
Clothes Make a Woman

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Brenada looked down at her brown woollen skirt. It was drenched from the rain – but then, so was the rest of her – and caked with mud right up to the knee. ‘And it’s only half way through the morning.’

It wasn’t particularly unpleasant to be soaking wet in Kadanzer’s summer heat; in fact, it was rather refreshing. That was probably just as well: given the weather they’d had since she came here, if they stopped work when it rained, they’d never get anything done. At least the rain made weeding easier, not like the rock-like ground that a dry summer brought to the cothold. Still, this was the worst day yet that she’d been working on the farm. What had started as a light shower was starting to look more like a downpour, and the earth that she was hoeing around the recently-planted fruit bushes was going to be liquid mud before much longer.

At the cothold, she’d have worked inside on a day like this. Bad weather meant the floors needed more cleaning, and there was always cooking, and wool to spin and knitting to do. Working outside in the fields was better, she decided, even in the rain. This was the fourth day since she’d been assigned to work permanently on the Weyr Farm. Four days since her husband had been staked out in Threadfall; nearly three sevendays since he’d killed the greenrider who was her lover – but she hastily reminded herself not to think about *that*. She could keep going, as long as she didn’t think about it. The work helped: it was physically hard, but no harder than tending her own vegetable garden at home. ‘At the cothold,’ she corrected herself. ‘This is home now.’

The heat here could make farm work difficult, but right now, the worsening rain wasn’t helping. Her shirt was plastered to her body, the heavy skirt clung to her legs and hindered her movement, and she’d already slipped a couple of times in her worn boots. One of the apprentices, Netheril, was working a dozen yards away, and seemed to be getting along much better. She wondered how he did it.

She took a few steps along the row of bushes to continue hoeing, but stopped when she found herself facing Kesyr. He was a candidate, like Netheril, but not an apprentice. She’d found that much out from mealtime conversations.

‘Why, Brenada, you’re covered in mud. You look as if you’ve been wading in the stuff. Whatever are you wearing a long skirt for, in the fields?’

‘This is what I always wear to work in the garden.’ Brenada suppressed the urge to ask what else he thought she’d be wearing: something about the way he was looking at her made her uncomfortable, and she didn’t really want to know. Besides, women here wore all sorts of things. Lots of them wore trousers, like men. She’d even seen girls with short skirts that showed their legs and tunics that left their waists bare! Fortunately, he didn’t pursue the issue.

‘Well, Master Raidun says that it’s too wet for what you’re doing, and you’re to help him in the large potting shed, by the place where the paths cross. Can you find it?’

‘Hard to miss it,’ she answered, hoping she was right, and hurried off. In the tool store, she rubbed the hoe clean and dry with a handful of the dry grass that was kept there, then smeared the blade with oil to protect it.

The potting shed was some distance away, and she hadn’t been in there yet. When she entered, she found that it was a large, light space, more like a small barn than a shed. The window openings had blinds whose broad slats could be raised or lowered, allowing light to enter even in the rain. Benches lined two walls and shelves the others, with trays and pots of young plants covering most of the flat surfaces. Tables down the centre of the room provided further work space. It was here that the Weyrfarmer was working with a tray of seedlings and a stack of small pots.

Master Raidun had dark skin and woolly-looking hair that had been black but was now mostly grey. He turned a smile on Brenada. ‘Did Kesyr send you? Good, I need all those cleaned and then stacked by size on the bottom shelf.’ He pointed to a cluster of wooden trays and clay pots of various sizes, all of which had clearly just been emptied. There’s a water-butt outside – not that you look as if you need any more water this morning.’ He frowned, looking at her skirt.

Embarrassed, Brenada waited for him to comment on its state, but all he said was, ‘You can dry off a bit in here, anyway.’ He returned to his task, leaving Brenada to set to work on the pots. Before long, she was starting to feel warm and clammy.

After a while, she looked up from plunging pots into a bucket to find Master Raidun watching her. As she met his eyes, he said, ‘Come over here a moment. Do you know what I’m doing?’

She rose from her knees and walked across. ‘You’re potting up the seedlings. You’ve sown them in that tray, and now they’ve sprouted, you’re putting them in pots to grow bigger.’

‘That’s right. Have you ever done this?’

‘Oh, yes. It’s too cold up in the mountains to sow some things outside until month nine or ten. I used to start greens and beans off in trays like that, and put them out to harden, and the runnerbeans and tomatoes, I’d grow on in pots.’ They’d talked about her vegetable garden before.

The Weyrfarmer gave a serious nod. ‘How did you know to do that?’

‘It’s what my Ma always did, in her garden.’ She looked at the feathery leaves of the small plants. ‘Your... those are finger-roots, there? I never did much good with those. They always used to split.’

“Well, that’s usually caused by too much water, so that’s a problem we’ll probably have here, too. In fact, they don’t grow well in this climate at all. But these are rather special: they’re a new hybrid.

Brenada’s face must have shown that she didn’t understand.

