



Angela C Nurse

**A
Friend
In
Need**

An Alana McFarlane Short Story



A Friend In Need

‘Has anyone seen Damien?’ Alana asked. She should be making her way to the fire escape with the rest of the residents, instead she was walking against the tide of people back up the stairs to the dorm rooms.

Donna, her lab partner, passed her on the stairs almost without noticing before suddenly turning back. ‘What the hell are you doing?’

‘I’m looking for Damien.’

‘He’s probably already outside. Come on, we’ve got to go,’ she tugged on her friend’s arm.

‘I’ll be down soon; I’ll see you out there.’

Donna looked down the stairs, then back at Alana already started pushing her way up the next flight of stairs. She shook her head and called out, ‘wait for me.’

By the time they got to the third floor, they were alone. Everyone was either outside or on their way down.

‘He said he was going to meet Max,’ Alana said.

‘I saw Max on the way down. He wasn’t with anyone.’

Damien had been preoccupied with something for days, and when he didn’t turn up to their usual study session yesterday evening, Alana had sought him out and confronted him. Eventually, he’d pulled a small metal box out of his backpack and handed it to her. ‘I found this in my dad’s things when he was over visiting last week. He doesn’t know I have it.’

When Alana had opened the box, she had found a small gold and jade statue. Damien’s father was an archaeologist, not the Indiana Jones kind, but the sort that stands in hot trenches

for hours, carefully digging and brushing. He'd taken Damien and his friends out for dinner, Alana had asked him about the British and other countries stealing antiquities in the 30s and if he thought those items should be returned to the countries they were stolen from. He'd smiled and told her that the repatriation of items was something he was actively involved in through Edinburgh University, where he had once lectured. And now he had this item that absolutely didn't belong to him.

'Why did you take it?' Alana had asked Damien, but he had just shrugged.

Then twenty minutes ago, through the lab window, she'd see him running through the grounds towards the building. Two minutes later the fire alarm went off. Then the sprinklers had started, so it was an actual fire, not a drill.

Alana had looked on every floor and seen no sign of him. She wasn't sure if her mum would be proud or angry, and the answer would most likely depend on what happened next.

Alana pushed open the doors to the third floor. They could smell the smoke now seeping into the open space from somewhere, stinging their eyes. She pushed open the door to the boy's toilets.

'Donna, quick,' she shouted to her friend, who'd stayed in the corridor.

Damien was on the floor, blood trickling down his face from a deep cut in his cheek. His shirt was torn and his torso looked beaten and bruised. Alana had seen markings like this on the bodies in the morgue. She put her fingers to his neck and felt a pulse.

'Help me lift him.'

Alana remembered Damien telling her he was going to start working out, fed up with being considered 'weedy'. At this moment she was incredibly grateful that this was one resolution he hadn't stuck to. Between them they got him upright, his feet dragging on the floor as they held his arms around one of each of their shoulders.

The smoke was much thicker as they opened the toilet door. Donna was wheezing as they almost collapsed through the doors into the stairwell, now eerily quiet. Damien groaned as they bumped his feet down the stairs.

‘We’re nearly there,’ Alana lied to Donna as they made it on to the next flight of stairs. They could hear the fire engine sirens now as they got closer to the ground.

Damien transitioned in and out of consciousness. With one flight of stairs left, they heard the loud bang of the door below. Alana froze, listening. She could hear the sound of feet heading towards them. This was the quickest way out of the building and by the looks of Donna, she wasn’t sure carrying Damien any further would be possible.

She stumbled over the last couple of steps on the final staircase, grabbing hold of the railing to steady herself. Donna had been struggling, and Alana had found herself supporting most of Damien’s weight by herself.

Finally outside, they collapsed to the ground.

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