

BOLTING THE FURIES

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FURIES

Helen H. Moore

SONG OF THE FURIES

According to Greek mythology, the Furies were ancient goddesses charged with the right to punish men for their sins. They were sometimes called the Fates or the Maenads.

ÆSCHYLUS, GREECE, 528–456 BCE

Up and lead the dance of Fate!
Lift the song that mortals hate!
Tell what rights are ours on earth,
Over all of human birth.
Swift of foot to avenge are we!
He whose hands are clean and pure,
Naught our wrath to dread hath he;
Calm his cloudless days endure.
But the man that seeks to hide
Like him his gore-bedewèd hands,
Witnesses to them that died,
The blood avengers at his side,
The Furies' troop forever stands.

O'er our victim come begin!
Come, the incantation sing,
Frantic all and maddening,
To the heart a brand of fire,

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Helen H. Moore, Las Vegas, NV, 89147

The Furies' hymn,
That which claims the senses dim,
Tuneless to the gentle lyre,
Withering the soul within.

The pride of all of human birth,
All glorious in the eye of day,
Dishonored slowly melts away,
Trod down and trampled to the earth,
Whene'er our dark-stoled troop advances,
Whene'er our feet lead on the dismal dances.

For light our footsteps are,
And perfect is our might,
Awful remembrances of guilt and crime,
Implacable to mortal prayer,
Far from the gods, unhonored, and heaven's light,
We hold our voiceless dwellings dread,
All unapproached by living or by dead.

What mortal feels not awe,
Nor trembles at our name,
Hearing our fate-appointed power sublime,
Fixed by the eternal law.
For old our office, and our fame,

Might never yet of its due honors fail,
Though 'neath the earth our realm in unsunned
regions pale.

I open my eyes. Above me are branches in leaf, above them blue sky, normal, cloudless, like nothing happened. Beneath me is earth, soggy and boggy. There is blood in my mouth, and I feel a tooth rolling around. I spit it out. What has happened here? My eyelids are heavy, and I close them and imagine for long moments that I feel the movement of the earth underneath me, turning from west to east. I think I may be dying; I think I may already be dead, and my mind closes in a kind of sleep.

I open my eyes, and now I see dark, and feel cold, and I shiver. I'm not dead, not yet. But it's night now, and I'm cold and scared. I'm never as brave as I make myself out to be in front of people. There are no people here. The leaves that I saw on the branches above me in daytime are making faint shivery sounds, as if they feel cold, and scared too. The humpbacked moon is pale and waning, but I see all around me fragments of broken glass shining and, in the near yonder, the buckled hulk of a bus, and memories begin crowding my mind. Words. *Glass. Crash. Fire. Scream.* And my name. *Senga.* Did someone scream for me, call my name? Anyway, that remembered name tells me I am still me, still Senga. And I begin to remember the last things that happened before I opened my eyes. And my head hurts. And I'm thirsty. I notice an electrical buzz and a hum. But no human voices.

I roll over, feel pain, feel my fingers stuck together with my own blood. Is it really my own? Because suddenly, in the weak moonlight, against the fat roots of a tree, I see my first corpse. The girl who was

playing guitar, singing about giving her love a cherry. Her busted guitar is still somehow around her neck, the strap strangling her. Her dead eyes are open. I see that. My dirty hands fly to my mouth. We were on a bus. Then I see the bus.

My eyes are adjusting to the dark.

I get up onto my knees, then onto my feet, and I begin to walk in the opposite direction from the guitar girl's body. I think I may be the only one left alive, because aside from that strange buzz, I hear only the shiver the leaves are making in the night air. No human sounds. As soon as I notice this, the more I look, the more bodies I see. I don't know all the names that go with them. But then I didn't know who all was on the bus. My knees and my breath are shaking. It's hard to balance on this broken earth. And I can't think why it's all broken. Uneven chunks of paved road sticking up, with clumps and layers of earth stuck to their undersides. Big gullies and ditches, and the roots of trees where their branches should be.

I look around. My glasses are gone, but everywhere now I can just make out bodies, bodies of women and girls, but no men. The driver was the only man. I don't see him. These bodies belong to the passengers. The driver is not in the crumpled bus, but the radio is still turned on, still blasting static as I half walk, half stumble along, passing it.

My head is clearing. I tell myself, as if it might be important, "It is 1972. My name is Agnes Craigie. My parents used to call me Senga. I live on Parsons Boulevard, Jamaica, New York. I'm a student..."

I keep walking, and now I think about my brother and my sister, and how worried they'll be when they hear our bus crashed, and that thought starts me crying. They must be frantic. I wonder how long I was out. I want to get back home. I can tell where the east is, and I

know I live that way. That way the sky is violet. Growing less black, anyway. And home is east, east of here, east of the big woods of Forest Park. If I can get out of the woods, I can find the Interboro Parkway, and then I can walk to the subway, take the E or the F back home, and never even think about going on a protest march again.

"My name is Agnes Craigie. I'm nineteen. I'm a freshman at Queens College. I'm an English major."

I remember the bus, and I remember the sign I was supposed to carry—"Equal rights for women, now!" and a closed fist inside the circle of the sign for female. That was my sign. Some women had signs that said "Death Penalty for Rapists." I keep trudging, stumbling forward.

Now I'm seeing the same ditches and gullies and bodies and tree roots and the damp ditch where I woke up, and I realize that I've stumbled and crawled in a big circle. Something stinks, and flies are buzzing. I'm dizzy. The sky is getting lighter, but I'm falling into the dark.

And then, after hours or it might be days, someone is shaking me. She's shouting.

"Senga! Open your eyes!" And I do.

It's the girl I call Buffy, though that's not her name. "Get up, Senga!"

She's been crying, and she looks like hell, even more like a water buffalo than ever, with dirt streaked all down her face, and I obey as best I can, but her shaking is making everything worse. Her voice is loud, and she's hurting me. She's got hands like a farmer, huge hands.

"Is everyone else dead?" she's asking.

I don't know, and I try to tell her so, but no sound will come.

“Here,” she says, and puts the lid of a thermos to my mouth. It had Kool-Aid inside it, and I choke on the sweetness, but it helps. “Finish it,” she says. “I got more.”

“What happened? Where are we?”

“I don’t know. Still in Queens, I think. We just got onto the Interboro when something hit us. I *think* something hit us.” Buffy helps me stand up. “Your head is all bloody.”

She puts her arm around me and drapes my arm around her shoulder and, still running at the mouth, walks me out of the ditch.

ONE

When the world came to, it came not to its senses but to its madness. Those who were left alive learned what their true needs were, which was almost as important as learning how to get them met.

Oxygen, of course, then water, then food. Although no one knew it for some time, the rupture had been total, worldwide. That dawned on people gradually. All over the world, those left alive were at the mercy of place and had to get their needs met from what was around them. Eventually, life resumed its potent, inexorable pulse.

Her name was Senga, and she was working this morning, foraging, looking for the small and delicate strawberries that grew without tending.

She lived with some others in what had been, back when such descriptions had meaning, the largest contiguous oak forest in North America. It had gotten larger since it was so described, and now crawled over the places where the grand, transformational roads, built to endure by men, had broken when the earth underneath them was overturned and upthrust.

The trees had begun to reclaim their dominion quickly, growing down into the shallow valley toward Jamaica Bay, encroaching into the neighborhoods that had been Woodhaven, East New York, and Cypress Hills. They grew an isthmus joining what had been Greenwood Cemetery with what had been the northwestern fringe of Prospect Park. Prospect Park itself they connected with the other old cemeteries—connecting them to the north-looking swamp that had been Flushing Meadows. The trees took back what had been theirs, and in the taking, they also gave not merely oxygen, but living room, raw materials, and a second chance for those who, like Senga, had been left alive under their branches.

Senga had known this place time out of mind; her parents had brought her here to ride the carousel, and she and her working-class family had attended concerts at the bandshell on national holidays, John Philip Sousa blasting through loudspeakers. Her father had played golf with secondhand clubs at the patchy public golf course. A carousel, a playground, the golf course, and even a stable with horses people could pay to ride, ten dollars an hour. When Senga reached her teens, when men and boys had been plentiful and free, she'd had a couple of each in this forest, right here, close to where she and the others of her group now rooted and gathered, built and destroyed, changed little and grew less. "I breathe in; I breathe out. I keep on keeping on," she told herself. It was true. Senga went on. That was one of her gifts.

She straightened up; looked around, sniffed the air. It amazed her that the forest air still smelled green and alive and keen to her after so many years. It never grew stale to her, in any sense of the word. *Sixteen years*, she thought. There was life in the forest, of course, as there was in the whole earth. There had been life in the darkness of the forest that long-ago night—there had been stables

nearby then, and the horses gave off a rich, pungent smell that she'd known was warm hay and the smell of live things. Because it was the boy's first time, too, and he was mindful of all the stories that were told in those days to keep the young ones off each other (and out of places like this), he took her deep into the darkest part of the forest he could bear to be in himself without being unmanned entirely. He took her, and she took him.

She hadn't gotten pregnant that time, so they went again and again, sometimes returning to the stable hill, sometimes to places more or less exposed. Senga sighed in the now and wondered, *Was I a bad girl, or a shallow girl, or just a girl, and a young one at that, to drop him so quickly? I thought I'd have all the time in the world to make it up to him, to have all the men I wanted. Well, I certainly got the time.*

She laughed silently at her own joke, but her face creased and cracked into a thousand sunburned wrinkles. Her strong white teeth were healthy in her pink gums, and her hair was a rich auburn-gold. She knew she'd been beautiful.

She had been beautiful, and a little vain about it too, when "It" had happened, whatever "It" was.

While she worked, she asked the same series of questions she'd been asking herself for the past fourteen years or so, the ones that started with *What was I thinking?* and rambled around *Was I crazy?*, on bad days veering too close to *What if they find out?* or even *What if they already know?* She was sure there was still a world outside the forest. That was the world she belonged in, belonged to. She would find a way to get there again someday. With Pink, or without, if she had to.

It was quiet in the forest this morning. Only birdsong. Shielding her eyes with one freckled hand, she whisper-shouted, "Pink!"

There was a movement in the woods off to her right, so deft and delicate it could only have been Pink. Only partially satisfied that the girl was safely hidden, Senga signaled her to stay that way and went to see what was being so unnaturally quiet that it was quite as much of a disturbance as a noise. *I don't care how much she begs, it's not worth the risk to bring her out here like this! It's not worth what it does to my nerves.* She knew she was in for it if the Abbess found out what she'd done. There was no rehabilitation. Only punishment, then death.

Senga avoided the Abbess and her women as much as she knew how. She brought them supplies they needed from what she'd collected, primarily to make herself useful and show some of the goodwill she did not feel. She had secondary reasons as well. She kept track of the women's numbers and, as far as she could, of their names. Of the followers the Abbess controlled, one or two had vanished over the years. Senga was certain they hadn't escaped, but she could never be sure that the Abbess wasn't responsible. She noticed that it was the followers on the fringe who disappeared, the most useless, the least fervent.

Senga believed that her life and, in a different way, Pink's depended on Pink's ability to hide and stay hidden. For fourteen years Senga had hidden her, and for fourteen years Pink had pressed upon Senga's thoughts. *I guess this is motherhood,* Senga thought. *I thought it would be different. I thought I'd be older, for one thing.*

Senga knew she had made life worse for herself by what she had done. She also knew she had given Pink a miserable, crabbed existence as well. Senga felt guilty for perverting the natural course of Pink's life. To compensate, she spoiled her, allowing Pink to wheedle her into whatever treats and privileges she could, like this morning's excursion. *I'm lucky the kid obeys rules better than I do.*

Senga knew the rules of the Forest Women; she'd been there the night they were written. And she had disobeyed. More than that, she knew what the other women did to punish disobedience. She had kept a child of her own, against the rules of the Abbess and the Forest Women. She had gotten away with it this long, against all odds. *How much longer?* she asked herself. The answer was always the same: *Not much. Will I be ready? Will she?*

TWO

She was named Pink because she was pink, especially when Senga had first seen her. Now her pale pink skin was spangled with gold freckles, like constellations of stars. Her limbs were strong and rounded, as was her torso, with its short waist and broad shoulders, the whole crowned with a blazing, copper-colored mass of unruly curls that had never been cut; an untidy areola of fire and snap from the midst of which her face, which could be sly or sweet, poked its way out. Pink.

She had come to Senga as a chick, an unwanted thing, from her own mother, who had been a younger-than-her-years girl full of superstitions and other fears and, Senga had thought, not quite right in the head. That had been more than ten years ago, closer to fifteen. Pink was now close to the age Senga had been when the Forest Time began.

Pink had a blemish. When her eyes began to lose their universal, newborn cloudiness and their own true color emerged, her young mother noticed the defect, and it terrified her. In her infant's eyes, which were now gray, now green, there was a streak or a

stripe that was distinctly not green. It was golden brown, blazing out from the black sun of her pupil like a flare, or maybe a freckle.

The young mother's name had been Maureen, Senga thought she remembered. "It's not right," Maureen had said, worriedly pointing out the blemished eye to Senga, who'd brushed the young mother's dirty finger away from the infant's face. Senga glared at the young woman as if in angry amazement that something so stupid could live. Maureen had of course had a mother of her own in the Time Before, and how Maureen had gotten on the protest bus Senga couldn't imagine, but get on it she had, and here she was.

By that time in the forest, some rules had been established by the survivors. On the night Senga had allowed Maureen to stay in her shelter and labor, she broke many of them. She wasn't thinking about what would happen if the Abbess found out. And when, afterwards, she decided to keep Pink's existence a secret, she knew in her innermost self the entire situation would come to no good. But she did it anyway. And she couldn't really have said why. Except that she had to.

Senga had delivered Pink. Maureen had been young and, although dimwitted, well formed, a girl of sixteen or so with almost fully filled-out hips, so in truth, Pink almost delivered herself. Senga had built up the fire—her quarters at that time were deep in the dark part of the forest, and night was falling. The darkness would have to serve as a screen.