“Hybrid?” he repeated. “A new strain, developed by crossing other strains that have the characteristics we want, such as tolerance for different climates, or resistance to disease. I’m going to try this first batch in pots, to help the drainage, and we’ll see how they do. If they seem all right despite the heat and the rain, we’ll see if they breed true.”

“You can breed plants that do better for different weather?” Brenada was amazed. This was a new idea, and a fascinating one. She was suddenly very aware of her own ignorance. She asked eagerly, “So, you can breed things that do better in the cold, or that don’t get the grey mould, or things like that?”

The Craftmaster smiled. “You can indeed. Breeding new strains is one of the main areas of work of the Farmercraft, and adapting to different environments is an important reason for doing it. If you want to learn about it, remember what I said: learn your letters and do well in your tasks, and we’ll think about an apprenticeship.”

He had made the offer before, but at the time, she had been stunned by the events that had brought her to the Weyr, and joining a craft had seemed totally remote from her life. This was a revelation: she felt as if a window had opened onto what farmcrafters actually did, and it made a great deal of sense. She wanted to know about this! Smiling, she said fervently, “I will! I’ve started my lessons with the harpers already, and I want to learn all I can.”

Raidun smiled back. “Good. I’ll no doubt hear of your progress from the Weyrharper. One thing, though.” He glanced at her skirt again. “It’s not only plants that need to adapt to their environment. Did you always work in the fields in long skirts?”

Brenada nodded. “Yes, sir. I always wear skirts like this.”

“Well, you’re at the Weyr now, and in a very different climate. Like the plants, you need to adapt. Go to stores and get yourself some trousers. They’re quite acceptable to wear here, and a lot less trouble. Besides, you won’t ruin them so easily. Do that today, if you can. Now, do you think you can get those pots finished by lunchtime?”

Brenada decided that she liked the Weyrfarmer, but she wasn’t at all sure that she was going to like the trousers.



Rather than going straight to the Weyrhall when lunchtime came, Brenada headed for her cubicle in the support staff barracks. She could hardly turn up to a meal in the Weyr with her clothes in this state. She started to hang the soiled skirt up to dry, but soon realised that the thick mud was soaked so far into the rough woollen weave that no amount of brushing was going to get it out, even if it were dry by the morning. She dropped it into the laundry bag,

and after a moment’s consideration of the soiled underskirt, put that in, too. She really didn’t need to bother with underskirts in this heat; it was merely habit to wear them, and she’d be more comfortable without. She wasn’t in the mountains now.

Her lighter skirt was already at the laundry. That meant she only had her good skirt left to wear – the one they’d given her to wear at her husband’s trial. Well, that was all right for this afternoon, when she had a reading lesson with the harper, and tomorrow was a restday. If her other skirt wasn’t back by the day after, though, she would only have the good one. It was so strange to have somebody else wash her clothes! She hadn’t entirely worked out how long the laundry took, or how they got things dried with so much rain. Could they possibly have somewhere that was big enough to dry a day’s wash for the whole Weyr inside, rather than pegging it all out? Anyway, that meant she couldn’t put off getting the trousers, so she was going to have to find the headsecond who had given her her new clothes. The woman had suggested trousers then, and so had Syrenni: they’d both be saying, “I told you so.”

She briefly tried again to imagine herself in the unfamiliar garment. Surely it would be hot to have the cloth fitting closely to her legs like that? To say nothing of exposing her shape to any man who cared to look. She almost shuddered at the thought of being so on display. Well, she’d been told to wear them, so she’d better try to get hold of some between lunch and her lesson, which meant she had to hurry now. She quickly slipped her best skirt over her head and tucked the damp shirt into the waistband. It would soon dry in the warm, airy Weyrhall.

She ate lunch hastily, sitting on her own, but as she made for the door, she passed Syrenni, who was sitting with some of her wingmates. The bluerider turned in her seat and called out,

“Oh-ho! All dressed up for your lesson today? Let me guess: you fancy one of the harpers?” Syrenni was clearly in good spirits, but it took Brenada a few moments to work out what she was implying.

“No, I just got muddy,” she said stiffly, a little shocked at the implication that she’d be looking for another lover so soon after Ineshra’s death, and her husband’s.

“Sorry, Bren.” Syrenni must have picked up her discomfort. “Tactless of me. You should get some trousers, you know – you *will* get muddy in those skirts you wear.”

“Not you too!” Brenada knew she still sounded grumpy. “I’ve heard nothing else all morning. Anyway, Master Raidun says I’ve got to, so I’ve got to. I’d better go before class.”

Syrenni grinned broadly. “I’ve got time. I’ll come with you.”

Brenada shook her head. “You don’t need to.”

“No, I don’t – but I want to. Come on, Bren. You look as if you’d been sentenced to –” Syrenni stopped, and blushed. “I mean, you must want some moral support for your first time in trousers!”

Brenada laughed at her friend’s discomfiture, realising with some surprise that she wouldn’t have noticed the reference if Syrenni hadn’t corrected herself. “My Lady

Syrenni decides that I'm guilty of the crime of muddiness, and I'm sentenced to wear men's clothes until it stops raining? All right. But I've got to go now."

