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11May 2023

Moa of TokTok

My mind was petrified with fear the entire trip. I looked behind every bush and tree for bandits. The third week we were attacked by three boy bandits. If my dog, Bearchaser, had not been inside the camp, we would have all died. If the boys had found me, death could not have come soon enough. This was all my own doing. I wanted an adventure, so I volunteered. Chief Thoma needed an animal expert to accompany a mounted Tsitsistas military scout of an enemy country, the Southland. Good Chief God, what was I thinking?

Hairy Pig was our commander. He made jokes about everything. He claimed to have been unbeaten in battle. Two moonrises into the scout he has already killed two bandits. The other two men, Copper Snake and Four Son, have killed two bandits. The attack that night was quiet, Copper Snake was on guard duty and heard nothing. Bearchaser nudged my foot with her snout. She thought to me [three human male close]. I woke Hairy Pig with panic coursing through my mind. [Hairy Pig attack us now!] He told me verbally to wake Four Son and alert Copper Snake. Bearchaser pointed with her muzzle in three directions with head flips. Only I knew she did that, that night had no moon. I ordered her to bite the closest boy. All I heard was grunting and metal on metal, Hairy Pig stood between me and the bandits.

Next day, Hairy Pig called a halt to our morning skulk midday. He joked that a woman with a big dog will make us look normal. Right, three heavily armed huge brown and black men on enormous horses will be able to sneak anywhere we want in the land of the yellow hairs. We set up a day camp inside a copse of oaks under living brush. Three moonrises to go before we are home: maybe. Hairy Pig was “counting noses” and mapping roads in a notebook. The Tsitsistas Combined Council needed the information.

Hairy Pig and I shared a shelter. He was so nice to me. He often said that he needed my advice about the animals and was grateful that I could speak to them. I removed loads and saddles from the horses for our daily four-hour midday break while the men made camp. The horses and Bearchaser told me about water. We found a yellow-hair woman. Hairy Pig made her cook and clean up the daily camps.

The midday break after the first attack, I tapped Hairy Pig’s shoulder and pointed. [Water for horses.]

Hairy Pig was rummaging in the packhorse’s bags before we led the animals to water. He motioned for me to sit on a rock near the pond after I had arranged the animals. The horses and my pony were filling up with water. Carroteater was my pony, but I was now riding a trained warhorse we captured last night. I have demoted Carroteater to pack pony.

Hairy Pig knelt in front of me. His TokTok language has improved so I could understand. [Moa, you cannot walk in these boots you are wearing. You cannot run in slick wooden soles meant for a corral. You would have not gotten fifty meters last night before you tripped.] Hairy

Pig asked me to take off my lace-up work boots. He pulled out a pair of boots he took off a boy from his haversack while I was taking off my rabbit fur socks. He told me to put on the boots. I got them up to my knees, but they fell. He looked at them closely, they required laces in trousers. He pulled out trousers with eyelets around the knees, complete with belt, silver buckle, and dagger that belonged to the largest boy. He motioned for me to put the bandit's trousers on over mine. I shake my head, [no]. I look at him pleading. I speak to him like I would to the horses. [I do not want to look like a killer. I do not want those clothes.]

His eyes were blue and kind. He held my face with both of his white hands gently and leaned forward. In a low, even, voice, he said, [Moa, I need you. We are in a world of hurt right now. If you cannot run away with us, you will die, or worse. Put the damn trousers and boots on.] I felt my face blush with embarrassment at his caressing touch and caring words.

We were lying in his shelter with our heads together on his saddle after supper. I could not sleep I was so frightened. Hairy Pig's nose was in the hair on my neck. I felt safe with him breathing on my neck. He wrapped his arm around me tightly; I nestled my left hand inside his. I tried to relax with the feeling of his hand around mine.

He says, [Moa, stop moving and get some sleep. Your dog will watch the camp.]

I turned over; his left arm still hugged me. [Hairy Pig, do you think the trip will take three more moonrises?]

Hairy Pig closed his eyes. [Yes Moa. We must map the roads and guess population.]

I groaned with disappointment. [I wish us to hurry.]

Hairy Pig sighed. [Moa, convince the animals to get us home earlier and I will marry you.]

I placed my nose on his. [Do not tease!]

Hairy Pig laughed, [I am not teasing. I am thinking of our children's names.]

I felt my eyes open wide. [Children! I will not agree!]

Hairy Pig gave me a very chaste kiss on my willing mouth. [Good night, princess.]

When we arrived at the gates of North Village three moonrises later, I certainly looked like the battle-weary veteran I was. I rode Wanderer, a chestnut Hairy Pig took as what he cheerfully described as a "war trophy" from a bandit. I was also wearing old leather "war trophy armor" topped by a dented helmet I found in a forest where we fought bandits. My oak shield was taken by Four Son and Bearchaser from a raider they killed. It was missing a piece of its iron girdle where a battle ax had nearly taken off my right arm in an ambush south of Southmost Village. There was an arrow hole punched into its iron boss by an iron armor-piercing tip fired from the same wood. We did not see who fired it and do not know who ambushed us.

Our parade into Tsitsistas Land's white gates three moonrises later was magnificent. All six Tsitsistas Army Ceremonial Guards lined the path to the entrance in their white dress uniforms. Four Son and Bearchaser handed the precious notebook to the Dog Clan Headman. She announced, "It is all here!" to loud cheers.

Copper Snake looked for his wife in the Owl Ceremonial Guard. When he stood in his stirrups to look for her, she broke ranks with a shout. She jumped up behind her husband dressed in her white dress uniform. She looked at me smiling. She held up her immaculate ceremonial

short blade toward me in salute. A fellow woman soldier returning from battle deserved the gesture.

I held up my blood-stained dagger taken from the first boy bandits in return salute. I held the weapon inside an old, armored leather gloves taken from a farmer. My return salute to Copper Snake's wife was in concert with the return salute from my husband, Captain Hairy Pig.