

The Homecoming

One of my customers pirouetted in front of the mirror and a small crowd of appreciative onlookers. As she admired herself in the dark green brocade bodice, I turned away and busied myself with rearranging a rack of chemises. During last year's Renaissance Festival, I had made myself a bodice of that same green brocade.

Andrew had told me how beautiful it looked with my green eyes and strawberry blond hair. I had been wearing that same bodice the day Andrew pulled me into a shaded clearing behind the falconer's stage, where he told me that he loved me for the first time.

Two weekends after that—the final weekend of last year's festival—Andrew solemnly announced that he was joining the Army. I cried as I bade him goodbye, and he promised that he would write to let me know where he was so I could at least send him letters.

A year had come and gone, and the annual festival had begun again, but still I'd had no word from Andrew. Even his friends, his fellow Scottish warriors (or at least they were for six weekends each year), hadn't heard from him.

The woman trying on the green bodice flitted over to me. "Can I just wear it out?" she asked.

"Of course, my lady," I answered, forcing a smile onto my face.

Her boyfriend, who seemed as enthusiastic about the flattering garment as she did, pulled out his wallet. I saw him glance at the price list posted above my display, and his eyes widened. Brocade was an expensive fabric, and I spent all year sewing the bodices, chemises, skirts and cloaks that I sold each year at the festival. "Do you take plastic?" he asked.

"But of course, my lord," I answered. "Lady Visa and Master Card are always most welcome in my humble shop."

The couple stared at me briefly, and finally the guy began to laugh as he produced a credit card.

Once they walked out of my shop, which was really just a canvas tarp stretched over a wooden framework, I adjusted my own bodice in the mirror before turning to greet two teenage girls who were admiring a black velvet cloak.

The festival just wasn't as much fun without Andrew, who had often popped in to make bawdy comments, or to simply eye me with a mischievous smile. Other times, he and his kilted

friends had run among the tourists walking past, shouting laughable insults at each other and the crowd.

I stared out at the tree-lined walk outside my shop, picturing scenes from last year. I couldn't bring myself to consider that Andrew just hadn't cared—about our relationship or about keeping in touch with me. I was too much in love to believe that, and he had seemed sincere in his love for me. Maybe he had simply lost my address. Sometimes I even fantasized that the Army had given him some top-secret assignment, and he'd been forced to cut off all contact with the outside world.

My attention was recalled by the two teenagers, who were lamenting the high price of the cloak. I felt a wave of pity for them. I was sad that Andrew wasn't present to admire my own period costume, but these girls didn't even have costumes to be admired.

“What kind of budget are you each working with?” I asked, feeling much kinder toward them than I had to the obviously happy couple earlier.

The prettier of the two shrugged. “I have about fifty bucks,” she said.

The other looked at me earnestly. “I've got seventy saved up. I come here every year and I want to dress up for it.”

Fifty and seventy. I could work with that. Neither girl would walk out in silk brocade, but I could outfit them both and still recoup more than the cost of my materials.

Helping the girls choose outfits actually lifted my spirits some. They were both beaming as they thanked me. Their chemises and skirts were just plain cotton, but I'd offered up two of my personal bodices. They were used, I explained, but guaranteed to draw looks from the lords of the realm.

I gave the earnest girl my green bodice. “But this is so expensive,” she whispered when I handed it to her.

“I can always make myself another,” I replied. “This very bodice once caused a man to tell me he loved me. Maybe it will do the same for you.”

When the girls left my shop, they did it in style, their swirling skirts hiding their shorts, and their tee shirts stuffed into their purses to make way for full sleeves and tight lacing.

I smiled as I watched the two girls walk away, their appearance immediately drawing loud catcalls from two of the actors who worked the festival.

My melancholy soon returned, though. The green bodice was gone, just like Andrew. I put the girls' money in the pouch hanging from my belt, hoping they would have better luck than me. When I looked up again, an elderly man was standing just a few feet away.

"Oh! You startled me," I said, dropping my feigned English accent in my surprise.

The man answered me in a thick Scottish brogue that sounded authentic. "You are Gwen, are you not?"

"Yes, my lord."

The man laughed. "That I certainly am not." He paused, and his face turned serious again. "He is coming home tonight, and I thought you might like to be there to welcome him."

"I beg your pardon, my—sir, but who is coming home?" I knew there could only be one person that the man meant, but I still felt a dizzy breathlessness when he answered, "Andrew."

"How do you know?"

