

Winslow's Last Gift

by JessicaRae



“He’s dead.” The incredulous shock that paled Pascal’s face burned in her mind like a leech in the murky waters of understanding. As she and the pipe master made their way back toward the upper tunnels, all Jamie could think of was the still body of their friend Winslow now resting beneath the organized sarcophagus of stones built with the hands of his friends.

“Thank you for saving us,” Pascal spoke softly, a few steps behind her. “I am not sure what would have happened if you hadn’t. Vincent was almost done for, and that giant was eyeing me up like a stick he was about to snap in two.”

“Wasn’t soon enough,” Jamie replied, her voice muted and quick. Pascal stopped walking for a half-second, confusion creasing his gentle face, then he hurried to catch up with the blonde girl moving up through the paths like someone was after them.

“What did you say?” He reached to grasp her elbow to slow her down, but she jerked her sleeve from his fingers and hurried on. “Jamie, stop for a moment, will you?”

She finally heeded his plea, stopping a few feet away, arms crossed, and head turned away from him. Pascal stood there a moment, trying to catch his breath.

“I wasn’t soon enough,” she repeated, a bit louder.

“Wasn’t your fault,” he assured her, solemnly, carefully.

He winced slightly as the girl’s shoulders bowed, and she jerked her head up to look him in the eye.

“Wouldn’t have happened if I had gone along in the first place,” she finally spoke, a stubborn set to her jaw. “I just needed one more arrow. I could have done it. You know I could. You spoke up for me when Winslow doubted me in front of the whole group. But you let them walk away without me and I was stupid enough to listen. Now he’s dead and I could have saved him!”

She turned and began to climb the rest of the way toward the tunnels that led to the library. Pascal followed along, helplessly.

“Jamie, now Jamie, don’t go blaming yourself like that. It was that giant gorilla. Look, maybe you wouldn’t have saved anyone at all if you had gone along. Maybe he would have attacked you first, you brave thing you, because you would have got him with your first arrow. Then you’d be dead. Then, he could have taken out the rest of us. Then no one would have survived, and Catherine would be lost forever. At least this way, Winslow has been lost, yes, and my heart is heavy, all of ours are, but it

could have been even worse, truly.”

She stopped walking so quickly that they nearly collided. “No.” She spoke, this time short, and pained. “It can’t be worse than him being dead. And the last thing we did was argue like enemies.”

The library was full of tunnel folk waiting for news of Vincent and his mission to save his Catherine. Worried brows were on every face. Father and William were attempting to pretend they were playing chess, but both looked weary of the charade.

“More tea, Father?” Mary asked kindly, as she moved gracefully around filling the cups held by those waiting. Rebecca was at her side with some type of cookie on a tray that she offered pleadingly to all, as if her offering would make them feel a tiny bit better. It was all she had, dear thing.

The older man shook his head kindly. “No, Mary, it isn’t helping, but thank you. I do wish we would hear something. I am sure Pascal will let us know as soon as they find her.”

“Father.”

Pascal’s voice filled the candlelit room, and with it fell a curtain of dread over the entire group. Immediately, children grew silent and the faces of the concerned turned to the entrance. Framed in the doorway stood Pascal and Jamie. Pascal stood tall, his face expressionless, but his tense smile spoke volumes. Jamie stood a little behind, her hands clasped together, a single arrow still clutched in them. Her face was hidden by her hair and the shadows. It was an eerie moment to those who waited for their report.

“Pascal, where are the others?”

Father’s question was an expected one, but Pascal found that the answer was so much harder to say out loud.

“They ... Vincent has gone on alone to rescue Catherine. The pipes ... did not extend further than the lake ... and there was no way ... to send a message beyond there.”

“That is a relief he has made it this far; I trust he will succeed the rest of the way. I hope.” Father’s brave words were choppy and nervous, and he hoped they sounded braver than they felt on his lips. He will not stop until he finds her, we pray. But what of Winslow? He has not returned here to the library with you?”

Pascal swallowed and glanced at the floor. “No, no he has not. Winslow ... Winslow is ... dead.”

“What?” The shock ran through the room in excited whispers and the higher-pitched questions of disbelief from the children. Father steadied his voice before speaking again, the room swimming slightly as his blood pressure soared.

“Pascal ... Pascal, tell us - what happened.” His voice was husky with emotions that Pascal could not entirely decipher, but that he felt in himself.