So Maureen, Pink's mother and eventual abandoner, spent her laboring hours and then her postpartum days and nights in Senga's small stronghold, until the baby, whom she had not yet bothered to name, had looked up at her mother one evening as she was feeding, and in her eye was the strange mark. Maureen yelped and jumped and pulled back so quickly her nipple popped

out of Pink's toothless mouth with a sound like a sodden cork, and a spray of milk spurted five feet in the air. Senga took the baby, gave the distraught young woman some tea to help her sleep, and shook her head. She made shushing noises and put a cool cloth on the young mother's head, and held her hand until she slept, all the while cuddling the baby Pink in her lap.

Poor dope, she thought, of Maureen. *Poor dopey girl*. Senga drank the rest of the tea herself and slept soundly too. The next morning, Maureen, the young mother, was gone, and the oddly, perfectly imperfect baby remained with Senga. *You are Pink*, Senga had thought, *and that's as good a name as any*.

In the beginning, then, from her cache of dented cans and not too badly broken boxes, Senga would make a kind of formula for the newborn to drink, mixing sweet, tinned milk with water from the bubbling stream that was the reason she had built her shelter where she had. Of course she had no bottle, and no rubber nipples, so she took a clean cloth and soaked it in the heated mixture, held it against the baby's lips, and dripped the formula into the baby's mouth until it learned to suck the fluid out of the cloth. And so she kept her foster daughter alive.

But something was wrong in the here and now. Senga waved stealthily to catch Pink's attention, and signaled her to get down, fast. Pink caught Senga's signal and nodded, then lowered herself—swiftly and silently—into the mossy ground, until the tall ferns that had bent to let her lie down sprang back up and covered her, red hair and all. Senga watched the ferns bounce and hoped it would seem to any observers that a rabbit had jumped there and caused them to move. She stood still, or as still as she could with her heart leaping out of her chest, and waited. Whatever it was that was wrong moved closer. Senga waited and watched.

Stillness was the main element of Senga's camouflage—her stillness, her equanimity, and her coloring, which was like the forest itself. Her tawny skin had faded to the color of her present surroundings, to pale gold and pale brown, and her clothing, when she wore any, was some subtle, variegated leaf color. She was wearing soft and ragged green clothing today and had a brown burlap bag over her chest for carrying things. Senga knew the secret of being unseen when it suited her, and of being noticed when it did not. She waited.

The woods that had swallowed up most of the land between Brooklyn and Jamaica Bay kissed the eastern shoulder of what had long ago been called the Harbor Hills moraine, named longer ago than even Senga could remember. Where she and Pink had been scavenging that morning, the forest floor undulated, its topography alternating between moist fossae and bulbous, moss-covered hillocks. There were low hills and rock outcrops beyond, and everywhere, trees. Honeysuckle and morning glory snaked their way up dead trunks. Bees drifted lazily in the mote-filled sunshine, and an insect of some kind softly droned.

Suddenly the silence became less silent. Whatever was coming that had caused the forest to go silent was itself now making a racket, and was evidently unafraid of being heard, but because of the way the path wound around Kettledrum Hill, whatever it was couldn't yet be seen. Senga sniffed and moved out onto the path herself, but she did not signal Pink to emerge from her hiding place under the ferns. She could not do that. Ever.

Pink was watching Senga, though, listening to the rackety whatever-it-was, and feeling the leaf-filtered sunlight on her back, smelling the living earth under her hands. She smiled. *I'd like to eat this earth*, she thought. It was dark and dense and smelled

like the living thing it was. She dug in with her fingers, breaking through the velvet layer of moss until her fingers encountered the dark, damp dirt and her nose caught the deep, inviting aroma of earth, which she knew well and loved. Removing her fingers one by one from the soil, she popped each one into her mouth to lick off its loamy residue of grit. If Senga had seen her, she would have struck the hand out of her mouth and wrinkled her nose, and muttered something about "pica" and "germs" and "vitamin deficiencies," and Pink would have rolled her eyes. But Senga was very deliberately not looking at Pink.

Peering harder through the leaves at Senga, finger in her mouth, Pink shrugged inwardly. She thought Senga worried too much. *If there was really something wrong, we wouldn't know it until it was on us. She told me that herself, a million times.* Pink smiled to herself.

As Pink watched Senga, and Senga watched the road where it curved around Kettledrum Hill, the source of the noise came into view. Senga snorted and dug a balled fist into her hip, signaling Pink to remain hidden. Resolutely, she turned her face away from the spot where Pink had vanished under the ferns and shook her head. Maenads. Dangerous.

The road as it came around Kettledrum Hill was narrow, but wide enough for the girls, who only ever walked two abreast anyway. They were doing so now, a cadet in the lead beating time on an old tub covered with stretched oilcloth, banging out the cadence with a heavy spoon someone had found and transformed into a drumstick. Pink and Senga called them "Girl Scouts" as a mockery, but that was only a joke between the two of them. To themselves and their leader, the girls were Maenads, the ragtag members of a death-dealing cult. They were followers of the second-oldest of the women whose woods these were. Her name was Alma, and the

Maenads were her creation. Whenever Senga encountered them, she had no doubt she'd done right to keep Pink out of Alma's grasp.

For Pink was her foster daughter, her companion, her surrogate, her prisoner, her hope, her madness, her folly, her reason, her despair, her hate, and her love. There were times when Senga realized these truths. And other times when she denied them. But Senga secretly exulted in the knowledge that she had something the Abbess and her women didn't know about.

Alma came into view around the base of the hill now, and when she stopped without a word, so did her little troop. She was a tallish young woman, and rather flattish too. Her square hips and shoulders and face were all angles, no curves. Even her hair was flat and hung down in mouse-brown strips as far as her waist. She sighted Senga and called to her. Senga growled under her breath. The Maenads, in their grass-stained white shifts, stood at something like parade rest. A few of them swatted at the clouds of midges that threatened to batten on them whenever they stood still.

"There you are," Alma cried, assuming a smile that did not quite reach her eyes as, arms outstretched, she approached Senga, who stood her ground and did not smile back.

"Here I am," Senga called out as Alma approached, and suffered herself to be embraced without bending or returning the gesture.

"I heard voices," said Alma, still holding Senga by the shoulders, still smiling her flat, shark-eyed smile.

"Well, in that case, you should see a doctor. Oh, I forgot. There are no doctors," said Senga, gently but decisively removing Alma's hands from her. She turned as if to continue on her way, opposite the direction where she knew Pink was hidden. Senga adjusted the

gathering bag hanging from her shoulder. "Seriously," she called over that shoulder at Alma, twirling her finger next to her ear.

"Very funny. I never noticed before; were you always this funny?" Alma asked. But the words fell against Senga's back, and Senga imagined those words dropping into the grass at her feet as she walked away. *Slowly*, Senga told herself, *and breathe. Do not let her see how frightened you are of your own anger at this moment... and do not look toward Pink...*

A scream from the Maenads stopped both of the women from whatever else they would have said or done next—froze them, in fact.

It came from a wild-haired Maenad much older than the others and named Yuki-Kai, twenty yards back along the path, near the foot of the rock called Kettledrum Hill. She was balanced on a small stump, arms held high, stretching a thin, brown snake between her hands. Her scream was echoed by another, by—*not Pink, not Pink, not Pink*—one of Alma's own girls, themselves all just a little afraid of the wild Yuki-Kai at the best of times. She whipped the snake through the air and dashed it against the rock she stood on. After her moment of panic subsided, Senga realized the screamer was Mia, a tiny, malnourished six-year-old who would have been completely unremarkable except for her ratlike face and earsplitting shriek.

For her part, Yuki-Kai was grinning her gap-toothed grin and panting. She slipped the dead snake into her gathering bag and jumped off the stump onto the path before crashing away through the heavy underbrush.

"Yuki," called Alma.

"Yuki-Kai," screamed the rest of Alma's girls. But Yuki-Kai was quick and strong and ungovernable.

Alma shrugged, an “it’s not important” gesture for Senga to see (although Senga was sure she was inwardly seething) and walked with a controlled stride back up the path to gather her girls. *She’d rather I hadn’t seen that display*, thought Senga.

Senga shrugged, too, but she kept her eyes trained on puny Mia, whose gaze lingered too long at the spot where Pink had been. *She couldn’t know, could she?*

Senga stood still and watched, arms akimbo, and saw Mia turn her little rodent face from the spot where Pink had been hiding to glare boldly up at her. Senga challenged the child’s gaze with a stare of her own. Mia broke first before turning to run after the pack. Senga watched her pull on Alma’s sleeve, as children always do when they want to tell a secret. But Alma, impatient to catch Yuki-Kai, batted Mia away with the back of her hand.

THREE

Alma and the Maenads pounded frantically up the path along which wild Yuki-Kai had disappeared. They had to catch her. Not that they were afraid she would run out of the forest; the forest was altogether too big and alive for that to happen easily. It wasn’t that there was no way out of the forest, either; there were ways, of course. But most of them led into the tunnels that had carried trains along the underground tracks, many came to dead ends, and all of them were dangerous, especially the ones Senga had worked on before she became altogether too frightened by the dark to go on.

There were paths, too, that led west, but none of the women had gone that way for many years; the miles of old burial grounds that lay there had not yet stopped giving up their dead, especially after each year’s rainy season. No, they had to catch Yuki-Kai because they couldn’t let her out of their sight, not once it got dark, anyway. Yuki was a prankster and a menace. She had to be caught before dark, or no one in their parts of the forest would be able to sleep.

Yuki-Kai had been born in the forest. Her mother, like Pink's, had been pregnant when "It" had happened, very newly pregnant when she'd got on the bus that day, but unlike Maureen, Yuki-Kai's mother had stuck to her cohort. Unlike Pink's mother, who had fled the group and found her way to Senga the night Pink was born, Yuki-Kai's mother had lived where she now worked with Buffy on the farm. She had no kind of special relationship with her daughter—why should she have had? Yuki's crash-traumatized mother had lost interest in her daughter even before she'd been born. Afterward, the rest of the women took turns caring for the child, whom they named after a cartoon character they decided she resembled. They gave her to her mother when it was time to feed, then passed her from hand to hand among themselves, satisfying that seemingly universal female urge to cuddle small creatures. The Abbess watched but didn't take part. Her interests were elsewhere.

But the Abbess would remember how easily the women cared for the child, as if she were their own. It was the Abbess's gift to have a good memory, and to index within it particular memories according to their usefulness.

In the first few years after It, while the forests were still knitting themselves together and the women still arguing about what had happened to them—in those days there had been about thirty women and girls in the forest. Of course, at first they didn't know it was only them, but fifty or so had been on the bus, and thirty, including the driver, had survived, at least for a while. If they had known what was about to happen to them, perhaps they would have paid better attention, but there was no way they could have known. Around the world, in fact, no one knew. And no one knew if there were survivors other than themselves.

Later, when it seemed to the women that the breaking of the world had come to a full stop, and no one was coming to their rescue, and they were the only ones left, one or two killed themselves in panic and pain and despair. The others found themselves marooned in a creeping green jungle that seemed to flow as it grew around them, eating up ruins and rubble, covering whatever buildings had been in the forest with a kind of kudzu in a day, and re-creating itself to have dominion over everything on two legs by the time the first year had come full circle.

By that time, as they always do, some leaders had emerged. Some leaders, some followers, and some fools. The driver died suddenly (no one knew how for sure; he had seemed to be getting better), but not without making his contribution to the ongoing survival of the group.

Senga, Buffy, and Alma had been on the bus, of course, along with some actual Girl Scouts, a troop who had planned to attend the Washington demonstration in order to earn something that had been called a merit badge. The scouts' caretaker, a nerve-thinned young matron from Flushing whose daughter had just joined the troop, had been one of the first to die following the accident. Alma had assumed responsibility for them after that; she had been a schoolteacher, she said, and it seemed fitting. And that was the start of the Maenads. The Abbess had been there too. Her name had been Abigail Barron. She lost her eyebrows in the fire after the crash, and they never grew back.

There had also been five or so nuns, female religious from South America, followers of the new "liberation theology." Their home countries had been savaged by colonialism, civil war, and rape. Somehow they had been assigned to the same bus as the

young U.S. American protesters by the march's organizers. Of course, none of them ever got there.

In the forest their numbers dwindled, as they would never take part in the Snatch, and as one year turned into two, and then three, they kept more and more to themselves. The Abbess's women could sometimes hear their music floating through the woods, that was all. Predictably, the Maenads called that part of the forest "South America."

That's where Yuki-Kai seemed to be headed, with the rest of the Maenads and Alma in hot pursuit. Wordlessly, Senga made the hand signal meant to tell Pink "meet me at home," but she needn't have bothered. At the first sight of Alma and her group, Pink had slunk away. Senga would have to make her way home slowly, carefully, in case she was being watched. But Pink would take another quicker, secret way. She planned to get there first.

As for Alma, as soon as Senga was out of her sight, she angled her skinny haunches onto the nearest, flattest rock and loosened the neck of her gown. She panted, sighed, and rested her big, flat hands, one on each of her knees, and looked around for Mia, whose canteen she grabbed to refresh herself. The day was turning hot.

The rest of the Maenads came to a stop, too, and a couple of them swatted the horseflies that were still abundant at this spot near the stables, although most of the horses were long gone. "Well, girls," Alma gasped, when she got her breath, "it's about time we stopped for class anyway." A groan went up.

"No arguing. Today you'll be learning about the Snatch," Alma said. Clearly, she thought she was holding out a treat to the unruly children, one they could earn by obedience, like dogs. A bigger groan, which more of the girls joined in, went up, but Alma ignored it. Using the ubiquitous Mia now as a rather spindly crutch, Alma

tossed her gathering bag to one of the older girls and lugged her spiderly frame off the rock. "Move it," she muttered, and move it they did, back toward the school bus that had been chopped and changed into a classroom-cum-dormitory. She would send a party out to look for Yuki once she'd had a chance to rest.

No sense overdoing it.



There were things that neither Alma nor Senga knew—about Pink, about Yuki-Kai, or about any of the Maenads. That's the way it always is with young women. They have secrets.

For instance, Senga didn't know that Pink was well aware of the boxes and crates of things Senga had found that were too dangerous to leave lying around, and too difficult to destroy. Senga didn't know that Yuki-Kai knew about Pink, or that Pink was curious about the bayonet and the hand grenades, although not what they were called, or what they could do. She'd found the box that contained them years ago, one day when Senga had gone to the old store at the edge of the woods; that trip could always be counted on to take a long time, sunup to sundown at least. Lots of time for snooping.

