

The Nude Equestrian

By

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Dropiana lived on a small patch of cultivated land in the hills marking the beginning, or end—depending on where one was coming from—of the Endless Plains. She lived where her parents and parents' parents had, centuries before. With the deserts of the Dead Zones to the West and the Pewter Mountains to the North, Alogas was so remote that it never featured on any map, which was a blessing and a curse. In much of Aenya, the people lived in perpetual fear of pillaging and raping and kidnapping, but Dropiana could never imagine such evils. Nor did she bother herself with armies marching through their land to empty the silo set aside for drought, or lay awake with visions of monsters crawling through moonlit windows to devour her. But there was also no commerce, no exchange of art or literature, no new ways of thinking of any kind. To live in Alogas was to know nothing of the Sea, or of the marble laden streets of Hedonia, or the ice glazed siege walls of Northendell. Ignorant of the world, Dropiana and her people prospered by their sweat, from whatever yield

their gods provided, and in this sensible way she managed her existence.

When the lines about Dropiana's mouth and eyes were less pronounced, when few might have called her pretty, she married into the family of a close neighbor, to a boy she'd never spoken to. It was the age that girls were bonded to husbands, when Dropiana woke, to her shame, in blood stained sheets. Her suitor was to inherit much land and the two families could join their fields into one. The wedding was a whirlwind of tradition and festivity—her memory of it a flash of color and grinning faces. Everyone seemed in on a dirty secret she was not privy to and then the night was marked with pain and guilt and overwhelming shame. In the morning that followed, the festive people were gone, and she was alone but for her husband and his unwed brother. Instead of dolls, she had a broom and a dustpan. In a day, the bedroom she'd been born into was a place outside her neighbor's window. But Dropiana never complained, for hers was an adequate life, and she never wanted for food or clothing.

Every day she woke in the dim light of the greater moon at the hour she was expected. If there was ever youth in Dropiana's face, it was long buried by the

constant needs of her husband and his brother. She dressed plainly, her hair cut short and bundled atop her head in a neat bow that never fell from place.

Descending from her bower, she prepared breakfast before watching her husband and brother-in-law tread off without a word. If ever spoken to, it regarded some chore she forgot to do, or some chore she failed to do well enough. After breakfast, it was her duty to scrub undergarments, to feed the red-breasted fowl, to pump water from the well, to harvest crops if season or lead the aurochs to plow.

There was only one time of day when Dropiana knew happiness, when it came time to take care of the stables. Since Alogan households spread across great swaths of land, horse rearing was a time-honored tradition, and for men the skill of the equestrian was as common as walking. As a woman, she was forbidden to ride, but feeding the great beasts and shoveling their dung was expected. She did not mind it, however; something about horses—their power, their wild spirit— attracted her. Even as a child, she loved to watch their flexing muscles beneath their hides. Sometimes she dreamed of wind in her mane, of hills rolling beneath her hooves, of distant waiting horizons.

Upon finishing with the stables, about when the sun began to wane against the greater moon, Dropiana began her bathing ritual, to cleanse herself from the day's chores. Assured that her husband and brother were away, she shut every window, spread the drapes wide, and made certain to wedge chairs against every door. Peeping once more beneath the curtain, Dropiana dragged the tub from storage into the bathroom, tossed a few hot coals in water, and proceeded to carefully remove her clothes, listening intently for the sound of hinges. Finally, squatting awkwardly in the tub behind a three-part partition, she rubbed olive soap against her bright pink skin with her one hand, her other hiding the unmentionables between her thighs.

The two brothers chatted at the dinner table as Dropiana sat like a specter in their midst, hands folded, eyes downcast, speaking when spoken to. One day, she lingered too long in the stables and the dinner table was empty when the two men returned from the field. The welts made by her husband's belt made sitting painful for a while and her chores more difficult.

Her husband snored as she tended to dirty dishes. With soft steps, she'd slip into bed, sore with exhaustion. Some nights, he'd roll over, clumsily poking

her until he was satisfied. It was another chore—another debasement to quietly endure. She thanked the gods that it was over quickly, and that he never bothered to remove any more of her clothing than necessary.

In the early days, he often spoke of sons. “She’ll make strong sons!” he’d say to the neighbors, and even Dropiana fancied the thought of little feet pitter-pattering about the kitchen, clinging to her thighs, calling *momma! momma!* She’d have someone to hold, to talk to, and care for. But after her second stillbirth, she became an object in his home—a tool for working, like a hoe or a broom, which satisfied her, at least, in that she rarely suffered the shame of mating.

Many times, the Aenya moon-system circled the sun, too many for Dropiana to remember, each day as the last. The field grew thick with wheat, then barren and pregnant with seeded soil. Nothing changed. Such was the reasonable life of Dropiana.

The greater moon was in mid-passing and Dropiana was approaching the stables when she first heard the commotion. The horses were neighing, startled, and their hooves were stomping like thunder. It was so unexpected, so far removed from her daily routine, that Dropiana was paralyzed, standing with her

pail and dung caked shovel. Starved from a life of monotony, her imagination could conjure nothing more than a snake having found its way into the stables. Her instinct told her to run home, but if something was molesting the horses, her husband would surely beat her for doing nothing about it. If, however, she was to call for help and no trouble was found, she might also receive a beating.