“We made it to where the pipe ended. There was an underground lake there. We weren’t sure where we were, it was such a long way beneath our lower tunnels. Next thing we knew, this giant of a man just ... showed up out of the fog ... he there was a fight, and he ... he killed Winslow. Threw him ... against ... against the tunnel wall ... and there ... there were rocks ... and ...” His voice trailed off painfully.

The stillness that followed was deafening. It was as if time stood still.

“And Vincent?” Father asked, his voice tight and unsteady. “Was he in the fight?”

Pascal nodded quickly. “Oh, Vincent, he’s fine, a few bruises I am sure, but he didn’t want to risk anyone else getting hurt ... killed ... so he ... sent us back to tell everyone ... what happened.”

“Us?” Father looked confused. He glanced at Jamie, then back to Pascal, and a dim understanding

dawned across his face. "Ah, Jamie."

"I can take care of myself," she spoke defiantly. Her voice was unsteady, and Father smiled kindly, although his face was drawn and sad.

He stood, coming to place one hand on Pascal's shoulder and one on Jamie's.

"You both have done enough for today. Go and rest. I will have Mary take some tea and something to eat to your chambers."

Jamie nodded once and turned to leave, her shoulders tense and arrow straight. It was all a show, she knew it. The pain in her heart was a lead weight in her chest, and she refused to cry in front of the entire council.

Pascal, his gentle face a muddle of emotions, laid his hand over Father's and gave him a quick half-smile that faded.

"Thank you, Father, but I must go to the pipe chamber at once. When Vincent finds Catherine and returns to the underground lake where ... Winslow ... is ... he will signal on the pipes that all is well. I want to make sure we do not miss it. Some tea would be nice, but I couldn't eat now."

Father squeezed the gentle, awkward man's shoulder slightly and nodded once.

"As you wish, Pascal. I am sure you both have had a hard day."

Pascal dropped his eyes to the floor. "Almost ... he ... the giant ... he almost got us all, you know.

Vincent, he was trying to save us, getting thrown about, and I was cornered like a mouse ... and then Jamie ... Jamie appeared. Handy with the bow she is, but Winslow ... he was already gone. Dead, that is. She saved Vincent and me both. She managed to get two arrows into the creature, it distracted him from me, and Vincent was able to ... get up. I thought I was a goner ... for sure."

Jacob saw the conflict in the pipe master's eyes, and his heart hurt for the man. Pascal was kind, timid, shy, but loyal, and the older man could see that he was processing the death of his friend, but also the fact that he had come a hair's breadth away from being laid beneath the stones of the underground cavern alongside their friend.

"She ... foolishly ... followed you all down there, at risk of her own safety, and for that, I am grateful that she saved your life, Pascal, and that of my son. Winslow was a good man. His loss is a tragedy to all of us."

The shock flowed through Father like a stinging river, and he tried to put on a brave face for the many eyes that were now looking to him for guidance. How could Winslow be gone?

"I could have prevented it," Jamie spoke from the entrance to the library. Both men turned in her direction.

"Jamie," Father chided. "Do not take this upon yourself. From what Pascal says, you did what you could."

"I should have gone along," she replied firmly. I had enough arrows. I could have distracted him from the beginning. I could have -"

Father laid both hands on her shoulder, his tired face stern. "Jamie. Listen to me and listen well. There are evil beings that lurk beneath us and above us. Their hearts are so black that coal would be clean next to them. And there is nothing that will stand in their way. Had you been there, the loss might have been greater or less, we do not know. We cannot change the past. Just remember Winslow for who he was and keep that part of his dream alive."

"I know." She spoke softly, this time with no malice. "I'm sorry ... I am going to my chambers. If Mary wouldn't mind, some tea might be nice."

Turning from the heartbroken group, she made her way through the tunnels toward the upper chambers. Her room was not far, but it felt like miles. At the doorway, she hesitated. The darkness, the aloneness hovered there like a heavy curtain. A bearded, roaring face hovered at the edge of her

consciousness, coming closer, one step closer. Shaking the image from her mind, Jamie strode into her room and tossed the bow onto her bed. In one motion, she took her cloak from the chair it lay across and swung it over her shoulder. She needed air, she needed daylight. Past the tapping pipes she journeyed, past the pipe chamber where Pascal would make his way to in a few moments, across the narrow gap in the passages, and eventually to the Central Park drain entrance. To her chagrin, she was greeted by a black, rumbling night sky.

