

The Spring Flu

by JessicaRae

The rain fell in unrelenting torrents. Across the vast concrete jungle of New York city, the swish of car tires could be heard among the pattering of drops in the puddles at every street corner. The busy feet of city dwellers rushing along the damp sidewalks with their umbrellas held high had long ago faded into the dismal fog of the night.

“Mouse, I cannot believe I let you talk me into coming Above on such a horrid night.”

Jamie hunched her shoulders against an onslaught of a downpour and tucked her hands into her sleeves.

“*The rain, it raineth every day*,” she declared with obvious lack of enthusiasm, quoting something she remembered from one of the books that Vincent had read at the recent reading circle with the children. King Lear, she thought to herself. Should have taken some notes from the experiences of the Bard.

“Night keeps other takers away,” Mouse replied, his voice muffled. “Rain too, even more.” He had half disappeared inside the mysterious cavern of a dumpster located in a shadowy corner behind a small bike repair shop. “All kinds of stuff. Good stuff. Here for taking. No fun if already taken.”

Jamie nodded in agreement, not thrilled at all by the rain trickling down her chin. She stepped over a pile of old cans, and coughed from the dampness, leaning over the edge of the dumpster to investigate the shadowed depths.

“That may be, but I am soaked, and we have been out here for hours. I think we have looked through every dumpster within a mile of Central Park. Please, Mouse, can we go home soon, I am really wet and hungry.” She coughed again and pinched the bridge of her nose between two chilled fingers. That wasn’t a good sign.

Mouse’s impish face appeared in the shadows, his longish hair hanging in stringy locks around his face. A smudge of black across his forehead completed the picture. His cheek quirked upwards in a kind smile, and he nodded once.

“Sure. Got a sack full anyway. Plenty good stuff. Mouse make all kinds of stuff with it.” His head tilted to one side, and a rare expression of concern dimmed the excited glow that had been dancing in his eyes. “Go now, Mouse sorry, Jamie not sick I hope.”

Jamie gave him a calming smile and braced herself against the cold metal, offering a steadying hand as the young man climbed out of the dumpster and leaped to the ground. He picked up the cloth of a burlap sack that lay next to the dumpster and stuffed some random metal bits inside. It clanked in a satisfying way as he hoisted the findings onto his shoulder and nodded toward Jamie. A few small bits he pocketed, casting Jamie a secretive grin that faded again at the weariness he could see in her face.

“Let's go, Mouse know shortcut.”

“Finally,” she muttered, pushing her tired body away from the support of the metal dumpster. “Good stuff or not, I need some of William’s soup.”

Mouse glanced at her rain-soaked outfit, his face an undiscernible mix of emotions.

“Jamie be dry soon,” he spoke softly.

Jamie’s heart fluttered slightly at the rare tone he had used. It was a tone he reserved for true caring moments, but he had never used it toward her. It was a new experience, and she wasn’t sure what to do with that. Best option when unsure? Pretend it didn’t happen in case you are overreacting. She was thankful that the chilly air had already reddened her cheeks. She could spare a blush for now, it wouldn’t even be visible.

“Yeah,” she replied kindly, her heart warming at the worry that had taken over Mouse’s round face. “Got to get changed quick and get this stuff sorted in your room, yeah? If Mary finds us like this, she will make us drink some of that medicinal tea she makes, and it is ten times worse than the cold that it is supposed to prevent.”

Mouse smiled, but replied, “I like it. Mix of things, like Mouse’s creations. Works, even if not pretty.”

Jamie sighed again, hunching her arms again to stop their slight shaking from the chill. “You would like a hodgepodge tea, Mouse. Only you. How much stuff do you have there, you think?”

“Enough,” he replied noncommittally. “Mouse make tons of good stuff.”

She grunted in acknowledgement and moved a few steps ahead of him to lead the way down the narrow alley that would take them toward the hidden tunnel that Mouse used when exploring Above.

Maybe they would be lucky, and no one would notice they had been gone.

She coughed again, a painful deep cough. Yeah, Father was going to notice that.

Carefully, on light footsteps, Jamie and Mouse hurried down the tunnels toward Mouse's room, where he kept all his 'finds'.

"Mouse sort later," he spoke softly, dropping the burlap sack in the corner of his room.

Various 'experiments' lay around the room in varying stages of completion, giving the small space very 'mad scientist' feels to the untrained eye. Jamie knew what a few of the projects were, and to her, it was just messy.

"Jamie goes to get dry, here take this." Mouse grabbed a blanket from the bed and shoved it toward the girl who was now shivering noticeably. "No, no, must get warm," he spoke as if to himself, and he swung the blanket around Jamie's shoulders, ignoring her flailing hands that tried to take it from him. "Let Mouse," he spoke firmly, and she let her hands fall to her sides, coughing again.