Pink had looked into the box and had known not to ask Senga about it; she just knew she was not supposed to know. Of course, there are things that older women always know too, things that the younger women haven't even imagined yet, but the young will never listen. That's another story.

Senga had tried for the life of her to keep the secret of Pink, but as Pink herself was right now telling Yuki-Kai, "You can't keep a whole person a secret! You found me... *anyone* could."

Thinking of that triumphant day her suspicions had been proved right and she had discovered Pink where Senga'd imagined she'd so cleverly hidden her, Yuki-Kai shook her head and smiled sadly. "No," she said, brushing a stray eyelash from Pink's cheek. "Not anyone. Senga's not as smart as she thinks. I knew she was hiding something. I just didn't know it was you. I found you because I was looking. No one else can look the way I can." The gaze she turned on Pink then was pure sugared love, but Pink didn't know that. Pink hadn't enough curiosity to find out much more for herself. She accepted Yuki's adoration as she had accepted Senga's care, the way any child accepts its mother's care: it was the way things were. She deserved it.

Yuki-Kai was making love to Pink, as she had spied the older women doing and as came naturally to her. The tribadism of the others was, in the main, situational, like that of sex-segregated and sex-starved prisoners, or people in jail, or sailors of old times out at sea. But Yuki-Kai's sexuality was real, and true. The needle on the compass of her desire would always find its true north in the arms of another woman; it was her tragedy that her first love was with Pink, whose wan responses to her caresses sometimes stung Yuki-Kai with their passive, pallid indifference. Pink's tragedy, if it could be called that, was that she was what was called a "man's woman" in a world without men.

Of course, there *were* men, they existed, if not in the cosmology of the woods. Outside the woods, in the Big World, which the older women sometimes called the World Before "It," pockets and remnants of men (and women) existed. Locked into itself as the forest was, nevertheless it seemed at times that the living woods themselves allowed these outsiders in. In recent years, though, fewer and fewer had made their way into the forest, and the ones that did

were quickly dispatched. But as superiors, equals, abusers, partners, fathers, brothers, lovers, or even and especially as friends—no. Men in those forms and roles did not exist for the women in the woods.

Pink and Yuki-Kai were in the fire relay station now, in Pink's quarters. In the initial cataclysm, the building had dug itself into the slope of a quake-formed hillside, crookedly burying itself up to and almost over the second-story windowsills in a mound of earth. When Senga had discovered the building some years after that, she had thought Pink less likely to be exposed there, so she and Pink moved in.

Out of the things Senga scavenged, Pink had selected for herself enough pillows, curtains, blankets, and even mattresses to make a comfortable nest out of that white-tiled kitchen that had served her as a nursery, a playroom, and a classroom but that was now more and more a prison cell. Pink wanted freedom, and she did not fully believe Senga's warnings about the others, although even Yuki told her they were true. It seemed to Pink she was less free, not more, as time passed, and it felt wrong.

As a small child, Pink had been strapped to Senga's back as they delved into the loamy blackness of the tunnels near the relay station as Senga had explored and dug. Pink had been covered with clumped soil during cave-ins, and had held the foul-smelling, fast-burning fat-candles in shaking, dimpled child-hands while Senga had excavated and set her traps.

Senga had one fear: the dark. It dated back to she-didn't-know-when, but she had never been able to shake it off. Somehow to have the child Pink with her in the somehow crash-formed tunnels gave Senga some courage, as if having to care for a child took away her own fear of what might be alive in the smothering, menacing dark. But that fear never left her entirely, and lately it had prevented her

from digging much at all. For one thing, her supply of candles was never enough—she would try to make them last by crawling down the tunnel to the digging face without lighting one, but once she was any distance from the tunnel mouth, the pale daylight faded and the blackness grew deeper, thwarting her before she could begin to make much headway in the digging. In the past few years, there had been months and months when Senga didn't dig at all, though if she had dug, and if the forest had let her, she'd have learned she was close to achieving her goal: escape from the Abbess, reunion with the world, freedom for herself and for Pink.

Once Pink had grown old enough, when Senga did dig, Pink—no longer a child strapped to Senga's back, but tethered to her by the same powerful, contagious fear—had shored up the tunnel walls and roof with wood and tile and metal stripped from the relay station, or had humped the baskets filled with black earth back through the tunnel and tipped them outside under cover of night, beside the relay station's back entrance, where Senga's garden grew, more lush and productive than any of the others' gardens. Senga and Pink, gaffer and laborer.

But Pink was quickly becoming a woman, and she wanted freedom—now, not in the “someday soon” that Senga went rabbiting on about. The stolen outings, like this morning's, were not enough, although they were bought with endless wheedling until Senga gave in, and usually ended, as this morning's had, in near disaster.

“She's not as clever as she thinks, but she's right about some things,” Yuki-Kai was saying as she held one of Pink's outstretched arms in her hand, tracing endless figure eights with exquisite delicacy on the upturned underside of Pink's tender forearm. Pink's

lips were set, as much to express displeasure with what Yuki-Kai was saying as to keep from giggling—she was ticklish.

The two girls were playing a game Pink had long played with Senga, which they called the “pain game.” There had been times that Pink's ability to endure in silence the kind of pain so slight it could not be borne, like an itch, had saved her from being discovered.

She was not in pain now, though. She was merely bored. She pulled her arm away from Yuki-Kai and flopped onto her stomach, pouting. “Really...” She turned over and propped herself up on one elbow, shaking a russet curl out of her eyes and breaking Yuki-Kai's heart with her careless beauty. “What would happen if they found out? What could they do?”

Only Yuki-Kai's feeling for Pink, a feeling she couldn't surrender made her answer tenderly for what must have been the hundredth time, “First of all, they'd probably kill Senga. The Abbess hates her. Then they would make you ride in the next Snatch. Then if you didn't get pregnant, they would make you ride again. Maybe you'd have to ride somebody nobody else wanted.”

Pink's bud of a nose crinkled with distaste, but she shrugged and pouted, “So what?”

Now it was Yuki's turn to flop onto her stomach and laugh. “So they're disgusting, that's what. They're filthy. They stink. They hurt you too. I don't know why the old ones make us do it—why they need to, I mean. You'd think there would be some other way, but they say that's where *they* came from, so it's how the Goddess wants it, but I think that's bull. I don't even think there is a Goddess. Anyway, you have to go into the cages and pick one, and all the women get to watch. Maybe that's why Senga hides you here. Maybe she doesn't want you to have to go through all that.”

Pink was silent now, imagining the cages she'd never seen, the bonfires she'd only heard of, the faces of the girls and the other women, and herself among it all, riding better than anyone else ever had, face flushed in the firelight, triumphant. A flicker of anger rocked through her belly. What right had Senga to decide she couldn't? She would ride in the Snatch if she wanted! The thought pricked her, and a kind of hunger began to tighten like a wire inside her, but a hunger for something as yet unknown to her, something that was not Yuki-Kai. Yuki-Kai, impatient now, rolled toward Pink, anger competing with her lust. She grabbed Pink by the ankle and turned her over.

"Anyway, how do you know all this?" Pink asked.

The strange hunger that was more than hunger vanished, and Pink's eyes narrowed. She propped herself on both elbows, looking down between her legs at Yuki-Kai, who was pulling herself up the length of Pink's body.

"Everybody knows," Yuki asserted. "When you start to bleed, they tell you all about it—Alma does—but by that time, you know already from the other girls. They all talk about it, like I'm talking to you. Anyway, they don't do it in secret. The whole stupid thing's right out in front of the carousel." She began to stroke Pink's leg. Pink was not ready to give Yuki what she wanted yet. Pink wanted to hear it all, the whole familiar story. But Yuki was ready to go.

"You're exaggerating," Pink protested, but she allowed Yuki's hands to resume their transit of her body from ankle to thigh, belly to breast. Yuki was dreamy eyed; she was past becoming excited; she was young and she was *there*. Her breathing was shallow and her heartbeat hard. Between her legs she could feel her pulse, faster and harder, insisting. She pulled herself on top of the languid Pink, who, as she ever had, allowed herself to be mounted. The girls stared

at each other across the L-shaped space made by their bodies as Yuki straddled Pink and began to grind her hips against her. "You ride them like I'm riding you right now," she hissed.

Pink, supine, was indifferent to Yuki's love and to her sex, too, and she wondered what Yuki was feeling that she was not, what Yuki was seeing with her eyes half shut, and what she was doing that made the muscles of her thighs tighten around Pink's thighs. Yuki was orgasming against Pink, grinding herself against the girl underneath her until another girl would have cried out, but not Pink, although her sparsely furred, plump little mound was being bruised by Yuki's furious orgasm. She felt a momentary tingling that went nowhere, and then nothing.

"Get off me," Pink grunted, as Yuki finished. "It doesn't sound so bad," she threw in for good measure.

Angry, humiliated, Yuki bounced off Pink, reached down, and punched her balled hand between Pink's thighs, her still small and childlike hand reaching just inside Pink's body, her untrimmed nails tearing at the dry membranes and unawakened flesh. Pink screamed then.

"It *is* bad," Yuki hissed. "They get inside you and fill you up with their disgusting ... slime!" Yuki rolled off as the shocked and angry, bleeding object of her love curled around itself and moaned. "That's what they do that's so bad."

Yuki ran away then, and if she cried, no one saw her.

FOUR

Senga took what she hoped was her own, unsuspected way back to the fire relay station. She had watched Alma's spindly form scuttle off back to the bus, and she was ignorant of Yuki and Pink's deception. In her ignorance she believed the danger to Pink and herself was in being observed—she thought stealth was needed, and a seeming calm, so she pretended to a purposelessness she did not feel as she forced herself to saunter, to fool any observers, she hoped.

The way she took was weed choked, and what slender pathways were there were lined with sticky, spiky vines that snapped back when pushed, and stung where they caught flesh. Senga had encouraged them to grow, and they had until now served their intended purpose—to block passage. Senga had planted them, and knew the secret way through them. But now they worked too well, and Senga cursed Mia, and Alma.

The original proximity of the building called the fire relay station to the forest had not been in any way a response to a real or perceived fire danger from the forest itself. The forest was lush, green, and wet, and not in any particular danger of catching fire. But New York City had teemed with people during the days when

the station had been built. It had teemed with people and roadways and structures old and new. Some buildings were more than a hundred years old and made of wood, some were newer and made of brick, but all of them would burn.

There had been underground trains then that skirted or bisected the forest, (although only the tunnels were left now), and trains that rode tracks in the air—elevated trains, they had been called. There had been two terminals—airports—filled with planes that rode the sky, two racetracks where men whipped horses to make them run so other men could wager on them, hundreds of underground tanks of gasoline; restaurants, taverns, and inns, theaters and markets for buying and selling, oil-storage tanks, army navy stores and junk shops, and refineries and generating stations, too; rubbish dumps, electric distribution wires, and telephone wires, and factories, and carelessness, grudges, and greed; all the things that make human society fire prone.

The fire relay station was a reminder that there had been a whole world of people who could endanger as well as save each other. The station was a remnant of that world's old technology as well, of people who had worked as dispatchers, shouting into telephones, pulling switches and maintaining call boxes, and it had been built to last. And last it had. But it was no longer needed to help extinguish fires.

There had been a suggestion among the women in the very beginning to torch the forest, the better to see where they were. It was unclear who had made the suggestion, but it had the flavor of something Buffy would propose. To end the debate, the Abbess said something about “not throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” and the others had agreed with her; the forest would not be burned.

They had also agreed that if they were to survive, they'd need to keep an eye out for at least two things: Buffy, and fires.

Much later, long, long after they had divided the food they had brought from the bus, and spread out and started living at some distance from each other, Senga had found and claimed the old fire relay station for herself. She tended the spiky, clinging thorn bushes that grew around it, encouraging them to grow. Any ivy vines she found she'd transplanted close by the station as well, to hide it. It was a place where it would be easy, she thought, to keep secrets. And in a way, she had been correct.

She could see the back part of the relay station now, when she heard a thing she had never heard before; a thing, however, that she knew at once. It was Pink's voice, and she was screaming. Senga no longer cared who might be spying—concealment was useless now. She began to run.

FIVE

“You can’t believe a word Senga says.” Alma rapped the palm of one hand with the ruler she held in the other, dropping her words carefully into the cadence kept by her feet as she paced around the circle of Maenads. These sat with their legs akimbo, knees above their shoulders, and bits of mirrors in their hands angled to provide them an instructive view of what, in Alma and Senga’s time, had been called “private” parts.

Alma had put on a spongy pair of footwear she’d fashioned from the now-ancient bus tires. BF Goodrich sandals, she had heard them called in the Time Before. Their soles made noises as if they were dryly kissing and unkissing the worn-out linoleum floor of the bus, or as if Alma was trying to stifle a fart. The girls suppressed laughter both at the sounds and at the subject of the lesson.

What she had said to the Maenads was not simply an exaggeration born of dislike; it was true, Alma told herself. Senga *was* dishonest. Well, maybe it wasn’t quite dishonesty as much as it was secrecy, and lying by omission, *a lack of reliability*. Alma, who prided herself on being reliable, was harsh in judgment of anyone who was not. The Abbess positively depended upon Alma’s

reliability. And Alma relied on the Abbess. But now Alma dwelled on the knowledge of Senga's sneakiness and lack of reliability. *That's why Senga never got anywhere*, Alma thought with a satisfied sniff.

(In fact, in the Time Before, Senga had been quite a reliable, trustworthy child, and a dependable guardian of her siblings once their parents died. But Alma and most of the others hadn't known her then. Senga knew what the others thought of her. *Given what some of the other women are like*, Senga told herself, *I have no other choice but to sneak.*)

As time had passed and no help had come from outside, and the driver and some of the early survivors had died, and the South Americans took themselves off to another part of the forest altogether, there had been left a group of about a dozen adult women and eight teenage girls in the woods. Two of the adults had been pregnant. One was Maureen. The teenage girls had grown, and, thanks to the genius of the Abbess in the creation of the Snatch, had had girls of their own. Those were the Maenads Alma instructed now.