They went.

In the store room, Headsecond Fenalara left them with three pairs of trousers in roughly the right size. "If none of those fit, we'll have to measure you and get some made. We don't have the stocks of clothing that we used to keep in. I'll leave you to try them. Bring back the ones you don't want."

Brenada picked up one pair and looked at how they were made. The seams were well stitched and the fabric was a sturdy twill. They would wear well, but would they fit her hips? She held them up in front of her and concluded regretfully that they wouldn't.

Syrenni, though, reached for another pair and held them up to Brenada's waist with a knowing eye. "Too small? You want something that'll give you room to move. Besides, they're dull. Try these."

Brenada laid down the sensible grey-green garment regretfully, and took the ones that Syrenni was offering. They were made from some dense, light fabric that she didn't recognise, and they were in an attractive deep red colour that she just knew must have required an expensive dye. The legs were cut short, so that they'd come to the middle of her calves. Not too indecent, but still... "They're too good for the fields."

"Nonsense," Syrenni said. "This cotton weave will wear fine, and long ones would be hot. Besides, why shouldn't you look good while you're working? I do!"

"You're a dragonrider," Brenada said automatically, but she sat down and put the trousers on, then unfastened the buttons at the waist of her skirt and stepped carefully out of it. She tucked her shirt in, noticing that it was already more or less dry, and fastened the drawstring that held the trousers up into a neat bow.

The clothing stores had a full-length mirror – the largest piece of polished metal that Brenada had ever seen. She turned to walk towards it, but Syrenni said, "Wait!" When Brenada turned back to face her, Syrenni leaned across and, before Brenada could protest, pulled the blouse back out from the waist of the trousers, unfastened the bottom two buttons and rolled the hem up, before knotting the bottom edges to leave a strip of exposed midriff – the very thing that Brenada had noticed this morning.

"You may as well be cool. Now, take a look at that." Syrenni pointed to the mirror, and Brenada turned. Looking back at her was a woman whom anyone would think had no shame about showing off her body. A woman who represented everything bad she'd ever heard about the Weyr.

"Not bad, eh?" Syrenni grinned. "You've got a good figure – you look strong, too. You'd better try sitting down and bending and so on – they're no good if you can't move in them."

Brenada took a few steps, then twisted and turned, getting used to the feel of the trousers as she moved. The cloth moved with her: to her surprise, it didn't seem to rub. She raised one leg and clasped her knee before lowering it, noticing the brown marks along the inside leg seam and the

faded places where someone had tried to remove the stains. Maybe in the Weyr those were enough to downgrade this good fabric to working gear? If so, these were going to be very practical for working in the fields, and walking on furrowed ground. She could get used to this! She looked back at her reflection, aware that Syrenni was still watching her.

She had never seen herself in a full-length mirror before, but even so, she recognised the transformation. The woman in the brown woollen skirt had been someone's wife, had expected some day to be someone's mother, had had no real prospects beyond a life of service to husband and family. The girl in the mirror was a free woman. She was learning her letters. She was working for a Craftmaster, and in a brief conversation, a whole new world of knowledge had started to open to her. She'd already heard enough gossip to know that she need not wear herself out in childbearing unless she chose. Shells, she need not even sleep with a man unless she chose! Why *shouldn't* she wear the same as the women here? This was the Weyr: nobody here was going to think badly of her for it, however strange and exposed she felt. And what had the Weyrfarmer said? Adapt. Well, maybe what she thought about things had to adapt, too.

She reached up to pull the restraining thong from her hair, and shook her head so that the thick dark curls fell over her shoulders, then grinned at Syrenni. "I almost didn't recognise myself there."

The bluerider was staring at her. "Your hair is wonderful. Why don't you wear it like that all the time? I suppose you have to tie it back for work in the fields, but..."

With a rush of pleasure, Brenada answered. "But not this afternoon. I've got a lesson to go to. I'm going to learn reading and lettering, so that I can keep records of ... hybrids, and plant strains. And I want to be an apprentice, and learn from Master Raidun, and then go back and tell women in the mountains how they can grow better vegetables. Show them that a woman can have a life for herself, too. This is the best..." She broke off suddenly, remembering that this freedom, these new opportunities, were the result of two deaths.

Syrenni seemed to read her thoughts, and said softly, "Just because bad things happened, doesn't mean it's wrong to enjoy the good things."

"Well, I don't care about *him*," Brenada said fiercely. "But I do miss Ineshra. I wish she were here. But she isn't, and I'm just going to have to make the best of it." Aware that Syrenni was still watching her, she went on resolutely, "They say it gets better with time. If I just get on with things, that's the best I can do."

Syrenni said kindly, "You will, too."

"You know," Brenada went on, "I couldn't see it at first. Couldn't see what someone like me could do here. But I think I can, now. I'm not stupid, and I know what I want. So it's just up to me. And," she added, aware that she was smiling again, "You know what? I'm even going to *look* like I belong here!"

END

