

VIGNETTES

Beginnings

- by Judith Nolan ©

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Jamie...

Jamie slipped away to her chamber and changed out of her party dress as soon as her mother's attention was distracted by the clean-up the morning after Winterfest. She grimaced as she tossed the offending garment onto her bed before shimmying happily into her old, well-worn jeans and a serviceable shirt. The well-washed garments made her feel more comfortable, more like herself.

Pulling on and lacing up a thick woollen vest against the cold, she hurried to find Mouse. As usual, she found her friend tucked away in a deeply shadowed corner, trying to avoid Father's sweeping glance, as their harassed patriarch searched keenly for more volunteers to help set the Great Hall back to rights.

Mouse was tinkering with his latest invention, something only he understood. He looked up when Jamie dropped to sit cross-legged beside him. “You're gonna get in trouble,” he remarked, his mouth settling into a disapproving line as he stared at her boy's clothing.

“I turned 15 last week, so now I can make up my own mind about what I wear,” Jamie defended herself stoutly. “So have you done as I asked?”

“Father won't let you be a guard,” Mouse opined darkly. “He said there's never been a girl on the gates. Besides no girl asked before. And you know you're not a boy.” He seemed satisfied with his own logic. “Only boys allowed. Father said so. Said it's too dangerous. You might get hurt. Better not to change.”

“Mouse...” Jamie scowled at him. “I thought you at least were going to be different. I can do anything you can, and better too. I can run faster than any of you, even Vincent will admit that. And I can fight too. So why can't I do it?”

“Maybe. But anything happens to you, Father would blame Mouse. Vincent too. And your parents. Not good. Best not to do it.”

“But nothing's going to happen to me,” Jamie countered patiently. “We've just got to convince Father to allow me to try it. Show him that I can do it. If you would just ask him again.”

“Talked to Vincent already.” Mouse shrugged. “He said maybe. He said couldn’t see why not. He said we could go see him. But not now. Too many people around. Father might see us. Ask what we want.”

“Come on, Mouse! Why didn’t you say that before?” Jamie punched him in the shoulder. “That’s great news! You can be such an air-head sometimes. I just knew Vincent would understand.”

“You talk, talk, talk...” Mouse carefully placed his half-completed invention in a nearby box, his concentration disrupted. He rubbed at his shoulder absently. “Always want me to do things for you. Make you stuff. Mouse likes silence.” He looked up at his friend. “Why you want to do boy things anyway?”

“Because being a girl sucks big time,” Jamie told him roundly. “I can’t sew, I hate cooking and I like things messy, not all neat and pretty. Boys get to go and see all the cool places way down below and climb the trees Up Top. And when they’re 15, they get their own staff and become apprentice guards. That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do since I was little. You know I’m a better shot with the cross-bow than you. Vincent knows it too.”

“Father doesn’t know.” Mouse jerked a warning glance in the old man’s direction. “If he knew I made you a bow, he’d ... ! You better give it back. Before he finds out. He yells at Mouse. Too much noise.” He clapped his hands over his ears.

“Make me,” Jamie challenged him, her eyes narrowing with displeasure. “It’s mine and I’m keeping it. Besides, you’d only shoot yourself with it.”

“For a girl you’re a lot of trouble,” Mouse stated mulishly, dropping his hands disconsolately. “All right, will ask Vincent to talk to Father again. But not ‘till he’s finished with the Great Hall. He’s in bad mood right now.”

“Thanks, Mouse.” Jamie jumped to her feet as her unwilling companion stood, clutching his precious boxful of stuff to his chest. “I knew I could count on you. I’ll owe you big time. It’ll be all right, you’ll see. Vincent will make him see sense.”

“Yeah, okay good, okay fine.” Mouse frowned. “Being a boy is no big deal anyway. Still get bossed around. Go here. Do this. Fix that, carry it over there. Where’s Mouse? Need Mouse now.”

“But no one’s ever tried to make you wear a dress when you really didn’t want to, have they?” Jamie caught his arm, as he turned away.

“No...” Mouse blinked as he looked back. “Guess not.” He stared at her with renewed respect. “Okay, Mouse will try. Will go see Vincent again. Then we talk to Father. Make him understand.”

“That’s all I ask, Mouse.” Jamie sighed. “Just to have the chance to be myself and do what I know I can do best. Why is that so difficult for everyone to understand?”

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