Over time Alma, the Abbess, Senga, and Buffy had each carved out a sphere of influence for herself. Of course, Senga's influence only extended as far as herself and Pink, the unseen tunnel and the small plot of earth around the relay station in the northeastern part of the woods. The Abbess held court in the old parking lot and lived in the carousel, in what was more or less the north-central part of the old park, and which encompassed the public amenities, toilets, bandshell, and playground. Alma slept in the carousel with the Abbess and her favorites, her chosen flunkies. But since taking charge of the Maenads, Alma spent her days with them, usually in the forest's shallow central valley. But of course the Maenads also roved and ranged all over the clearings and the more meadowy parts

of the woods where the trees were sparser. They were snooping and spying—or as they called it, patrolling. Of course, being children and near-children, they also played when they could, risking life and limb on the remnants of the old playground equipment near the carousel, or climbing the low-branching trees. They managed to guard a good-sized area, but by no means could they patrol the entire forest, or even its entire perimeter.

Buffy took herself off to a more distant part of the woods, southward, closer to what had been Jamaica Bay. And as the trees had overtaken more and more of the disassembled-reassembled landscape, two things happened: the trees had moved closer to the water, and the water had crept closer to the trees.

The women had begun to realize fairly quickly that if they were to survive for any length of time, they'd have to start helping themselves. In addition to watching for fires—which was a responsibility shared by everyone, really, more than a job per se—Senga made and scavenged for paper. She had always been down to earth and practical, and it was she who had, as soon as it became evident that they were going to live, decided that they needed paper. Especially toilet paper. Even if they no longer had toilets, they would have toilet paper. “Women,” she'd declared, “need toilet paper.” And she'd need paper to write on. Pens and pencils she'd had in her knapsack, but not much paper.

Alma and the Abbess had looked at each other when Senga made this announcement. “She has a point,” said the Abbess. This was in the beginning, before her dislike and distrust of Senga had crystallized into hatred.

So Senga began to scavenge, and one of the things she scavenged was paper, which she would barter for whatever she needed

that the forest didn't provide, or that the community didn't share in common.

Alma founded the hatchery, where the future Maenads would be born, and the nursery, where the small Maenads would be cared for, and the school where she would educate them as they grew. The Abbess took on the tasks that had been filled in the outside world by authorities. And Buffy got stoned.

As for Senga, she walked, and as she did, she scoured the forest floor for paper that could be salvaged, or pulped, or otherwise reused—for toilet paper, yes, and for paper for the Abbess, too, who needed paper for record keeping, she said. And Senga also wanted it for herself.

She turned out to be a natural scavenger, and soon fashioned herself a gathering bag, then another, more elaborate one, with compartments for wet garbage and dry garbage, and toxic garbage, too, which she carried away as far as she could, to a dumping ground. She had a way of seeing the possibilities in discarded things, and it was by scavenging that Senga first noticed that the forest had a way of answering her needs, although not always in the way she expected.

There had been some hippie chicks on the buses among those who had lived, and who were almost gleeful at the prospect of what Buffy called "livin' off the land." In the "Time Before It," Buffy had been a large, unpopular girl with greasy, mouse-colored hair that she parted in the middle of her head and allowed to hang over her muscular shoulders. It grew down to her waist, and she had an unconscious habit of flicking it back over her shoulder with one gigantic hand, while snorting as she lazily tossed her head back at something she found funny. In the high school she and Senga had both attended, Buffy had been standing hip-deep in

the swimming pool when Senga first saw her. *She looks like some kind of sleepy animal...like a...water buffalo*, Senga had thought that first time, and blurted out her thought; and far from being insulted, the girl whose nondescript name had been Mary Ellen or something equally mundane became the more exotic Buffy, happy to be noticed and named by a pretty, popular girl.

That swimming pool had its place in the bowels of the high school Buffy and Senga had attended together when there were such things as high schools. They had been required to wear, and hated wearing, uniforms to class. Short-sleeved, beige nylon blouses with brown plastic buttons and pointed collars, and tight-fitting brown gabardine skirts, nylon stockings held up with metal garters, and flat, white, pancake-shaped hats. White gloves and flat-heeled brown oxfords as well.

The school they attended specialized in teaching secretarial skills to young women, to prepare them to enter the workforce. While young people in the rest of the world were beginning to adopt a costume of sandals, feathers, beads, and denim, Buffy, Senga, and their classmates were forced to wear this dowdy uniform, and they resented it. The uniform was an attempt to mimic what actual, ladylike secretaries in fact wore, which, if the students had had the sense to see, was only another kind of uniform than the beads and fringes of their more liberated peers. It was an unsuccessful mimicry, filtered as it was through the consciousness of the frumpy, spinsterish teachers who enforced the rules. Even the school's one male instructor, who taught typing, had a drab, undashing quality.

The distortion of the workforce costume was completed by the students themselves, who rolled the waistbands of their skirts until the hems were thigh-high and, in the name of "women's

lib,” went braless under their thin nylon blouses, to the despair of their frustrated teachers and the delight of the horny, catcalling boys and men they passed on the street. Even after her rape, Senga hadn’t minded the catcalls. She had been raped long ago, she had done her best to suppress the memory, and she never consciously connected the two phenomena. The man who had raped her had come out of the dark and gone back into the dark. There had been power and fear, anger and cruelty, No desire, no catcalls, only opportunity, grunts and curses. And so, years later, Senga walked with her shoulders squared and her bosom high on her way to school every day, and Buffy laughed at her.

“You’re doing that on purpose,” she’d say.

“I am not,” said Senga.

But Buffy was right.

Surprisingly to Senga, Buffy in those days had something she did not: a boyfriend, although when Senga met him, she told herself he was no prize. The boyfriend was older and had his own place, a grimy flat above a grocery store, where an American flag with dirty white stripes and dingy stars served to separate the kitchen from the toilet. Young people went there to do drugs. Senga balked at doing anything more than smoking hash with Buffy in those days—Buffy’s fingers were always violently filthy and stained with God-knew-what. But it was common knowledge that Buffy attended class giddy and stoned, or sleepy and stoned, or spaced out and tripping, plucking with dirty fingers at things unseen by anyone else. That was when she attended class at all.

Like high school seniors everywhere, Senga and Buffy had sworn on graduation day they’d be friends to the end, but in fact, she and Senga lost touch soon after that June ceremony. It had been

by pure coincidence that they’d ended up on the bus, traveling to the same demonstration, in the fall of the following year.

Buffy had been traveling to the demonstration with a group whose members included Alma. Alma had lost her teaching job and was working as an office manager for the Manhattan plumbing supplies company where Buffy had found work upon graduating, thanks to the office skills she and Senga had learned.

For her part Senga had gone on to a city college. Alma and Buffy had become office friends, and when Alma’s hangovers threatened her job, Buffy introduced her to pot, which at least didn’t make her so violently sick on Monday mornings. But she and Senga didn’t quite maintain the close contact they’d promised.



“Where was I?” Alma asked herself in the here and now.

“You can’t believe a word Senga says,” quoted Mia, the underfed, wizened rat girl, whose stringy hair was tied up in two blond bunches atop her head, and from which strands were continually escaping. Alma stopped her spindly walk around the classroom and peered down the length of her own ungenerous body to see where the little voice was coming from. Mia smiled up at her, baring small pointed teeth. It is untrue that all children are beautiful. Mia had one of those smiles that makes their owner look worse. Alma blanched and put her hand to her neck. If there had been a string of pearls there, she would have clutched it. She cleared her throat.

“Yes,” she said, and resumed pacing and distributing shards of hand mirrors as she did. “We’ll begin where we left off yesterday.”

The girls pulled up their thin shifts, and those lucky enough to be wearing underpants took them off. The girl sitting next to Mia waved her panties in the air, and Mia swatted them away.

“Pee-yew,” somebody yelled. Alma scowled.

“You know what to do,” she said, and girls squatted, knees apart, mirrors in hand. They began peering at the reflections of their genitals as Alma spoke, goggling bug eyed at one another’s parts and rolling their eyes in the time-honored manner of school-children everywhere each time the teacher’s back was turned. The lessons were unnecessary—owls to Athens, coals to Newcastle as it were. Some of these girls had been playing not only with themselves, by themselves, for months—in some cases, years—but with each other as well, for almost as long.

Alma was oblivious. She hit the palm of her hand with her ruler again and again as she spoke and resumed her procession. “For instance,” she said, “Senga would tell you the strangest things about the part of your body we are examining today.” As she squelched around the perimeter of the circle behind them, half hypnotized by her love of her own words and unseeing what was around her, the Maenads would make gagging faces at each other, tongues out, noses wrinkled, eyes crossed. Oblivious, Alma droned on.

“*She* would tell you that that is where babies come from,” Alma sniffed, “and of course, technically, or perhaps I should say biologically”—she tittered at her own wit—“she is correct. But first and foremost, there is the clit-or-is. (Alma, teacherlike, over-enunciated whenever she deemed the topic important or difficult.) The purpose of your clit-or-is—you see it there at the top—at the *top*, Glynis—is to provide you with pleasure, and it is secondary to the vagina, one might even say inferior to it, for that reason. The clitoris is the only human organ devoted solely to pleasure.”

Suddenly Yuki-Kai appeared, red faced and panting, just come from her visit to Pink, at the edge of the circle. “Don’t I know it!” she cackled, grabbing her crotch with one hand and jumping into an empty spot. “Sorry, Miz,” she said, and, practiced liar that she was, she almost looked like she meant it.

The smaller girls, like Mia, looked from one to another, both frightened and excited. But the older ones, closer to Yuki-Kai’s age, giggled. Alma pursed her lips and exhaled through her nostrils.

“Nice of you to join us.” She smiled at Yuki. “It saves us the trouble of searching for you. This lesson is especially important for you and your cohort. The girls who have begun to bleed.”

A moaning, groaning, giggling wave of a somehow peculiarly female blend of gloating and dismay bubbled across the room. The girls who had begun to bleed variously smirked or grimaced or blushed. There were five of them, counting Yuki-Kai. Five who would take part in the next Snatch.

“We already know all about it,” said Yuki-Kai, wiping her fist on her dirty shift.

“Really?” Alma’s smile was cold. “Who knows *all* there is to know about the Snatch?” The girls hung their heads, and even bold Yuki-Kai was cowed into silence by the grim and knowing condescension of that “all.” But Alma was a bully, and smartass Yuki was her favorite target.

“Since you know so much, why don’t you give the lesson, Yuki-Kai?”

Yuki was daunted but couldn’t resist the bait. She rose from her place and walked to where Alma was standing. Alma’s nose wrinkled; she smelled sex on the girl, but that was impossible and therefore to be ignored. Alma squinted at the possibly treacherous child but said nothing, extending the broken ruler for Yuki-Kai to

take, but the girl shook her head. Alma closed her eyes and pursed her lips as if to say, “Suit yourself.” Mia squealed delightedly. Yuki-Kai shook herself and began.

“The Snatch,” Yuki-Kai intoned, falling into the speech pattern Alma habitually used when instructing. She began pacing with her hands clasped behind her. “The Snatch is a ritual, but it is more than a dead, empty ceremony. It is life itself.” She shot a glance at Alma, whose face did not betray anger or frustration, if either of those was what she was feeling. Alma looked rather haughty and proud and a bit indulgent all at once. Emboldened, Yuki-Kai went on.

“When we came to the forest, all praise to our Mother in heaven, we had been prisoners of patriarchy, victims of rape, and slaves to men.” At the word “men” the girls shivered theatrically, and Mia let out a squeak. Alma smiled tightly; they had learned well. Yuki continued.

“In her divine wisdom, and in her own divinely female way, our Mother delivered us from the dominion of men, and granted to us the freedom to choose our own way forward.”

Alma allowed the merest wrinkle of a smile to crease her lips and thought, *Do I do that? She really is quite good.* She adjusted her bony bottom on the rude wooden seat that had been made for a girl, and one half her size at that. She had no fat to cushion herself.

Yuki-Kai, having completed a transit of the lopsided half circle of girls, stopped pacing at the end farthest from Alma, and turned to face her listeners.

“The Snatch—it organizes our lives and provides us with new life *and* new women. We women are now, for the first time in the story of the world, quite literally on top. We take from men the

single thing they have that we cannot make for ourselves. And when we are done with them, they are done for good.”

“Done for good,” the girls in the circle chanted softly in unison, and as they chanted, they drew their small and grimy thumbs across their tender throats.

Alma stood up and applauded. “Well done, I must admit. Take your seat, Yuki-Kai. Clearly, I have taught you well.”

But Alma stood where she was, forcing Yuki-Kai to squeeze past her to get back to her own place, and then she addressed the girls again. “Yes, Yuki-Kai has learned well. As must you all. For your lives, and our very world—” And here Alma looked toward the treetops and gestured upward and outward, a gesture that encompassed the entire forest. She seemed to enrapture herself as she spoke in a voice that at least seemed to be tremulous with deep emotion. “They depend upon how well you play your parts in this ritual that is more than a ritual—” And here she stopped, as if too overcome to continue. She started to leave the classroom clearing, trailing small girls and bits of mirror in her wake.

“Time to remind Buffy to check the traps,” she called back, her words straggling after her. “Mia?”

The rat girl pricked up her ears. “Yes, Miz?” But Alma was in full sail and didn’t deign to look back at the child.

“Collect the mirrors and lead the young ones back to the dormitory. It’s time for your naps.” Alma waved a vague hand. More groaning greeted this announcement, but the children had reasons to obey, so obey they did. Corporal punishment was the rule in the woods. “Yes, Miz,” said Mia to Alma’s indifferent back.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” whispered Glynis.

“What’d ya eat?” Yuki-Kai asked.

Glynis shook her head so violently that her teardrops scattered; one splashed Yuki-Kai's arm. Yuki wiped it off and twisted her lips. She knew what was troubling the younger girl. To the adults, especially Alma and the Abbess, Yuki behaved as contemptuously as she dared, but to the younger girls she could be kind. Her attack on Pink earlier that morning had left her feeling anxious and guilty. So she spoke to Glynis gently. "Don't worry."

It was not just the idea of riding the men that made some of the girls feel sick before their first Snatch. It was a cascade of long-delayed realizations, some of them deeply disturbing to the more sensitive girls, like Glynis. Eventually they came to understand that they would have to ride the battered, broken men who had been captured for that purpose.

