul..."

Glancing sideways at his young friend, Vincent smiled softly. "There's nothing wrong with Paul, except for his warped outlook on life. He is fine."

"Vincent, I'm sorry but I must know. How was... did you..."

"He's an angry and bitter man, Jamie." He sighed heavily. "And he will never truly be happy." Facing her, Vincent took her hand in his, squeezing gently. "He became... unpleasant. Actually quite violent and very insulting to you, Father and... to me."

"Well, what did you do?"

"He said some terrible things about you."

"But what did you *'do'*, Vincent?"

"He showed no remorse for striking you. He only understands violence."

"Vincent, please..."

"I hit him."

Jamie lowered her head, tears welling in her eyes. "Oh, God, Vincent. I'm so sorry that you had to what did you say?"

"I hit him."

"Hit him like you punched him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the face." Vincent smiled with satisfaction. "To coin a phrase that Mouse uses, I popped him. He went down like a ton of bricks."

Jamie stared at the man who, from the first moment she'd met him, had become her confidant, her ally, supporting him through every tumultuous milestone in her life. The man who was responsible for the safety of their world. The man who struck terror into the hearts of his enemies; the strength, the most important member of the Tunnels. *'Rocky Vincent Balboa.'*

She flashed an unbelieving look at him. "Right in the kisser, you say?" amusement stealing into her voice.

"Yes, I believe Mouse uses that phrase, also."

This was incredible! A broad smile crept to her lips. "Thank you, Vincent."

"You're welcome."

Vincent suddenly grew pensive and rubbed his slightly bruised knuckles. "Jamie, I'm somewhat uncomfortable... there is something else I must confess."

"What?" Jamie asked, her curiosity piqued.

"It felt good."

Jamie bit her lip to stop herself from giggling. This was too momentous an occasion -- for her and for Vincent. "I'm glad you enjoyed it!" She gave up trying not to laugh and hugged him fiercely.

Vincent silently gazed out into the swirling mists of the gallery. "Always before, my rage would engulf me, and I would be lost in a red haze of fury. This time ... when I saw Paul strike you, Jamie, I could feel the need for vengeance swelling inside me. That anyone would hurt a member of my family is unthinkable. However, I did not feel that uncontrollable desire to lash out at that red haze and destroy the enemy."

Jamie gently touched his shoulder consolingly. "Vincent, when you do that you're only protecting us, protecting the people who love you."

"Yes, but this time it was different." Vincent faced her and grasped both her hands in his. "Don't you see, Jamie? *I was angry! Angry that he hit you, angry that he caused you pain*, but I was in complete control... I saw everything clearly." He released her and shrugged helplessly. "It seemed the best thing to do at the time."

Jamie hid a smile behind her hand. "It was a very natural reaction, Vincent. Anyone - any man - would have handled it the same way."

"Any man..." Vincent whispered reflectively.

"So, how do you think Father is going to react to this one?"

Vincent turned in surprise and smiled down at his young friend. "I really don't think he has to know about this, Jamie."

She looked at him questioningly.

He added, "Why don't we keep this just between friends?"

That sounded like a great idea. Truthfully, Jamie would agree to anything. She was finally home.

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