"Darkness, always darkness," she whispered, looking up into the darkness above. There were no stars, and the lights of New York illuminated billowing storm clouds, racing across the sky that was blacker than they. A chill wind rustled the colored leaves around the tunnel entrance in a swirling microburst, and she drew hunched her shoulders against the blast. It was raining in the distance.

"Is Jamie - okay?"

A voice startled her out of her reverie. Mouse stood there; some random metal objects cradled in his arms. His concern was evident in the dark eyes that studied her cautiously from beneath rain his rain-soaked tawny mop of hair. Raindrops reached their part of the park, a tapping staccato that pattered in the leaves that covered the grass, brown and dying due to the solemnly approaching winter.

"I am fine, Mouse, just needed some air." Jamie looked away from the young man and up into the dark sky, closing her eyes against the falling rain.

There was a clank as Mouse dropped the materials he had 'found'. "Mouse ... heard ... on pipes." Jamie's face fell, and she sighed, wrapping her arms around herself against the cold.

"Yeah. I ... I am sorry, Mouse."

"Sorry? Jamie is sorry ... for what?" Mouse looked confused. "Jamie did ... not kill Winslow."

"I may as well have," she retorted, beginning to pace across the entrance of the pipe. "Mouse, I knew I should have gone. I felt it. I should have listened to that inner feeling. I wanted to help. Winslow ... he didn't want me to go. He said ... he said girls didn't have any place going along."

Mouse looked uncomfortable and shifted from one foot to the other. "Not good, not good at all. Jamie ... You tried. That's all ... that matters, yes?"

"No, Mouse. That's not all that matters. What matters is he's dead. He's dead, and he's not ... not coming back."

"I'm sorry."

Jamie finally looked at the forlorn young man, and she saw the sadness there. It was true. She knew in her heart that there was nothing that could be done. But what truly ate at her was not the fact that Winslow had died, as horrible as that was. The most painful part was that the last time she had seen him alive, she had hated him.

"Yeah, me too."

Mouse gestured to the open tunnel entrance. "Go inside where it's dry."

"No. I ... I need to go for a walk. Go on in. Mary is bringing tea to my chamber. Feel free to help yourself."

The idea lit up Mouse's face, then he frowned. "Jamie goes for walk in the rain. Not good, not good at all."

"I need to be alone Mouse, okay? Just for a little while? I need to think."

Mouse nodded once; uncertainty still evident in his furrowed brow. "Okay, should I tell Vincent?"

"No, not unless he asks. All right?"

Mouse nodded again, then stooped to take up his random assortment of parts.

"Jamie, want to know." He straightened and realized that she had already walked away into the rainy autumn night. "What Mouse is building," he finished forlornly.

"Tell Vincent, Vincent would want to see it." This thought brightened his features and he disappeared into the tunnel entrance.

The rain fell in unrelenting curtains. In the distance, the swishing of tires on the wet pavement could be heard from the busier section of town. Jamie wandered hopelessly down chilly alleys and through back passages. Everywhere she went, the loneliness and sadness followed like a hound on a leash. How could she ever let Winslow know that she hadn't truly meant to be angry at him? He had just hurt her pride, her stupid silly pride, and she hadn't had the chance to forgive him. He had treated her like an inferior, to hide his tender heart. He had simply wanted to save her, protect her from the hell below. She knew that, deep inside. Perhaps they both had too much pride. And in the end, it hadn't been worth it.

Drenched and cold, she pulled the cloak tighter around her shoulders and found a dry place in the shadows to lean against a brick wall. The rain pattered on, the humidity swirling into mist above the gratings in the streets. It was an eerie, foreign feeling to be out at this time of night, and the Halloween lights of the city lent a spookier atmosphere to the dark world.

"You are on the wrong side of the street, missy." A cutting voice spoke above where she crouched, startling Jamie like a hunted rabbit.

She jumped to her feet and stumbled backward, instinctively putting as much distance between herself and the speaker.

"I ... I am sorry." She managed to speak, trying to sound as tough as the newcomer. "The rain wasn't stopping so I was waiting in the ... dry ... bit ... there."

Words failed her at the moment, and she clenched her teeth together in frustration. Of all the times to be a babbling idiot. Her mind ran through her list of options. Bow and arrows stupidly left in her chambers. She could run, but the size of the guy standing where she had been leaning indicated he was probably a faster runner, and he did not look as chilled as she. He leaned conversationally against the wall.