If, as was the desired result, a girl became pregnant, she would become a mother according to her body's readiness, not that of her mind or her soul or her spirit. Of course, although some of the young girls' bodies might have begun to ovulate and bleed, that was no guarantee that their hips were sufficiently wide to birth a baby. As even the youngest ones all knew, sometimes babies came late, or feet first, or dead. Sometimes a girl had to be cut, when the baby was too big. And even the most naive girl would notice that when a baby was born dead—or worse, born male—there would be more and tenderer meat in the stewpots. Once a Maenad had bled to death, but of course she didn't go into any pot. She was buried with great pomp next to the early survivors, and was honored at the equinox with flowers and song.

But of course, boy babies went into the pots. It was too much for some of these young ones to think about, but no number of tears would dissuade the Abbess, and Alma, and the other grown women. It was the Snatch, and the Goddess herself had dictated its

terms, so they said. "The boys are so young; it doesn't hurt them much. Too young to know they're alive, before they're not." Not all the young women believed that.

SIX

Goddess or no Goddess, the Snatch existed and endured because if the women's world in the woods was to continue into the future, there was a thing they needed that the woods did not provide, and that thing came only from men: Spunk. Baby Batter. Skeet. Jizz. Semen. Man milk. Splodge. Penis pudding. Ejaculate. Cum. Once the driver died, they couldn't get any either. Not without leaving the forest or letting men in freely, and that they would never do. So in the very beginning, they'd had to decide. They'd had choices.

That was to assume that if *they* had been left alive, then it was likely others had too. Some of those others were bound to be men. Some might even be in this forest.

Senga and Buffy wanted to find the other survivors, maybe figure out what had happened, and most important, get down to the real business of living. Senga wanted to find what was left of her family. The last thing on her mind was procreation. She and Buffy were pragmatic and present-minded. However, they were opposed by most if not all of the others, and most determinedly by Alma and the Abbess.

The Abbess put forth the proposition that the world had come, not to an end, exactly, but to a fork in the road of history. The branches of this fork included themselves, possibly some other men and women, and what the Abbess thought of as the insentient woods. It was up to them not only to survive, but to repopulate the world if they could. Those who had had been pregnant when they'd boarded the bus would in due time give birth to children who could be raised as if in another Eden, an Adam-less Eden. Their own wishes led them to believe or deceive themselves that this had been somehow divinely ordained or intended.

"Think of it," Alma had said with a smile. "A world of women, and daughters raised by women. Without patriarchy or its oppression."

"What if," Senga had ventured, "one of them"—she pointed to Maureen and Sandra—"was to have a boy?"

Alma looked startled. "Why borrow trouble?" she asked. She had looked almost sweet then. Almost reasonable. "We know that each pregnancy has a fifty-fifty chance of producing a girl. Why not assume the best?"

They were sitting in a circle around the fire, smoking the last of their ready-mades, and Buffy was smoking something else in a ridiculously long-stemmed pipe she had found.

"If it's a boy," she suggested, "you can just whack off its little thing. Make it a girl." She giggled and wrinkled her large nose, and made a snipping gesture, holding invisible scissors. "Wee, wee, wee, wee, wee..."

Senga reached over with one leg and made contact with Buffy's rump, rolling her farther away from the fire. Buffy kept giggling as she rolled away, down the gentle slope beyond the fire ring, then stopped and subsided into sleep, snoring gently.

"Don't even think that way, Senga." Alma's face was shining in the firelight, her angular face looking soft and angelic. Maureen and Sandra rubbed their still-flat bellies and looked queasy.

"Why not believe we've been given a chance to start over again?" the Abbess continued. She swept her hand in a circle around them, indicating the fire ring, the woods beyond, and the ruined bus.

"Because...it's impossible! You can't have people without some of them being men!" Senga yelled.

She was met by a chorus of dismay. The Abbess smiled sweetly.

"Well," she said. "We'll just see about that."

That had been in the beginning of their forest life, before the women had grown brave enough to separate from one another and move off to find the living arrangement that suited each of them best. The driver's body had been buried "up there somewhere," to the northwest. The woods were still scarred where the bus had crashed, and the things that had been salvaged from the luggage compartments hadn't been sorted yet. The foodstuffs they had intended to donate once they had arrived at their destination were, providentially, nonperishable. And at least for the present, the Abbess seemed to be right. Other than the driver, nobody had seen any men.

At that time, the women and girls still slept in a huddle around the fire at night, and only ventured out in pairs during the day. The South American nuns had stayed with them at first. But after this night, the nuns began been stealing away, singly or in pairs. None of the American-born women noticed. All this took place before the women and girls understood there was nothing in the woods to threaten them, except, of course each other. It seemed to be the woods' intention to isolate them. But they didn't realize that then.

“What makes you think we can survive for very long?” Senga had asked that night around the fire, incredulous. The force of her despair pushed her to her feet, and she winced. Her ankle was badly sprained. “I mean, why would you even *want* to?” The fire flickered and leaped, illuminating the women’s faces all around her, blurring their hard edges, veiling even the homely ones in a golden, firelit beauty. This light jumped and dazzled. It hurt Senga’s already-throbbing head. She put her hands to her temples and looked around wildly. “Do you hear yourselves? I mean, what would be the point of just surviving? Why not just finish the job? The world has ended, don’t you get it?”

The adult women gasped in unison, and one of the younger ones shrieked. Senga went on, “We should be thinking about the best ways to off each other, not all this ‘world of women’ crap!” More gasping and shouts of “no!” followed, as the Abbess flustered her hands, palms downward, attempting to restore order. The women became quiet, but the young girls murmured.

“Then what were you doing fucking the driver?” Alma sneered. Senga stared back at her.

“*He* was fucking *me*, and you know it!” Senga knocked a log off the fire as she jumped at Alma, loosening a shower of sparks. Buffy woke up.

Alma dodged Senga’s fist, and angled herself behind the Abbess. She jeered at Senga, “You’d fuck anything in pants!”

The next blow connected with the side of Alma’s head and grazed the Abbess’s cheek as Alma tried to hide behind her. Buffy lumbered back toward the fire ring and pinned Senga’s arms behind her, dragging her backward. Buffy had brothers, and her father owned a bar. She knew how to break up a fight.

“Everyone knows you’re a slut,” shouted Alma, louder this time, gesturing toward the entire group. The forest swallowed up any echo. There were murmurs from the women, and even some clicking of tongues, but no answer. Senga tried to break free, but Buffy had big hands and a strong grip.

“Enough, Alma!” The Abbess stood up and stepped around the fire to Senga. Her eyes could be soft and kind when she chose, and she chose now. She made her voice as calming as warm milk. “Yes,” crooned the Abbess, touching Senga’s pinioned arm with the soft fingertips of her right hand. “I believe you. After all, isn’t that how we all found ourselves here—victims of rape, protesting rape? We intended to put a stop to rape, and other all kinds of brutality against women.” Senga realized that the Abbess wasn’t only talking to her but to the assembled group, speechifying. “And it seems Mother Nature heard us and stepped in to help our cause.” Murmurs of assent rippled through the group. Buffy relaxed her grip as she felt Senga grow calmer.

“And how long do you think it can go on this way?” she asked the Abbess. “How long can we go on?”

The Abbess had a high, sweet, tinkling silver laugh that raised the hairs on the back of Senga’s neck, and she laughed as she said, “Another two thousand years, perhaps? Who knows? Long enough.” She looked meaningfully at the pregnant ones’ bellies. “Long enough for the children you two are carrying to grow, to be born, and for a new world to be formed. Formed by *us*!”

Senga opened her mouth, then snapped it shut, then opened it again. It was too much. The flaw in the Abbess’s logic was canyon big, but no one else seemed able or willing to see it. She gestured toward Maureen and Sandra’s bellies. “Are you nuts? I suppose

we're gonna wait till these two grow up and get married and have a family...assuming they're boy and girl!"

"Geez, Louise," said Buffy.

The Abbess came close to Senga now, and gripped her above the elbow. "No one is pretending that men aren't necessary, Senga," she hissed so the others wouldn't hear. "And I'm not saying they have all been killed either. But look around you—it certainly seems that way. We just need a few. A manageable few. It seems reasonable to think that the Goddess we worship has heard the prayers of the oppressed women everywhere, across the world, and chosen this beautiful manner of freeing us from the scourge of a world dominated by men and their violence. Doesn't it?"

Senga was close to crying now, with frustration and hunger and anger and pain, and the horrible feeling of being the only sane person left alive. Her sprained ankle was healing only slowly, and she hadn't had so much as a drink of water all day. Despite that, she felt desperate to pee, and she suspected she had a urinary tract infection.

The Abbess simpered. "Haven't you noticed we're in a forest?" she asked. "We can get everything we need right here." The women around the fire murmured in agreement. Senga was close to pulling her own hair out.

"It's a forest," she yelled, "not a fucking farm. What are we supposed to eat, bark? And even if it wasn't a forest, we're not farmers. Seems like your goddamn Goddess could have dumped us out in Jersey if she wanted us to grow our own tomatoes and shit!"

The Abbess clicked her tongue and was about to speak when Senga said, "Don't you click your fucking tongue at me. Before we think about starting a farm or anything else, if we're going to live, we need to find food. The stuff we brought won't last forever.

And we need to find water." She kicked at the candy-bar wrappers and cookie boxes that had come off the buses and that now littered the campsite around the fire ring. "This crap is running low. And don't you want to know what happened? What *really* happened? To find out if there are other...survivors? We need to see if they can help us! Or if *they* need help, or if...we need to find out if there any men—"

Before Senga could finish, Alma stepped out from behind the Abbess. "*You* would think that!"

Senga took another swing, and this time connected squarely with the side of Alma's nose before the Abbess got between them and Buffy's fellow stoners roused themselves enough to grab Senga by the elbows from behind once again.

"It seems we don't need men to have violence in our beautiful world, sisters," the Abbess said in her false voice. "Sisters, we have all been through a terrible ordeal. Terrible—and wonderful. *We* have survived—miraculously."

Senga shook off the stoners, but she kept her head down and rubbed the knuckles of her fist. She listened to the Abbess. Outside the circle Alma wailed theatrically and held her hands up to her injured face. She was ignored.

"Go on, Senga," said the Abbess. "We want to hear everything you have to say. After all, we're not men. We respect every woman's voice." Senga glowered at her, but was forced in spite of herself to admire the way the Abbess was taking control of matters, even though she had a feeling it would not be to her benefit for the Abbess to have control over Senga herself. She exhaled heavily and swallowed before she spoke.

"We don't *just* need men. I mean...we need to find out things..."

“What kinds of things?” asked one of the stoners. Other women echoed, “What things?”

A voice—Senga thought afterward that it had been Alma’s—came out of the dark and said something Senga heard as “Only one thing!”

Senga looked around in the firelight at these strangers, these women she had not known before getting on the bus (except for Buffy), and with whom she seemed destined to die. All they had had in common was a cause, and now that their world had ended, they didn’t even have that.

“We need to find out if there are...I don’t know, horses, or dogs, or poison ivy—or snakes...running water...wild animals...”

Murmurs of assent were heard in the leafy dark, and a thrill of fear went through the huddled group. “That’s right,” said one woman. “Right on,” said others. “I think I saw a raccoon. They can have rabies, you know,” one woman started to say, but the Abbess silenced them all with a glare.

“Go on,” she said to Senga, in her voice of silky deception. “Tell us what else you think we need to know.”

“You shouldn’t need me to tell you what else—just think! Food, water, shelter...”

“As I said before, we’re in a forest. It can provide all these things, and more.”

Senga stared at the Abbess in dumb amazement, and the air between them rang with their rage, Senga’s white hot and the Abbess’s blue and cold. Abigail Barron had been a refined and sensitive girl, overindulged by her mother and a stepfather who’d oscillated between molesting the young Abigail, spending his significant wealth spoiling her, and running the largest and poshest department store in Queens. He’d paid for her to study art at

Hunter College in Manhattan, but disowned her when she’d left before graduation to marry her boyfriend, who was in imminent danger of being sent to Vietnam. Fortunately, his parents were also people of means, and Abigail moved into their home after her young husband was deployed.

When he was killed, Abigail lost the baby she had been carrying, but she got to keep the Long Island house her new in-laws had just bought her and her ill-fated young husband as a wedding gift. Maybe if Senga had known this history, she would have been sympathetic. She did know that like all the rest of the women on the bus, the Abbess had been mistreated most egregiously by men, and that protesting that particular kind of mistreatment was their cause, even though many of them couldn’t even utter the word for it.

Senga had come from an insalubrious apartment house in Jamaica, Queens, not far from where the women now found themselves, had they known. She’d shared a bedroom with her siblings until she was eleven or twelve, and a bed with a drunken uncle on occasion. The roots of her fear of the dark were in that place, with its cavernous, dangerous cellars where bad people, strangers and neighbors and even uncles, did forbidden and furtive things. But her mind would not let her remember the roots of her fear. The uncle who’d made her afraid of the dark was dead and buried, and only the fear remained.

Senga was aware of the chasm between herself and a woman like the Abbess; she marveled at the things she knew that the Abbess didn’t, yet she also had to admire the social jiu-jitsu that had put the Abbess on top of the group here, as she had undoubtedly learned to be in the big world outside, the world of the Time Before. Senga sighed. Where had she been the day that lesson was taught?

“The forest doesn’t *provide*,” she mocked the Abbess, shaking her head. “You have to work for what you need. You have to take it. And having men around would make the work a lot easier.”

“Oh, of course, I see,” the Abbess chirped. She was around the same age as Senga but seemed a throwback to an earlier age, an age of girdles and lace gloves and pearls, not sandals and patchouli. Afternoon card games and cocktails. In fact, having her on the antirape march at all had been a surprise to Senga and Buffy.

“I think, dear,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, “that you are deliberately looking at things in the worst possible light. I was speaking figuratively; of course we’ll *all* have to work. And while it’s true that men’s muscles would make that work easier, it’s really not a fair exchange. We pay too high a price when we let them ‘help’ us.” A murmur of agreement came from the women. One thing that didn’t surprise Senga was the way the Abbess had quickly assumed the role of leader. Senga had no doubt that the girl who’d introduced herself on the bus as Abigail Barron would do very little of the actual work herself.

The Abbess yawned, and her yawn caught on throughout the group. “It’s late,” she purred, reaching out to stroke Senga’s sooty cheek. “Everything will look better in the morning. We can all start to figure out what we should do then. Right now I suggest we get some sleep. Come on, girls.” Most of the girls stood to follow her.