Shaking uncontrollably, Dropiana moved closer to the stable with every ounce of her will, reaching for the beam that slid across the gate. And then it shattered. Splinters flew into her face as Freeborn, a tawny mare, came bursting forth. *The horses are escaping!* That was her first and only thought. But in that instance, she saw another creature, a rider without saddle or reigns. The sight was familiar, but so alien from her experience that she did not first recognize it. It was a human, and not just any human, but a woman. Yet this woman was like nothing Dropiana could have dreamt of; but something monstrous and obscene. Her skin was as dark as the copper pots that hung from the kitchen, and each of her muscles showed tightly beneath the skin as might a man's, as did the tawny mare's. All of her was in plain sight, for any eye to witness, and Dropiana's mind

reeled with what she was seeing, for the woman was completely and utterly nude, as nude as a newborn pushed from the womb. As the mare reared onto its hind legs, the wild woman gazed into her, and there was no shame in the woman's emerald eyes, no effort to look away from Dropiana, no attempt to hide a nipple behind an elbow or her hairy womanhood beneath her hand. She passed in a swirl of dust, and Dropiana could not help but feel ashamed for reassuring her senses that not only was a woman riding away with her husband's horse, but that she was doing so without wearing anything but a quiver of arrows.

Snapping out of her paralysis, Dropiana dashed around the corner of the house, faster than she'd ever attempted to move, screaming louder than she'd ever made sound. But it was not so much to alert her husband and his brother, but that she did not want to miss the chance to marvel, to burn to memory that obscene yet beautiful sight of the nude equestrian.

Having heard the cries of his wife, Dropiana's husband looked to the tawny mare hurrying toward him. With hoe in hand, he moved to knock the rider from her perch. But what emerged from the wheat stunned him and his brother to inaction: a woman tugging at the

hijacked mare's blonde mane, kicking her heels at its sides with a ferocious cry, as lacking in clothing as the animal she sat upon. She flew between the two men, rustling their garments, and before the brothers could think to give chase, the woman turned backward with a bow in hand. The arrow tip split through the shaft of his hoe with uncanny accuracy. It was enough warning to end any thought of pursuit. Shortly thereafter, Dropiana joined her husband and brother-in-law, watching as the nude equestrian shrank brazenly into the empty horizon, Freeborn bounding powerfully between her knees.

To her surprise, Dropiana was not beaten for losing the mare. Nothing was spoken of it at dinner that night and all he and his brother could do was to visit the stable to confirm that Freeborn was, in fact, gone.

Afterward her husband could do little but speak of halfmen. "Did you hear about the halfmen?" he'd tell the neighbors at every opportunity. "They're coming around, more and more each day—hide the women, I say, and your kids too!" The lie became so persistent that he and his brother became convinced of it. Based on his description, halfmen were more beast than man: furry, brutish, and hideous, and they ate human flesh. But the horse thief was nothing of the kind. One day talk

of halfmen became too much for Dropiana, and she dared to break her silence.

“It was *not* a halfman.”

Her beating was never so severe; it was as if she'd somehow become guilty of the theft. Yet she never felt such pride for speaking out, a pride that lingered long after the welts healed over.

As time wheeled on and the memory of the horse thief faded from her husband's mind, Dropiana could not help but remember her and smile. After all, it remained the most exciting thing to happen in Alogas. She found herself lingering over every detail of the encounter. And she secretly harbored wild and dangerous thoughts, for she did not feel as any of her people did. Dropiana felt no hatred or spite toward the wild woman, and it sometimes frightened her.

More and more Dropiana pondered the identity of that wonderful stranger. Where had she come from? Where was she going? And why, oh why, had she not been wearing any clothing? At first, the woman was a runaway harem slave. But the idea never sat right with her. Dropiana had looked into her eyes and seen a strength like no other woman's, slave or otherwise. Another story formed in her mind, of a traveler gone to

bathe, only to be robbed of her possessions. But that story did not suit the wild woman either—could not explain the skill and grace with which she rode off, the way she turned on her knees to fire her bow. And the more Dropiana thought, the greater the strange woman loomed in her imagination, so that in her mind, dressing that coppery-kettle skin was like putting a stocking over a tree, a tunic on the sun, a hat on a lightning bolt. Finally, the unthinkable became the only explanation to satisfy Dropiana's aching curiosity. No man decided the nude equestrian's fate. She had been free to choose how to live.

One day, the compulsion to hide in the bathtub was simply no more, and washing with both hands became not only practical, but preferable. In time, Dropiana would learn to leave the chairs at the dinner table and sometimes forget to shut the drapes. But the euphoria of the nude equestrian's visit would not last. Aside from a few changes in her private rituals, life remained unchanged for Dropiana. She continued to wake before dawn, to feed her husband and his brother and the red-breasted fowl. She still pumped the well, led the aurochs to pasture, and harvested the crops at season. The horses still lured her with their lithe, wild

bodies. Bathing, dinner, and cleaning house continued, occasionally interrupted by her husband making use of her body. But deep within her, something was irrevocably transformed, for the chores now felt more tedious and her despair more unbearable.

And every night as she lay restless in bed, her thoughts turned to the same thing she dared never speak of, to the nude equestrian, wondering as to her whereabouts and adventures, and longing, ever longing to abandon all things and ride away.