Instead of answering, the man reached up and drew a gold chain from underneath his shirt. A semi-circular pendant dangled from it, indecipherable characters etched on its gleaming gold surface.

Andrew had worn one just like it. He'd shown it to me the night he told me about his plans to join the Army. "It's an astrolabe," he had told me. "Ancient explorers used them to determine their location and chart their course. It means I can go anywhere I want, and I'll never lose my way." I had never thought to ask Andrew where he'd gotten it.

Now, I looked at the old man and simply said, "When?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight! So soon!" I instantly reached up to smooth my hair, wondering foolishly if Andrew would recognize me.

I also wondered, less foolishly, if he even still loved me. "I'm not sure he wants to see me," I said, crestfallen. "I haven't heard from him since he left."

The man laughed again, a short outburst as if I'd told a very funny joke. "No one has! There was nothing he could do about that." He took my hand, and I felt something cool and hard press against my palm. "At dusk, follow the old trail behind the jousting field and wait at the church."

The old man released my hand, and when I drew it back I realized I was holding an astrolabe of my own, this one suspended on a smaller chain. "I can go anywhere," I whispered.

The man smiled softly, bowed his head and left. I called my thanks as he disappeared around a turn in the path outside.

After that, it was hard to concentrate on anything. As the shadows grew long across the grassy avenues and the heat of the day began to subside, my anxiety rose. The end of the festival day used to be my favorite time: the few people left were the really devoted fans of the festival, and it seemed as if everyone I saw was in costume. In the fading twilight, it sometimes felt as if we'd traveled back in time.

My last lingering customer finally gave up the search for a chemise, and I wasted no time in pulling out the plastic sheeting that clipped onto the sides of my shop. Once my wares had been secured for the evening, I began my walk toward the jousting field. I had never ventured behind it before. The façade along the back of the field was made to look like viewing boxes for royalty. I skirted the plywood structure and passed the stable, trying to avoid the gaze of a few “knights” who sat nearby with large tankards of ale.

The light was fading quickly, and the wooded area behind the jousting field was already filling with shadows, but the overgrown remains of a trail were still visible. I started down the path, brambles tugging at my skirt and crickets fleeing from the weeds beneath my feet. Looking down that dim path, all of my excited anticipation turned to apprehension. What was I doing here? The old man had been wearing the same necklace as Andrew, I told myself. It wasn't much, but it gave me some hope that maybe I really would see him tonight. With that thought, I pressed on.

The shadows continued to deepen, and soon I was stooped over, trying to see the path beneath my feet. I hadn't even thought about bringing a flashlight, but I was grateful that I had thrown an old wool cloak around my shoulders. The air was growing cooler by the minute, far more than I had expected.

I was nearly ready to give up when the debris in the path lessened, and soon I found myself on a wide, well-kept trail. It was more like a dirt road, and I was finally able to lift my eyes from the ground right in front of me. The trees stretched tall over my head, but in front of me I saw a dim glow. Reassured, I pressed on at a faster pace, able now to see my way. Andrew is where that light is, I reminded myself.

I was nearly running when I finally burst into a clearing, and the scene before me made me stop so quickly that I toppled over, landing on my hands and knees. I felt a hand beneath my elbow, and I looked up to see the wizened face of an old woman. Her gray hair stuck out in wisps

from beneath a leather cap, and her simple wool dress was worn. “There you are, nothing hurt,” she said. Her accent reminded me of the man who had given me the astrolabe. I barely understood her words, but I returned her smile.

The woman continued on her way, taking the trail I had been on. I wiped absently at my dress while I surveyed the little village I had entered. There were low huts of wood, and a few larger ones of stone. A great fire burned in the center of the clearing, and about a dozen people stood around it, talking. But it was the church that really surprised me. Built of stone, it stood two stories high. A massive wooden cross was mounted on top of it, in front of a small bell tower.

It looked better than any of the buildings at the festival, yet it was back here, where the tourists didn’t go. I knew that some of the shops had living quarters for the out-of-town participants, but I had never heard of there being a village like this. Why would they build something that looked so authentic when the general public would never see it?

I wandered over to the fire, but not one of the faces illuminated by the flames belonged to Andrew. I tried asking for him, but every answer was negative. One boy said, “We’re all waiting,” his accent as thick as the old woman’s had been.