As she and Buffy watched them, Senga put her hand up to run it through her hair in thought. *I need shampoo*, she realized, and began to laugh, although her lip quivered.

“I need shampoo,” she said to Buffy.

Alma heard her as she was turning away to bed down with the Abbess and the others. She called back over her shoulder.

“Why don’t you put that on your shopping list? Right after *men*.”

Senga sighed. It was going to be a long night.

SEVEN

It had been a long night, and it was followed by a long day, and then a string of long days. Once it seemed clear to the women that they were alone, and not in imminent danger of anything except starvation, they gained confidence. They began to spread out into the forest. Just in time too. So many humans so close together, and so dependent on each other, will begin to fight, or at least split into factions. Which was what happened, eventually. But not right away.

By the time the real conflicts began, as they always do, a society had emerged. As Senga had foreseen, Abigail quickly solidified her standing as leader. It was unclear to Senga and Buffy when she had renamed herself as the Abbess. But it couldn't have taken long. Alma became her lieutenant. Senga and Buffy strayed off on their own, in different directions.

The South Americans had already decamped unnoticed to the far western part of the forest. They resumed their lives of prayer and, as far as they could, of service. Their plan had been to represent their country's women at the demonstration, as they were suffering heavily from rape as a weapon of war. But like the others, they

never got to Washington. They didn't speak much English at the time of the crash, and once they saw how things among the other survivors were developing, that's the way they kept it.

In the years following the crash, they kept more and more to themselves, and two of the original dozen were now buried in the small cemetery they had established. It took a few years to build it out of the raw materials they found in the forest, but the forest seemed to facilitate their work. When they needed brick, they came across a half-shattered building that had stored mowers and other gardening tools for the maintenance of the park. When they needed wood, they found strong trees that were easy to cut with what tools they'd found in the shed.

As years passed, the nuns would bury their sisters next to their small stone chapel, in ground they consecrated themselves. They left the Abbess's women alone, and it was rare for even Senga and Buffy to come across them. But there were sometimes flute music and resonating drums in the dusk, along with faint notes from a guitar that floated through the thick forest air from the west.

Alma and the Abbess, strangers when they met, discovered they were natural allies. They had a symbiosis as leader and led. Buffy attracted a trio of like-minded potheads from among the few hippie chicks, and their first efforts toward meeting their own needs went into pot farming. Emptying their pockets and turning out the seams, they scraped together a quantity of stems and seeds that they managed to germinate between dampened paper napkins scavenged from the lunch sacks they'd brought onto the bus. These they planted in a damp, overhung spot that Buffy liked the look of.

Senga, out scavenging one day a few weeks after the plants had gone into the ground, came across the plantation. Buffy looked worried. She was biting what was left of her grimy nails.

"Man, I don't think they're getting enough light here," she told Senga, pointing to the dug-up patch of ground, which, Senga had to admit, was practically devoid of sprouts. "But it's not as risky."

"Risky?" Senga looked around. "Buffy, there's nobody here. The rest of *them* don't smoke. There's no law, no pigs. Nothing. Dig 'em up and plant them over there." She pointed to a dappled clearing.

Buffy looked at Senga in wonderment. "You think they'll be okay, huh? Right on," she said. She went off to uproot and replant her precious crop. In a year's time, she would be stoned nearly constantly, a goal she had been striving for since the age of twelve. Unable to keep up with Buffy's almost endless capacity for intoxicants, the few hippie chicks gradually straightened up and joined the other straights.

Alma commandeered the young girls, and together they righted and cleaned out both halves of the school bus. The surrounding area they cleared of brush and undergrowth. Half of the broken bus they used for a schoolroom, the other for a dorm.

The Abbess and the women Senga thought of as her court moved into what had been a derelict carousel and its housing. Many of the painted horses were intact, and the roof had been replaced the year before the crash, as part of some ill-timed New York City Parks Department restoration. Even with the shutters down, there was enough ventilation so that the first winter, when they burned the damaged wooden horses for heat on the concrete floor of the building, the smoke could escape through the vents. (They kept the mirrored calliope and the huge turntable and a few of the horses intact, as they provided something to look at and listen to once the women figured out how to get them going.)

A playground nearby had survived, but just barely. The jungle gym was a twisted wreck, and the seesaws were torn apart, but there were still two slides and a swing set that was usable.

Senga was alone. She kept her own counsel, and she wandered through the strange and yet familiar woods. The first winter, she took slim refuge in the curve of a bandshell that had survived intact, but it offered little shelter from wind and rain. That winter she burned one hundred wooden folding chairs she'd found stored underneath the stage. She set fire to them on the concrete apron of the bandshell, and she still almost died of pneumonia.

One day while scavenging, she would, in the future, spot the red tile roof of what would turn out to be the fire relay station. She had driven past it a hundred times when the world was different and the woods had just been a part of a New York City public park. The relay station had moved, almost intact, from where it had sat on the crest of Woodhaven Boulevard, on a gigantic wave of earth. It had traveled downhill on that rolling wave, coming loose from its fixtures and foundation and half burying itself in a high hill of soft loam within the woods. Perfect.

EIGHT

Pink hadn't even been thought of on the day Senga found the relay station. And that day itself was years away from the women's first days in the woods. Those days and nights had turned to weeks and months and then a year, and then another, and both Senga and the Abbess had been proven right: the forest had sustained them, but they needed to work it. Of course, as Senga had also foreseen, the Abbess didn't do much of the work; with her chosen coterie, her Acolytes, she dwelled in the ruined carousel near where the bus had crashed when the world ended.

"I hear she pays a South American woman to come in and clean it once a week," said Buffy, and then she belched and began to laugh. She and Senga were in Buffy's encampment, itself at the edge of the forest on the shore of a strange-smelling lake, drinking hooch and sharing a pipe. In addition to her flourishing marijuana plantation, Buffy now had a distillery of sorts, where she concocted a degraded and malodorous variety of moonshine. Having no specific knowledge of winemaking or home brewing, with only the ingredients the forest provided and the vessels Senga scavenged, it was no surprise to Buffy that the stuff was vile. What

was surprising was that it had not yet killed her. With nothing to eliminate wild yeast, some of Buffy's vintages were almost hallucinogenic rather than hypnotic. They produced a bone-rattling buzz and a wracking nausea. (Her experiments with making LSD never came to anything, although the woods were filled with morning glory flowers, which caused Buffy no end of tantalized vexation. She was sure she'd read they could yield a form of lysergic acid, or something close enough to it for her purpose.) For psychedelic stimulation she had to rely on mushrooms, which were plentiful but by no means uniformly "magical." For Buffy this meant many backbreaking searches on hands and knees, and she was very seldom rewarded. She had caught and licked a toad once, but that, too, was a disappointment. She had sworn off toads after that and would never talk about the practice again.

It was getting late. Senga would have a headache in the morning. Maybe not if she puked tonight. She scowled at Buffy. With one eye screwed up, her scowl was less than formidable.

"Who told you that?"

Owl-like, Buffy turned her entire head to look at Senga.

"Told me what?" She blinked.

Senga reached for the pipe. "The thing about the Abbess and the South American!" She clenched the pipe between her teeth, and Buffy fell to one side, laughing. Senga thought a small pig ran out of Buffy's ear, and she scowled.

"What's so funny?"

Buffy was holding herself around the middle and weeping with laughter so hard she could barely choke out, "You look like Popeye, man!"

Senga stood up quickly, banging her head on the low ceiling of Buffy's shelter. She took the pipe from between her teeth and

threw it at Buffy. "I'm outta here," she said, left as steadily as she could. It took her several shaky attempts.

The moon on the water of the inlet where Buffy obtained the water for her still was bright, waxing gibbous; it would be full in a day or two. Senga shielded her eyes. Before they had gone their separate ways, the women had agreed to gather at the clearing next to the carousel at the next full moon; and that remained a custom. Senga's head already hurt. She would try to make it home tonight and sleep until it was time to prepare for the next Moon Meeting.

And she did make it back to her shelter, and she did sleep a sleep of sorts. She slept long and deep, and came to with a throat like scorched sand and a volcanic, bilious thirst—no wonder; she was soaked in both sweat and piss. Her head was filled with glass shards that were trying to work their way out through her eyeballs, and no matter how still she tried to hold her head and no matter in which direction she laid it, her surroundings responded by whirling violently in the opposite direction before slowly swinging to a stop, whereupon the contents of her stomach emptied themselves, again, and again, until her stomach itself threatened to give itself up and walk out of her body with its hands up.

Losing consciousness was a mercy when it finally happened, and how many times it happened before she finally recovered her senses she had no notion. She regained and lost consciousness again and again, and passed some hours when she shook until she couldn't remember ever not shaking. She tried to force her legs to carry her to the stream for water, but they only laughed and then gave up. A chilly sheen of sweat glossed her skin and caused her to shiver with cold, although the night was mild. She could feel her bones, cold as iron but soft as jelly, and when the shaking stopped, the jerks began.

Voluptuous waves that felt like imminent death and precarious life chased each other across her body and mind until near sunset a day later, when they subsided into a tremulous silence.



In the carousel, Abigail, who now called herself Abbess, orgasmed delicately, a gentle tensing of muscles telling her partner to stop. She required only infrequent servicing—this time it had been Alma’s turn. Alma, who had been an indifferent lover in the Big World before the Crash, paid close attention to the Abbess’s likes and dislikes now; there was no better way to curry favor, in this or any other world, than by being the purveyor of pleasure, she knew that. She serviced other women and they serviced her, and the Abbess had others as well, but Alma was best.

Alma got to her feet and pretended to look at the hourglass. Surreptitiously, she rubbed her jaw. If the Abbess had a weakness, it was her sensitivity to criticism, so much so that she saw reproaches where none were intended, and became wrathful when she did; nevertheless, Alma’s jaw was sore. She forced herself to smile and then turned to face the Abbess.

“I’m getting some water. Do you want some?”

The Abbess reclined onto her upstretched arms and nodded, yawning like a cat. Alma left the tented pavilion inside the carousel where she and the Abbess slept, in order to fetch the water.

The Abbess, Abigail Barron that had been, watched her friend’s jangly, retreating form and sat up languidly. Outside, the women were preparing for the Full Moon Gathering. They pulled the crude benches they’d hacked from the forest trees into the clearing, and covered the dais where the Abbess and Alma would preside over the

evening’s events, where the crowd would be seated upon tree-stump furniture before a painted birchbark screen. The Abbess listened to the familiar preparations. It had now been some months since the very first Moon Meeting, the gathering at which the women had written the rules.

There had been firelight then, and a thrill in the air, as by this time they knew they were castaways, shipwrecked in an arboreal ocean by what means and for what purpose they knew not; all they knew was that they were alive, and those left alive now intended to go on living. It would be the purpose of this gathering to determine how.

The women and girls had gathered in the parking lot that had been built to accommodate visitors to the carousel in the park. They’d spent time talking about what exactly it was that had happened to them: some said earthquake, some said asteroid strike, some said the end of the world. Senga had thought the first scenario the most likely, and in this she was close to the truth—not that it really mattered.

By the time of that first Moon Meeting, when the women had lit torches and were burning rubbish in metal barrels, they had a society, a hierarchy, and a mythos.



Alma returned with the water, which the Abbess accepted wordlessly. Alma backed out of the sleep chamber gingerly; she had work to do. But she needn’t have bothered with deference. The Abbess was indifferent to her now, lost in memory of her triumph at the very first Moon Meeting. It helped her to prepare for her monthly performance to review the triumph, as she saw it, of the past.



At that first Moon Meeting, roughly a month after the cataclysm, thirty women and girls had turned dirty faces to the firelight, and the Abbess had stood before them on a concrete slab inlaid with alternating squares of dark and light stone, a concrete chessboard in what had been a public park. But to the Abbess, it was a stage. Senga, late to the meeting, smiled with closed lips. *What was that black thing on the Abbess's head?* Senga nodded politely at the women she hadn't previously known, but kept to herself on the outmost fringe of the group, barely within the circle of firelight. She crossed her arms over her chest and watched. She was slender and strong, and her hair stood out from her head in pale auburn waves to below her shoulder blades.

The air beyond the firelight's reach was turning chill in the blue light of the full moon; some of the younger girls shivered, and a few were crying. All were hungry. The old concrete chess table on which the Abbess now stood, Senga observed, was matched by two others, and at those two—on either side of the Abbess—Alma and Buffy stood. Senga frowned. What was Buffy doing here?

Alma carried a pot of red paint. Buffy, Senga now saw, had lugged a plank of wood half the width of a barn door to the make-shift stage; she had tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to cover it with a blanket recovered from the riding stables nearby.

So Buffy's been scavenging too.

Buffy pulled the blanket off now, and steadied the edge of the wood planking on the chess table nearest her. Standing on the middle table, the Abbess was in full voice, and she cried, "Behold—the Rules of the Forest," and to Senga's mild disgust, as the blanket

was tugged off, there were several crudely painted sentences to be seen on the board, red paint smears running and blobbing down the wood, but legible, if she squinted. She missed her glasses. Two of the Abbess's adult followers were dispatched to help steady the planking; a night breeze was rising and ruffling the forest leaves. It had seemed to Senga that the leaves were whispering a warning, millions of whispers behind millions of leafy hands.

The Abbess's voice was joined by Buffy's and Alma's, and the voices of the thirty or so women and girls gradually joined in. All except Senga, who was too uninformed and appalled to understand quite what was happening, and, in truth, a bit suspicious, too, as if this were all a joke the others were playing on her. It had to be. But the women seemed almost comically serious as they read aloud the words painted on the planks:

THE RULES OF THE FOREST:

1. All women are created by the Goddess as equals, and are as sisters of the same mother.
2. No woman shall shame another woman, or prevent her from expressing her innermost self.
3. No woman shall strike another woman.
4. All women shall share everything.
5. The Forest giveth, and the Forest taketh away.
6. You shall not suffer a man to live in the Forest, except when as needed for the Snatch. The Rules of the Snatch are three:
 - Catch them.
 - Ride them.
 - Kill them.

Catch whom? Senga was disquieted. *Catch whom, exactly?* They were clearly talking about men, but Senga hadn't seen any men in her roaming and scavenging, despite what she had argued at the first firelight conclave. But before she could consider this question further, she was perplexed, as Buffy passed the steadying of the rules board off to another woman with an elaborate flourish.