"Thanks, Mouse, I can get it. Just need a bit of a nap, I think, and everything will be okay. Got a bit of a chill, I guess. See you at dinner, okay?"

Mouse nodded, for once wordlessly, and he watched her turn and leave for her own chamber, coughing again, and mumbled to himself.

"Must tell Vincent. Must tell Father. Jamie sick."

He left his room in a rush and followed the tunnels to the library where Father could usually be found. He stepped into the warm, inviting space, where a myriad of lit candles lent a gentle amber light to the many rows of literary works.

"Mouse, good to see you," Father's cheerful voice spoke from the loft of the library, and Mouse stepped further into the room to look upward toward the voice. "Haven't seen you in a bit. Everything okay?"

Before Mouse could speak, there was a clatter as Father dropped the book he held in his hands onto a nearby pile, sending it tumbling sideways, and hurried down the steps.

"Mouse, you are soaking wet! Are you well? Vincent said it was a miserable night out, I hope you haven't been Above."

Mouse considered for a moment, unnerved at the knit brows that gazed down at him and the firm hands that clasped themselves to his head.

“No fever, that’s good,” Father spoke softly, his tone gentle and relieved. “Go get dry, my boy, traipsing around in those wet things will get you a chill.”

“Jamie’s already got one,” Mouse spoke up, gaining his courage back. “Jamie cough and shake, went to chamber to rest.”

“Ah,” Father replied in understanding, patting the obviously nervous young man on the shoulder. “She went above with you?” He turned away to collect his black medical bag, glancing over his shoulder at Mouse for an answer.

Mouse nodded, his face miserable. “Mouse ... Mouse didn’t think and- and rain make Jamie sick. Rain good for borrowing. Not picked over, not taken. But now she’s sick.”

“Borrowing?” Father asked, disapproval in his tone. Mouse quickly explained.

“Dumpsters, big metal ones, look through that, find all kinds of good stuff. Not taking.”

Father sighed tolerantly, knowing that telling Mouse to not hunt for things to collect was like telling the sun to not rise. True to his namesake, the young man was a hunter and a finder, and if he wasn’t stealing, there really was no harm. Except when someone got sick.

“Don’t worry, Mouse, I am sure it will be fine. Just go get dry and let Mary know to make some of her tea, okay? Can you do that for me while I go check on Jamie?”

Mouse nodded, the miserable sadness still hovering in his gentle eyes, and he rushed away, muttering to himself, “Mouse does not go in rain ever again!”

Vincent arrived a moment later, as Father was rummaging in his bag.

The lion-like man pulled back the hood of his cloak, revealing damp tawny hair framing a regal, and unusual face. He looked concerned.

“Father, is someone ill?”

The older man glanced up, his keen eye noting the dampness that also followed his son. “You have been above too? Why, of all the beautiful nights in the year, must everyone decide to go out when the spring rains have come?”

Vincent stepped forward, laying a gentle hand on the black bag.

“Father, I am sorry, I went Above to see Catherine. She has not been well with the flu, and she wanted me to stay and read a while. Is someone else sick?”

“Jamie,” Father replied, gazing into the blue eyes of the man that he both did not understand, and yet knew better than anyone else. “You are quite sure it is the flu?”

Both men remembered the times that great sickness, contagious and deadly, had invaded their tunnels, and the fear still hovered in the back of their mind that there was always a horrible chance it could happen again. But Vincent’s response quelled the fear for the moment.

“Quite sure, Father. Dr. Peter has seen her just a few hours ago, and it is just a simple flu. Perhaps that is all Jamie has, as well?”

“I hope,” Father replied softly. “Will you see if William has something suitable for a sick person to eat in case she wants it. Mouse, poor boy, has gone to see if Mary has tea.”

“Right away, Father,” Vincent replied. “And do not worry, children bounce back incredibly well. I am sure all will be well.”

She ran down rainy streets that seemed to loop over and over and over. There were no dry places to wait out the cloudburst, and the rumbling thunder refused to relinquish its noisy onslaught over the city. She pulled her jacket tighter, shaking her head to let the rainwater drip from her face. The air was warm, nearly what could be called hot, and her legs ached from running. “Why can’t it stop raining just for a minute,” she grumbled to herself. The rain continued to fall, the air kept getting warmer, and the thunder refused to silence.

“Jamie?” Father entered the girl’s chamber cautiously, as to not startle her, and set his bag down on the table. He leaned over the still figure, who looked as if she was sleeping. The moment his hand touched her forehead, he knew they had problems. At that moment, Mary appeared, a steaming cup in her hand. Mouse was right behind her, still wearing his forlorn expression of self-blame.