"Didn't mean to startle you there, missy, but like'n I said, you're on the wrong side of the street. He tossed the cigarette he held in his two fingers onto the sidewalk between Jamie and himself, and it hissed for a second as the puddle that caught it quenched the bit of amber glow with a puff of steam and smoke.

Jamie nodded stiffly. "I will be moving on then." Fists, that was all she had. Instinctively, she clenched them slightly. "Thank you for the warning."

The man shoved himself off the wall and ambled a few steps closer. "Say, no need to rush. I said you was on the wrong side of the street, but since you seem like you ain't out to kick me out, or rob me, well, I reckon we can share this awning. Sure seems a mite dryer than where you're standing."

Jamie considered for a moment, brushing the back of her hand across her eyes to clear the rain that was dripping through her soaked hair.

"I appreciate your kindness, but I will be moving on. Thank you." She took a few more steps in the opposite direction. The man closed the gap so quickly that she had no time to react. His hand closed on her wrist like a vice, and he towered over her.

"Not so fast, missy. I was trying to do the gentlemanly thing, and there you go turnin' me down. I got

my pride you know?"

Jamie considered bitterly for a half-second. Pride. Yeah, she knew all about that.

"Let go of me now," she requested firmly. "Let. Go."

"Now, now," The man wrapped one grungy hand around the back of her neck and pulled her closer to his face. "Why in a rush doll? You look like you are in need of a good time. Such a long face. Hey, old Eb here knows exactly how to make that happen for ya if ya knows what I mean."

"I am not interested. Let. Go. Of me."

This denial flipped something in the man's psyche and immediately his manipulating expression melded into one of complete evil. He wasn't going to be denied. His hand clenched around her neck, his thumb well-placed on her carotid artery, way too close for comfort.

"Listen, missy. I've about had all I can take of this dignified proper nonsense. Beside's, Old Eb doesn't know the meaning of the word no."

There was a sudden roar from behind them, and the street dweller shoved Jamie backward into the street, turning tail rather than face the sudden violently loud interruption. The tall, cloaked shadow emerged from the alleyway, teeth white in the glow of the streetlight for a moment, then the face relaxed kindly, moving to Jamie's side, who was picking herself up from the puddle she had landed in.

"Jamie," Vincent spoke gently, reaching toward her, and she allowed the lion man to embrace her.

"How did you know?" She asked as he turned toward the alley that he had come from, guiding her with him.

"Mouse," he replied, and Jamie nodded.

"I have to thank him. And ... thank you, Vincent. I ... I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come."

"You need to rest Jamie. Come below, I know you are hurting. Take some time.

It's Halloween tomorrow and the children expect that you will go with them Above, but you are not obligated to do that this year; you can stay Below if you would rather, where it is quiet, and you can think about things."

Jamie shook her head. "Thank you, Vincent, but I ... I should not disappoint them."

She looked up into the kind blue eyes, that mirrored the pain she was sure he saw in her own. That was the way of life, wasn't it? It moves on, never stopping, never waiting for the past to catch up.

The tunnels were nearly silent. The children had been taken on a trick-or-treating journey and nearly everyone in the tunnels had errands to run or places to be. He sat calmly drinking tea in the library with Hamlet upon his knee. The flickering of the candle lent a golden shimmer to the still room, bathing the classics in flame. It was nice to have such a still moment to himself without a worry or a care.

"Just for a half-hour," he promised himself, turning another page.

"Are you going to sit there all night?"

He nearly threw the book into the air at the sound, and barely managed to retain somewhat of a grip on the teacup with one hand, although the steaming liquid sloshed over onto his fingers, and he swallowed the exclamation of annoyance that leaped to his lips. This rude interruption drove all fear from his mind as he looked up to see who had intruded into his precious quiet time.

There he stood, a shimmering image of what would have been, what might have been, just as broad and tall as he had always felt before his death. There was that smile on his lips that left one wondering if he was supremely angry or plotting something behind their backs.

"I said, Father, are you going to sit there all night?"

Father silently set aside the cup, now heavy as a brick in his hand, daring his old eyes to believe what they were seeing.

"Winslow? Is it really you?"

"Of course, it's me," Winslow spoke gruffly, stepping forward out of the shadows. "It's Halloween, Father, the walls are thin. Just got a little bit of time, though, we are only allowed a precious few moments. Guess they don't want us getting too comfy again down here, eh?"

"I guess," Father spoke softly, rising slowly from his chair. His knees were surprisingly wobbly, and he wasn't sure if he would be able to move toward the door to escape the mirage. His old mind had finally gone.