Buffy stepped forward, cleared her throat, and, to Senga's ongoing surprise, produced from one of her numerous pockets an undamaged pitch pipe. Flamboyantly, and with tremendous gravitas, she blew a note, and began to sing, to a tune that reminded Senga of either "Blueberry Hill" or "La Bamba":

It's catch before kill,
'Cause a girl needs a thrill,
We must get our fill,
And don't let any spill!

As Buffy, bowing deeply, swept the tabletop with her mouse-colored hair, the women and girls clapped and cheered. The ones who had been crying were now wiping away their tears, smiling and hugging one another, and Alma was hugging Buffy, who went back to holding the rules board with a shy and humble smile illuminating her plain, broad face. Senga had a brief spasm of uncertainty. This was a joke, right?

What are they singing about? Why are they cheering?

The brief spasm turned to profound confusion. In all Senga's month of wanderings, she had searched, every sense on alert, for a sign that the forest contained anyone other than herself and the other women who had been on the buses, and she'd found nothing. Yet these women were talking as if there were an invisible

population of men in the forest who might just be listening. And they were talking utter nonsense. Senga shook her head. Nothing about this made sense.

The Abbess turned to face Alma, but it seemed to Senga that her enemy stared at her for the briefest of seconds before addressing the crowd. She shrank back against the tree and farther from the firelight. She stared in astonishment at the admittedly paltry and makeshift, yet somehow sadly powerful, spectacle. *How long was I out?* She caught herself as she stumbled back against a shrub, and heard more:

"Women of the Woods, we are here tonight by the will of the Heavenly Mother, who has preserved us and protected us and will never forsake us as long as we obey these rules. In return she will continue to protect us from the depredations of men, at whose hands we have suffered so much!"

There was cheering at this last bit, although some of the younger girls were yawning, one was scratching her bottom, and one was picking her nose. The nearest woman slapped the nosepicker's hand away from her face and made a disgusted noise. As soon as the woman's back was to her again, the teenager stuck out her tongue and resumed her nasal excavations.

At the front of the crowd, the Abbess scanned the darkening perimeter of the woods and went on, her rich contralto voice portentous, admonitory: "Any man left alive who hears my voice, pay heed. The tables are turned. If you dare breach our defenses, we will use you up and then rid ourselves of you. We will not go back to the way things were." Women and girls shouted approval, and some shook what Senga had taken for walking sticks, but now realized might be spears. The Abbess continued, this time addressing the gathered women.

“We are not men. We do not decree and levy, but we confer and come to consensus. We now invite you to come to the board, take up the paintbrush, and write what rules seem good to you. Ask your heavenly Mother for guidance, and it will come.” The Abbess opened her arms wide, and a line of women and girls made its way up to the board. This must have been planned—no way would she waste the paint letting anybody write whatever they wanted, thought Senga, crouching in the lee of the shaggy elm. Up front, silhouetted by the orange flames, a thin, lovely woman with crisp, ink-black hair and golden skin that shone in the firelight had hold of the paintbrush in the long fingers of her left hand and was already writing. When she was finished, she stood aside to let the others read:

NO WOMAN SHALL CALL ANOTHER WOMAN
A BITCH.

And as she finished the final, predictable word, a shout went up, and then another, and the women were calling out more words, and the Abbess was nodding, and so the golden-skinned woman painted all the words the women called out, until the list read:

No woman shall call another woman a bitch,
or a cunt,
or a whore,
or a skank,
or a tramp,
or a hoochie,
or a slut,
or a twat, etc.
No woman shall own another woman.

No woman shall keep a secret from the group.
Every woman shall benefit from the labor of the group.
Private property is forbidden.
No football.

Then Alma and Buffy disappeared behind the stage, and the Abbess’s favorites followed them. The Abbess was standing above the crowd, absurdly balanced on her tiny, concrete chessboard stage, and holding both arms outstretched, she turned her hands palm-side down, patting the air above the women’s heads and making shushing noises, which the women and girls gradually obeyed.

“Sit, please,” the Abbess repeated until all the women but Senga, who was still hidden behind her tree, were seated. The ground was hard-packed dirt here on the rim of the old parking lot, and the grass was sparse. Exhaust fumes from the automobiles of hundreds of long-ago visitors to the carousel had coated the spiky grass blades with a seemingly permanent layer of soot and grime. That was when Senga noticed what the Abbess was wearing. At the moment when the women and girls, instructed to sit cross-legged, bare-legged, on the hard ground, pulled their flimsy, worn-out skirts around their legs for what protection from the dirt and cold they could afford, Senga noticed that the Abbess was wearing—there was no other word for it—a habit. The Abbess had kitted herself out with a nun’s habit.

There was no wide black leather belt from which a rosary could hang, but the layered cut of the thing, the heavy white gabardine-like fabric from which it was fashioned, and above all, the strange headdress and furled black poplin veil were both unmistakably homemade and equally unmistakably an approximation of a nun’s floor-sweeping habit.

From her hiding place behind the shaggy elm, Senga ventured a grim little smile. She hadn't noticed that it was a habit, and might not have noticed for a long while, were it not for the extremely nunlike way the Abbess swept the folds of her heavy white skirt away from the ground, and with what disdain she pinched the fabric between forefinger and thumb to lift it away from the earth daintily (but almost modestly, as if she wanted no excess of flesh to show). Senga smiled more grimly. *Wasn't that just like her?*

Evidently the evening's program was only beginning. Once the women and girls were seated on the forest floor, the Abbess clapped her hands, and from the darker-than-dark aperture that led into the carousel, Alma and Buffy reemerged, followed by the nameless women who carried between them a huge, cylindrical metal barrel from which steam was rising; there was a pair of holes near the top rim, and opposite them another pair of holes. Through these, rough poles, stripped branches, had been forced, so that two women could walk, before and behind each other, each resting a pole on one shoulder, so that the metal barrel was suspended between them. The barrel looked heavy, and it was evidently very hot, from the care the women took not to touch it or to let it touch their bare skin. Senga watched in silent amazement. *How long was I out?* she wondered, and rubbed her forehead.

The women put the drum down on the ground in front of the Abbess. A murmur went up from the assembled women, which the Abbess did nothing to quell. Senga watched and waited.

Finally, the Abbess spoke. "Sisters," she said, "come and eat." Alma murmured something to her and she added, "One at a time, of course. Form a line here. Alma and Buffy will give you each a bowl, and Renee and Alice will fill it for you. There is enough for all."

And so the women and girls lined up. Senga bleakly observed there was no thought to feeding the young ones first, or if there were, it was quickly submerged in the demanding hunger of those older and stronger. Senga herself felt a little sick. Some kind of stew was being doled out into bowls and cups and old tin cans, discarded bottles and small tubs the women and girls had scavenged. Senga sniffed. *There's meat in that stew. A lot of meat.* There had been none on the buses, and what food had been brought with them had long since been consumed. But there *was* meat in the stew.

Looking around, Senga started counting. One, two, three... oh, she couldn't remember how many of them there had been on the buses, and how many had died at first, but she hoped, she hoped, that whoever it was they were eating had died naturally, as the other possibility was too horrible to imagine.

But imagine it she had, and the vision in her mind sent her flailing backward and crashing into the bracken, which was where the others found her, sprawled in a bush, her legs splayed and her arms caught by bare branches. There was a scuffle and a clamor that came from what had been the front of the group, where the Abbess was, and Senga heard the Abbess's voice clang, "Bring a light!"

To her surprise, she found herself pinned in the synthetic yellow beam emanating from the lens of an ordinary, two-cell, gray metal flashlight with a red plastic top; it had been in the driver's toolbox, and it was wielded by Alice now, in two shaking hands. Out of the darkness between the fire and the flashlight's beam walked the Abbess. Approaching Senga, she reached out her hand. Senga grabbed it and the Abbess pulled her out of the bush. Senga did not thank her.

"Nice of you to join us, Senga. We were about to form a search party."

“I’ll bet,” said Senga, playing for time. Her head throbbed and her stomach was threatening to empty itself on the ground at her feet, or it would have if there had been anything in it to empty. She brushed down her clothes; unlike the Abbess, she had no special raiment and was feeling somewhat chilled as well as embarrassed. The Abbess, reveling in her enemy’s discomfort, smirked.

“Poor Senga. Always...underdressed.” She turned on her heel and signaled Alice to extinguish the flashlight. “Save the batteries.”

“Always late to the party, too,” added Alma, who had trotted up just as Senga was being rescued from the bush. Then she, too, turned to follow the Abbess.

Buffy, still and slow, stared at Senga across the darkening clearing and shrugged. She put up her hand with the index and middle fingers in the shape of the letter V, then turned and lumbered across the grass, into the darker darkness of the carousel, and joined the others who were already gathered inside with their spoons and bowls.

NINE

That had been long ago, and Senga had learned not to eat or drink or smoke anything the Abbess or the other women offered her. Or anything from Buffy’s hands anymore either. She’d make do with what she could forage or scavenge on her own. She still visited Buffy on occasion in her stronghold, that clearing in the center of a stand of silver maples close to the water’s edge, to which Buffy had added over time, binding and winding, shoring and reinforcing, enhancing and embellishing. Her pot plantation was thriving, and if she had never managed to synthesize LSD, she still made and drank her fierce poteen-like brew, and her diet never suffered for lack of protein.

Buffy, like most of the other women, had found her niche. She’d taught herself butchery, practicing on small things at first, and she taught her friends the stoners to cut too, in exchange for keeping them in weed. The trapping and killing she did herself, though. Whether she ate human flesh, Senga didn’t know, and didn’t want to know.

Alma continued her interrupted teaching career, and if she was now only a teacher from necessity, truly, she was gifted with the

malignant pettiness and aimless cruelty to have been a qualified teacher of the type Buffy and Senga would have suffered in the Big World of the Time Before. She had a natural gift.

The Abbess kept the rules and the ceremonies, the calendar and the rituals. She lived in the carousel with the women who called themselves her Acolytes, and took no part in the everyday work of maintaining the world in the woods. That left Senga.

After that first disastrous Moon Meeting, Senga had begun to walk. She walked in the direction she thought would lead her out of the forest, but despite what the Abbess believed, the forest was tricky; the forest was alive. It had its own purposes and its own rules, purposes and rules the women knew nothing of. Senga suspected that there was a spirit animating and directing the forest, but she didn't know for certain what it wanted. Only what it did. It helped her hide from the others somehow, and aided her in her tunneling and gardening, causing packed earth to give way under her crude tools, and vegetables to grow quick and lush. And it opened paths when she needed them, guiding her in her scavenging. She was grateful for this tendency of the forest, but afraid of it as well.

Senga had been wrong about some things that long-ago night right after the cataclysm, when she and the Abbess had argued: live or die. And she'd discovered some things as well. She wasn't the suicide type, for example. But she wasn't the type to fall in line behind the Abbess, either, and so she began to walk, as if she could walk her way home, out of the forest and back to a world that didn't exist anymore, except in her memory.

In that memory, as she walked, Senga visited and revisited all the places and people she knew she would never see again, her mother and father. She thought too of those she hoped to see again, her siblings, the friends and neighbors all around them in

their old, once-grand, lately shabby apartment building on Parsons Boulevard. She thought of the boys and men and girls who had been her friends, or the rivalrous women and girls she had fought. She had these images for company now, and they were to be all she would have until Pink came to her, sometime in the unseen future. The Women of the Woods were content to live alone in the New World, but Senga was not. Alone in the world, she felt her loneliness keenly. She felt lost, isolated, and abandoned. The walking was automatic and witless, but it also fed her hope. Hope that the forest would show her the way out of itself one day.

She walked through days and nights until one morning after sunup she could no longer place one foot in front of the other, and there it was that she collapsed in exhaustion. When she rallied, she looked around and saw that the forest here was less wild, the terrain more level, and there was water nearby—she could hear it. The trees didn't grow so thickly together, and there was a semicircular clearing around which a thin grove of birches stood at attention. She would build her first home here. As she assessed the possibilities of this bit of earth, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a bright shape in the air that moved, then darted forward, then hung low in the sky, so still except for its wings, which beat so fast they blurred as they held its tiny body in suspension.

My first hummingbird, Senga thought, and smiled to herself, a wan and listless little smile before the enormity of her isolation and forsakenness crashed in on her. Then she wept, great convulsive tears, with loud wailings and shuddering yawns as she gulped in air. How long that lasted she couldn't know, but since she had decided she was not the suicide type, she gradually pushed herself to her feet, and headed toward the sound of running water. She would have to pull herself together and set about the business of surviving.

So that's what she did. That first afternoon, once she'd cried herself out and had several gulps of cold water, she'd crawled into the birch clearing and slept on the bare ground, but she was so weary she wouldn't have noticed if there had been a bed of gravel under those trees.

She awoke, for the first time since the crash, on her back, looking up through birch branches at the same blue sky she had known forever; there were even white clouds being blown across the small, naked patch of azure heaven. Senga got to her knees and prayed. "If you are there, protect me. If you are there, show me the way out." That was all. As she placed her hands on either side of her knees to help her stand, she noticed the faint sheen of moss on the spot where she had slept, which had been bare and brown the night before.

Those first days in her glade were a jumble of problems to be solved, and priorities to be made. Did she want to eat? She'd have to find something to eat, or pick it, or kill it. The last idea held no appeal for Senga. Although she had been a voracious consumer of cheeseburgers wrapped in foil and the kind of fried chicken that came in a red-and-white-striped cardboard bucket with a picture of a bloated, goateed, and bespectacled southern gent on the outside, she had no stomach for catching, much less killing, her own food.

But she was hungry, and her belly was griping, making growling sounds. She had long ago finished eating the things she'd brought with her for the march, and she'd gone through her share of the common food the women had gathered from the buses and divided among themselves. She remembered something she had read, and as she remembered it, she said it aloud, as persons who live alone often do. So began Senga's habit of talking to herself. *A person can survive three minutes without air, three days without*

water, three weeks without food. Okay. So I've got the air and the water. I need food.