My anxiety was now tinged with fear. I didn’t know where Andrew was, I wasn’t quite sure where I was, and I certainly didn’t recognize any of these people. I had felt lonely many times since Andrew left, especially at the festival, but the loneliness I felt now seemed deeper. I stood mute for a while, listening to the babble of voices around me and hoping that Andrew’s voice would begin speaking at any moment. Instead of his voice, though, I heard the crack of thunder.

I looked up as the first drops of rain began to fall. They were ice cold, and I dashed for the church. Inside, only a few people were scattered among its pews. The walls were hung with woven tapestries, which seemed to shimmer in the light of the candles burning in every alcove. I sat down in one of the pews near the back, feeling suddenly weary. I leaned forward and rested my forehead on the back of the pew in front of me. The storm worsened, and I could hear raindrops pelting the church. I sighed and shut my eyes. “I just want Andrew to come home safely,” I whispered.

As soon as I uttered the words, there was a shout from outside. A few seconds later, the church bell began to toll. The parishioners all rose and hurried outside. I sat up, looking at them in dumbstruck silence.

The same young boy who had addressed me at the fire came up and grabbed my hand. “They’re coming!” he shouted, tugging at me urgently. I allowed him to pull me to my feet and followed silently.

The open space outside the church was filling with people, who were streaming out of the houses and appearing from gaps between the trees. I could feel the anxiety around me, and not a word was uttered. The only sound I heard was the tapping of the rain and the occasional crack of thunder.

And then, dimly, I began to hear another sound, too rhythmic for rain and too quiet for thunder. I subconsciously leaned forward, straining to hear, like everyone around me. The sound grew until I recognized it as a drum. It was coming from a different road than the one on which I had arrived.

Someone near the road’s entrance shouted, and soon others took up the call. A wave of cheers and grateful prayers rippled across the gathered crowd. I was so swept up in the emotion that I cheered as well, though what the drums meant I couldn’t guess.

The bright flare of a torch emerged from the trees, and I saw that the torch was held aloft by a man wearing a long dark cloak. The cloak was tattered, and it waved behind him in the wind like a flag.

More men followed, about forty in all. They all looked as beleaguered as their leader, but they began to smile as they recognized people in the crowd. As they marched right into the center of the village, I heard wails amid the cheers.

The woman next to me moaned. “My boy,” she said. “My boy is not there.” A girl on her other side embraced her, and they both began to weep. I felt tears in my own eyes, and I returned my attention to the men, who were now spreading out in a circle around the fire, many of them greeting people from the crowd.

One man stood alone, his head down and his shoulders slumped in weariness. His hair was long and dark, and when he turned, I saw his face had high cheekbones above a thick beard.

Andrew! I thought. I shook my head. No, of course not. Andrew didn’t have a beard, and they certainly wouldn’t let him have long hair in the Army. I walked toward the man so I could get a closer look. When he saw me, his back straightened and he shouted loudly.

Before I could speak, he closed the space between us and drew me to him. He kissed me hard, his beard scratching against my skin, but I knew from his familiar touch that it wasn’t a stranger kissing me.

“Andrew,” I said, breathless, when he finally released me. “I—you smell terrible.”

Andrew laughed with real joy. “Just like my Gwen, always telling the truth,” he said.

I could feel my cheeks flush. “I’m so sorry. But what are you doing here? And where are we, anyway? The old man said you were coming home tonight, but you certainly aren’t in an Army uniform.”

“We don’t have any uniforms.”

“Then you are in the Army?” I looked down at Andrew’s stained and patched clothing.

“Yes, and we’ve been fighting the English.”

“We aren’t at war with the English.”

“We certainly are.” Andrew’s voice grew quiet and sad. “The astrolabe will take you anywhere you want, and to any time, so I chose Scotland in 1347. I thought it would be fun. We’re always pretending to be warriors from this time period, and I thought it would be an adventure to come here and actually live it. But it’s been terrible. Fighting, and no food, and cold that I thought would kill me. I thought I could go home whenever I wanted, but I realized that the astrolabe will only take you out at the same place you entered.”

“The trail,” I said.

“Yes. We left two months after I arrived to go fight, and we’re only now coming home. Home for these people, at any rate.”

I took Andrew’s hand. “I think it’s time for us to go home, too. You know I’m going to have a thousand questions.”

“I know. As long as I can take a hot shower first. And eat a burger. I’ve been craving a burger and fries for months.”

No one in the village noticed as Andrew and I walked slowly toward the path where I had entered. No one saw us leave, or heard me say, “We have plenty of time for all of it.”