"Easy there," Winslow took a step forward and grasped the older man's arm, providing surprisingly strong support.

"It's good to see you again," Father spoke sincerely, still confused as to how he was speaking with a dead man. "We all miss you."

"Ah, it's nothing," Winslow shrugged, guiding the man back to his chair. "Would do it again, I would. Just wanted to know, how is everyone?"

"F-F-fine," Father replied sinking into the chair again, feeling as if every ounce of strength had drained through his feet into the floor. "We ... we are all surviving."

"Did Vincent rescue Catherine?" There was a deep worry in the lines of Winslow's brow, and Father felt a companionate tug at his heart.

"Yes, he did. They are both well."

The lines vanished, and Winslow's eyes quirked up at the corner mischievously. "I knew he would."

Father nodded once; head tilted sideways. "Yes he ... he was determined. They made it out safely."

"Good to know," Winslow spoke, genuine relief in his tone, then he stood staring down at his feet.

Father studied him for a moment. He was still the tall, broad, rough-looking man that they had always known and loved, but had anyone ever told him that?

Here he was talking to a ghost. How could he ever tell anyone that?

"We miss having you here," Father spoke suddenly, as if welcoming an old friend.

"We ... it's just not the same."

"Eh, you don't need me, big gorilla that I am, loping around these dusty tunnels. Always impetuous, hot-headed, running my mouth."

"You stop that," Father grunted, clasping his hands into a steeple and resting his chin on his pointer fingers. "You were a strong man, a bold man, and we do not fault you for that."

"All the same," Winslow spoke a little more quietly. "I ... I should have kept my mouth shut more."

"You mean Jamie?" Father asked pointedly, and his perception was rewarded by the way that Winslow shifted uneasily where he stood. "Have a seat?"

Winslow chuckled, waving a hand at the chair opposite Father. "Just a ghost, Father, chairs don't mean anything to us."

"They do to me," Father replied, his tone unmistakable in that he wanted Winslow to sit down with him at the chess table, just for a moment, just once more.

Winslow moved amicably to the wooden chair, sitting down in it as easily as if it were air. "Thank you, Father."

Jacob Wells nodded once. "You are worried about Jamie."

The big man nodded, dropping his gaze to the tabletop, his eyes shifting over the different chess pieces as if they were old friends. "Yeah, I ... uh, how's she ..."

"She's hurt," Father spoke simply. "She's hurt that you two parted at odds. She wishes she could talk

to you, to make it right.”

“Is she here?” Winslow asked hopefully, and Father’s heart sank a little.

“No, she took the children above for Halloween.” How he hated to say that. If only she had stayed behind.

Winslow’s face fell slightly, and he rested his strong elbows, now a film of shadow, on the arms of the chair. “When will they return?”

“It could be hours,” Father replied truthfully. “I am sorry, Winslow.”

“Yeah, me too.” The man replied softly, almost too softly for the persona that he gave off. Certainly, Father had never seen him so tender, so gentle.

There was a cool shift in the air, and he raised sad eyes to the old man’s understanding face. “I ... I can’t stay, Father. The walls are thin, and I must be on the other side when they close again. In my old quarters, on the shelf, there is a bundle wrapped in a blanket. That ... that was for Jamie. It’s some new arrows and some metal armor I made for her with my old blacksmithing skills. I ... I meant to give it to her for Christmas. Could you make sure that she gets it on Christmas, from me?”

A tear formed at the corner of the ghost’s eye, and he stood. “I have to go.”

Father rose too, laying a hand on the table to steady himself, as he straightened to his full height and reached out a hand to the ghost.

“I promise you, Winslow, Jamie will receive that package on Christmas day, with a ‘from Winslow with love’ stamped right on it.”

Winslow wrinkled his nose a bit and frowned. “You better not put the ‘with love’ part on there. Man, I may be a ghost but I ain’t no patsy.”

“I think she needs it,” Father replied firmly, fixing the ghost with a raised brow. “Love, she needs to hear that from you.”

Winslow looked as if he would disagree, but then his face softened in remembrance of the last time he and Jamie had spoken, and he nodded. “Yeah, you do that. Just this once now.” He reached out and took Father’s hand, as they had done so many times, and Father chuckled as the figure faded back into the world from whence he had come.

“Sure, Winslow. Just this once.”

END

- Photo’s courtesy of a Google search, edited by the lovely Judith Nolan