

VIGNETTES

Beginnings

- by Judith Nolan ©

“Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead. Don’t walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.”

- Albert Camus

Charles...

Charles crouched against the rock wall, trembling and deeply afraid. He couldn't cross that bridge into the unknown. He just couldn't do it; no matter how many times Devin tried to tell him about magic places; places where Charles would be safe and find friends. Where no one would laugh at him or demand he remove the hood he wore to keep his face from being seen.

But everywhere was the same and people were all the same. Cruel and demanding, not liking anything that was different. He'd heard them laughing just now. Nowhere was safe, no one would want him. He was just a poor freak. He was better off alone...or dead. *If it hadn't been for Dev...*

“Remember what I told you.” Devin crouched down before him, to plead with him. “About the secret place where I was born. It's right over there, across the bridge. It's full of music and candles everywhere you look. And the people, they're like a family.”

“I heard them laughing,” Charles complained, looking beyond his friend's shoulder towards the bridge he'd been so afraid to cross. He couldn't do it. His limbs trembled with the need to run. “They won't want a freak, an ugly freak.”

Devin was his adopted brother, he gave him courage. But other people he could never trust. They only wanted to hurt him, make him feel small and afraid. *Why should these new people be any different?*

As Charles wondered what to do next, there was a sound, a sense of movement from beyond the bridge. Devin rose, turning to look. Charles scrambled to his feet, crowding up behind his friend to also look across the bridge. He blinked, frowning, wondering if he was now seeing things in this strange place.

A man was standing there. A tall, powerful man with a flowing mane of hair...*and his face...*such an incredible face. Charles leaned forward to get a better look. The man looked like one of the lions they'd kept chained in cages back at the carnival, where Charles had been exhibited in a cage by his own brother. Eddie had laughed at him too. Said he was good for nothing and not worth the trouble. But

Eddie said he was the only family Charles had, so Eddie would take care of him. But Charles had to pay his way by showing the people what they'd come to see...the freak. *The ugly freak...*

Charles's sobbing breath hitched and he blinked behind the cloth hiding his head from view. How could such a man as this walk around with his face uncovered? Didn't he scare people too? Didn't he make people so afraid they screamed and ran from him?

And then the man spoke... "There are no freaks...here." He raised his hands, lifting back the hood from his hair, exposing more of his unusual face to the warm glow of the torches illuminating the vast cavern. Still he seemed unafraid to show them what he looked like.

Charles stared, even as he eased away from the certain security of Devin's strong presence and stepped into the unknown. He inched forward, moving out towards the bridge which had so recently scared him. He stepped carefully from plank to plank, his eyes fixed on the man before him, who stood calmly on the other side, watching and waiting. Charles saw him raise his hand, an inhuman hand with fur and claws.

How can this be? Charles swallowed, but he didn't falter, slowly creeping further out onto the bridge, going on faith now, a belief in himself he had never known he possessed until this very moment. Like he mattered, and someone other than Devin actually cared about his feelings. Even Eddie's carping voice, telling him he was ugly and useless, was strangely quiet in the back of his mind.

Reaching the far side of the bridge, he stretched out one arm and their hands touched, folding and connecting as Charles made it to the man with the unique face who watched him so calmly, acceptingly.

Charles stood staring in wonder. He wanted to touch the other man's face, but he dared not. Instead he remained still, waiting and wondering as Devin came up behind him. His friend clapped a hand on Charles's shoulder.

He was looking at the other man when Devin said, "Hello, little brother. Long time no see. This here is Charles. You could say I've adopted him, made him part of the family. So I guess that makes him your brother as well, Vincent."

"Welcome to my world, Charles," Vincent replied softly, watching him with curiosity. "No one will hurt you here."

"Brother..." Charles nodded his thanks as he savoured the word. "Brother..." he said again and sighed, as he looked at the two men. He liked the sound of the word when Devin said it.

It meant something then, something warm and safe. It made him feel secure, like he was cared for and didn't need to be afraid any more. *Brothers...*

END