“Is she sleeping, Father?” Mary asked softly, setting the cup on the other side of the bed, and sitting down carefully next to Jamie. Father waved a hand toward Mouse to bring his bag, and the young man moved quickly, handing it to the man, then taking up his own place of observation near the foot of the bed.

“No,” Father replied softly. “Not exactly.” He withdrew a thermometer from his bag. “She’s running a very high fever.”

Mouse shifted uneasily, his expression heartbroken. “Mouse sorry.”

Mary immediately went to his side, putting a comforting hand on his arm. “Not your fault, Mouse. People don’t get sick that quickly from being out in the rain. She was probably getting sick already, you know how Jamie is - she’s tough and tends to not say much. Just being out in the rain brought it to light, that’s all. Not something you could have known.”

Mouse nodded once but kept his eyes on his friend. What if something happened to her? What if she never woke up and he never had a chance to tell her he was sorry?

Mary patted his arm. “Why don’t you go rest, maybe work on an invention. We will call you when she wakes.”

The young man glanced up at the kind faced older woman, and he understood that he was being asked to leave. Probably so he would not worry. It wasn’t going to help, he would still worry, even while inventing. But Mary looked so concerned for him that he had concede to her wishes.

“Sure,” he mumbled. “Sure, Mouse go.”

The night was long. Jamie ran a high fever for hours. Father tried everything he knew to do to bring it down, finally sending Kipper to fetch Dr. Peter. He would have sent Mouse, but Mouse could not be found. Vincent had also gone above, sensing that Catherine was also not doing well.

“You are all keeping me busy,” Dr. Peter said amicably, as he tucked his stethoscope into his bag. “The medication I gave her should help. Catherine has it too, I am afraid, and so do several others above. Seems like the season changing brings all kinds of sicknesses. Once she wakes up, light foods - you know what to do, once she feels stronger, she can sit up in bed for periods of time. No pushing it or doing too much too soon, or she will be back in bed again.”

“Thanks for coming Peter,” Father offered a hand to the other doctor. “We rely on you so much. You know you always have a place here among us.”

“I know.” Peter sighed. “There’s a lot of this flu going around. I would recommend that you keep the children Below until the rainy season is over and things get warm and dry Above.”

“We will let them know,” Father replied gratefully. “There will be a council meeting tomorrow and we will discuss this.”

“Good.” Peter nodded and took up his bag. “I will go now, but if anything changes, you send for me.”

“We will,” Father stood and shook the other doctor’s hand. “I will have Kipper see you back to the entrance.”

Gradually, the dream of rain faded, and Jamie awoke. Wearily, she blinked to clear her vision, and found Mouse sitting at her side. He moved as if to stand when he saw her awake, but she held up a hand.

“No - No, Mouse, don’t - go.”

“Mouse get Father, he instructed soon as Jamie wakes up, get Father.” The young man replied, clasping his hands nervously.

“I - I’m sure he did,” she replied faintly. “Mouse, I’m sorry, you have probably been really worried, I should have told you I wasn’t feeling well, I just wanted to go with you.”

Mouse smiled crookedly. “Jamie wants to go borrowing with Mouse?”

“Yeah.”

Mouse looked as if he did not know what to say, but he did not have to think long for at that moment, Father’s voice interrupted their moment.

“Jamie! Glad to have you back with us. Mouse, you were to get me right away.”

“I am sorry, Father,” Jamie replied before Mouse could say anything. “I asked him to stay.”

“Hm,” Father seated himself at her side, and examined her throat and felt her forehead. “Well, don’t get any ideas, child. You need to rest and stay in bed a few more days. No running around anywhere, and when you do go back to borrowing, for heaven’s sake, do not go in the rain.”

Mouse nodded his agreement, and Father smiled. “Good. Now you, Jamie, drink your tea that Mary has made, and Mouse, you can be useful and keep Jamie entertained, okay?”

“Sure,” the young man replied eagerly. “Mouse tell Jamie all about latest invention. See, it’s going to have a place to put teacups, and tea, and it’s going to have a spinning base.....”

In a high-rise apartment not so far away, Vincent and Catherine sat on the balcony so high above the twinkling city.

“You are sure you feel better?” Vincent asked softly, his chin resting carefully on top of her hair.

She nodded, leaning into his embrace. “Much better, Vincent. Thank you for staying.”

“We still have two chapters of Great Expectations left.”

She wrapped her arms a little tighter and laughed softly. “Maybe I won’t feel completely better until you finish it.”

With a gentle smile, Vincent took up the well-loved book and continued to read.

END