She looked around, as if she expected to find a supermarket, or at least an apple tree, on the spot. Her looking did have one good result: she began to remember this part of the forest now, or she thought she remembered being here before. It had changed, and would change more, but there was a ridge directly in front of her that she had seen before. She made her way up the slope toward that ridge, marked with a large, long-dead oak tree that had fallen against another instead of falling all the way to the ground—a bit of luck, since if it had fallen, it would have been covered with leaves, sprouted mushrooms, and rotted away. Instead it had remained where it fell for many years, from the time Senga had made love with her young man near the stables, and it was here still, a signpost. And if it was here, the wild strawberries might also be here. And they were. There were many more than she remembered.

Of course Senga gorged on them, and was almost sick. But she was careful not to eat them all, before wiping her mouth with her hands and heading back to the birch grove and its nearby stream. As she dipped her head down to the water and drank, some impulse made her pause and say, "Thanks." As she did, an errant gust of wind blew across the forest floor and lifted twigs and branches in a leafy susurrant that Senga took for a blessing.

TEN

The forest *was* alive. Not solely in the usual way that forests and grasslands, deserts and moors, bogs and savannas and marshes and swamps are alive; no. The forest had intentionality, it had will. If it didn't give sustenance to the women and girls in quite the way the Abbess had predicted, still, it gave to them, not always what they wanted, but most assuredly what they needed.

It began to seem to Senga that the forest had a soul that needed expression, or that it had an idea of what it wanted to be that it was impatient to realize. Time after time, in the early days, Senga had watched the unnaturally rapid growth of certain stands of trees, with an attendant squealing and squeaking as the bark tried to outpace the burgeoning, pulpy wood inside. Birches and maples she had seen growing like bamboo, shooting measurably taller and rounder in hours instead of years.

The process worked in reverse as well, and Senga had rubbed her eyes in the beginning, but then became almost jaded by viewing the compressed disintegration of copses and groves, and easily familiar with the almost inaudible whispers they made in their dying.

Of course, on the day Senga and Alma would challenge each other at Kettledrum Hill, the pace of the forest's changing had long since slowed. No longer did meadows flower, outbuildings collapse, or new groves appear overnight, nor did the earth buckle as if bored by giant moles making giant tunnels in the space of an afternoon. But the rhythm of growth, although it had slowed, had never stopped altogether. After her initial shock, Senga had been reminded of the thing called "television," and of sitting on the floor in her parents' house and watching the images that emanated from its glowing, glaucous eye on a Sunday evening—watching something, Senga remembered, called *The Wonderful World*. This program often presented images of the natural world—entire life cycles of plants compressed into minutes, frog spawn erupting into frog in the blink of an eye, a moon that traversed the crisp, inky dome of the night in a trice, all while a deep, fatherly voice explained...something. "Magic," young Senga had called it.

She had liked television, even the programs like *Combat*, which was about soldiers and war, and which her brother had insisted they watch. Or wrestling, which was stupid and ugly and clearly fake, but to which her old aunt Tee-anna had been devoted. Tee-anna had died long before Senga got on the bus that last day, but Senga's brother, by then almost grown up and just a year younger than she, had been alive. She wondered, in those early days, if she ever would see him, or her sister, or anyone from the World Before, again.

It occupied her mind, this wondering, as she wandered like Carroll's Alice through a ceaselessly changing, now-you-see-it, now-you-don't landscape. Thinking of the people and the things she had known, and wondering if she would know them again. There was in Senga a strange and placid acceptance, a fatalism

wedded to an indomitable resolve, which allowed her to bear the otherwise unbearable.

While Alma and the Abbess were power seekers, and Buffy sought oblivion and bliss, Senga was driven by an inner conviction that things could and should make sense, and that she could affect the outcome of events. *I can't do everything*, she thought. *But I can do something*. Senga had intelligence, a practical, optimistic nature, a bold curiosity, an uncrushable spirit, and a great deal of common sense.

As she wandered, she began to be aware of the will of the forest, where it wanted to wilden and where it wanted to tame. She followed the taming impulse as it beat down bracken and gorse and made paths, always leading her deeper into the heart of itself, away from the others. One day, it would lead her to the half-buried fire relay station.

But in the early years, she always circled back in her wanderings to, as she told herself, keep an eye on the others. Alma and the Abbess she distrusted, and Buffy filled her with both amusement and, at times, despair, but as she knew well, she needed contact with something more human than the intentionality she sensed in the forest. The young man she had loved once had called the thing that Senga needed "God with some skin on him," and she'd understood—he'd meant people. Humans.

Buffy was drug-dulled, and coarse, homely, and only semi-conscious the majority of the time, but she was human, a real person—almost too much so. And so, every month, it seemed that the forest sensed Senga's need for her own kind, and it led her back, at the days just before the full of the moon, to Buffy's first small hut in the clearing, not far from the carousel and the others, the

place where she could see but not be seen by them, near the place where, in the future, she would meet her foster daughter, Pink.

Living so much inside her mind, Senga didn't notice the exact moment when her memories, her imaginings, her wishes, and her dreams collapsed in on each other and coalesced, but there came a day when she began to feel she had come loose from time. Often she'd thought, in the beginning, upon awakening, "I'll go to so-and-so's house today," or "I wonder what's at the movies." Then she would gasp as she realized that she was cut off from old friends, and movies, and her brother and sister, and her parents, and the young man she had loved, and her entire life. As the years passed, these losses would be less keenly felt, less like a knife wound, more like a bone-deep bruise.

ELEVEN

The Snatch was the reenactment of a myth. The myth promulgated by the Abbess that any of the world's surviving men were due their just punishment for their treatment of women through time. Like every myth, the myth of the Snatch was a mixture of fact and fiction, lies and truth. And as happens with all rituals, when the deep truth of the Snatch began to be forgotten, the forms of the ritual became more rigid, and adherence to them more strenuously defended.

Senga realized this phenomenon only vaguely, without the words to analyze it, but she had observed these principles at work in her own long-ago girlhood, when Sunday attendance at the ritual called the sacrifice of the Mass was obligatory. Senga and her classmates had fidgeted on the narrow wooden kneelers under a soaring Gothic vault, while on the altar the priest turned water into wine, and the roll was taken by the pickle-faced, sad young nuns who were, during the rest of the week, their schoolteachers.

On Monday mornings, retribution was visited on those who had displayed an insufficiency of piety, or worse, missed Mass altogether. (Public shaming for the children who were easily cowed,

corporal punishment for the bold, all backed up with the promise of hellfire itself unless amends were made in the confessional box.) Senga shuddered when she remembered how she had feared the sleepy old priests behind the curtains and the screens, and the snappish nuns—she had lived it all, and she remembered.

Senga would take care to observe the Snatch, but from a distance. After that first time, she never took part. Aside from the rape by the half-dead driver, she knew she would have no more to do with men, unless it was in her dreams. She dreamed often of men; of her father, with his tough pink skin; of her brother, younger, more sensitive to slights, fair-haired and handsome, and easily hurt. She dreamed of their old doctor, who had sewn her eyebrow back together when her brother, growth spurt begun and done, had outgrown Senga's temper and bossiness and punched her. She dreamed of boys from college—fumbling youths, all mouth and teeth and tongue, and she dreamed of their rough, eager sex—straining and ready to surge, hard and hot and tight inside their jeans as they clashed against her in stairwells or doorways or in borrowed cars. Of the young man she had loved, she rarely dreamed. Except once.

She had been dreaming of him the morning she heard the voices. Real voices, not ones inside her head.

She had slept that night in the soft, mossy clearing near the stream where the strawberries grew, the stream that splashed along for a while before disappearing into a natural declivity under a recent but very solid-looking rockfall, close by the spot where she'd made her bed. Senga was, she now saw as she looked around for the source of the sound, near the base of a sort of mesa. She hadn't noticed it the previous night in the darkness. At the bottom of the mesa were fallen rocks and, farther up, a band of dark soil that supported the growth of what looked like an ordinary, if somewhat

taller than normal, boxwood hedge, with innumerable shiny, spear-shaped leaves growing in all directions.

The hedge—as she could see by standing on tiptoe and peering between the lowest branches of the trees around her moss bed—extended above the tops of the taller trees in this part of the woods; it seemed that its roots grew in a layer of soil at a level with the treetop canopy. Senga's clearing was, therefore, at the bottom of a sort of cliff, in a fairytale spot, really. *Times like this I wish the others could see me. They wouldn't believe it. They thought I'd have crawled back to them by now. They're probably starving and killing each other for the crumbs in the seams of their knapsacks!* Senga compressed her lips and exhaled through her nose in satisfaction. She was doing well. Things were looking up.

The air in this part of the forest was populated with small white butterflies attracted by the pink and white clover nearby, and the place was loud with bees and iridescent with dragonflies, and she would have made it her permanent camp, if not for what happened there that morning.

It was men's voices she'd heard, calling her out of her sleep.

“Fuck! Jesus fuck!”

“You asshole, Frank—you're gonna get us killed!”

Senga bolted upright, and the hair on her arms stood erect, and her mouth fell open. Silence.

She had heard it, she had. It hadn't been part of her dream. She looked around wildly, whipping her head from side to side as she tried to determine which direction the unmistakably male, unmistakably real voices were coming from. Then she heard them again. They were above her, at the top of the low cliff.

“It was here, I told ya!”

“Well it ain’t here no more. I shoulda known better than to listen to you. Fucking idiot!”

High above the rockfall, behind the hedge, Senga realized, with a burst of joy—that’s where the voices were coming from. She looked around, but she had nothing she could bring back to the others, nothing that would permit her to say, “See—we are not alone—there are others. She was blind to the danger she might be in from the unseen speakers. Excitement overran caution, and she called out, “Hello!”

High up, behind the hedge, the deeper of the voices yelled, “Shut up, you jackass! I heard something!”

“It’s an echo,” said the higher voice.

“If it was an echo, it would’ve said ‘fucking idiot!’” said Deeper Voice. Then it called, “Where are you?”

For the briefest of moments, Senga considered that she had no point of reference, and so no possible way to tell the men (and she was certain now that they were men, although not yet how many) where she was, before calling out, “I’m here—down here—on the other side of the—bushes—be careful, there’s rocks, and a cliff. I’m at the bottom...”

“Hold on,” said Deeper Voice, and there was a sound of yells and scuffling as he and the other argued some more, an argument Deeper Voice evidently won, and by the time the men had finished, Senga had clambered halfway up the rocky face, following the sounds of their voices. She heard hacking and tearing above her, too, as the men attempted to break through the hedge, which, she now realized, might be more like a gigantic, wild, flat shrubbery than the tame and logical thing Senga had called a hedge in her life in the Big World before the buses crashed. It could be terribly

thick up there; it might take them a while to break through. She looked around. She began to climb, the better to guide them.

From the bottom of the hedge to the forest floor, she estimated, it was a twenty-foot drop. Manageable, if expected, but a potential leg- or neck-breaker if not. “I’m below you,” she cried, when suddenly one, and then the second, crashed through the roots and fell past her where she clung to the rocks. They fell fast, propelled into thin air by the impetus of their own eagerness and the strength of their own arms, and the per second per second force of gravity, which was the same in the World of the Woods as it was in the World Before.

Senga climbed down from her perch slowly; she was shaking in all her limbs. She reached the bottom of the rocky cliff and stopped, suddenly wary. Winded and shocked, the men were struggling to stand up, only yards away from her. A lone bee swam in front of Senga’s face, and she swatted it away.

Slowly, slowly, the young men regained their balance. They bent over, hands on knees, to recover their breathing, and when they did, they grinned toothy grins at each other. Success.

“Holy shit!” said the first to recover his breath. “You were right...”

Deeper Voice took longer to recover, but when he did, he looked directly at Senga. He pointed her out to his companion with an elbow jab and an index finger. The grins were turned on her now.

She froze, gripped by a sudden terror she’d felt once before, which held her rooted for long, slow-moving seconds. A moment ago there had been only a frenzy of joyous hope, but something in the way the two men looked at her turned her guts to ice.

They were not prepossessing. Whatever the cataclysm had wrought in the way of hardship on the women in the woods, it

seemed to have been matched in the world outside. The men were filthy and hunger thinned, and they stank; she could smell them from yards away.

The one nearer to her, the one with the higher voice, was the more slightly built of the pair. The hair on his head was the color of window putty, or would have been if it hadn't been so filthy. The men's exertions had brought the sweat out on their foreheads, and it dripped from their brows and made their already-threadbare shirts cling to their skin. Senga could almost count their ribs. She could hear, if not feel, their breath. As they panted loudly and circled close to her she recognized the metallic smell of starvation. And although they were clearly suffering hunger, as she had been, they were still men—bigger, stronger, tougher. The smell of them stood in her nostrils and raised the hair on her arms, and she panicked. She ran.

Blindly and in terror, she ran toward the others, or toward where she thought the others had been when she saw them last. She crashed through the undergrowth, and the men crashed through behind her, shouting at her, calling her names.

“Crazy bitch!”

“Come back, you fucking cunt!”

But she wouldn't and couldn't stop—her blood was pounding in her ears, and her eyes stung as sweat mixed with her tears and blinded her. In her unseeing terror, she ripped wildly at vines, even as they snapped back and tore her skin. Her one advantage was that she knew the forest, and her pursuers did not.

But that advantage couldn't last long. Though she was goaded by dread and spurred by the will to survive, her pursuers were stronger, and could run faster. Stinging nettles whipped her bare legs, and her breath scratched and caught in her chest, and she knew

she couldn't go one more step when she heard a bigger crash amid all the crashing behind her, and the screams of the men changed. There was still rage, and there were curses, but there was also now suddenly pain in the men's voices. Senga tripped and gave herself up for dead, closing her eyes, waiting for the bone-breaking welter of blows and the ripping of hair she was sure would come. But she waited in vain. Although she could still hear them, her pursuers had suddenly disappeared.

From where she lay panting on the forest floor, she raised her head to look around. Another moment, she now saw as her vision cleared, and she would have reached some safety—Buffy's pot plantation was staked out directly in her path, and Buffy—maybe in response to the men's screams—was lumbering out of her shelter, pulling up the straps of her ubiquitous farmer's overalls and scratching herself. Senga began to shudder and laugh with relief as she lay in a heap on the ground and Buffy approached.

“Whoa,” she said. “What happened to you?”

Buffy's manner was nonplussed, as if it were nothing, as if she saw Senga raw and panicked every day, collapsed on the forest floor in a quivering, fear-struck heap—or as if she were Senga her as she might have in the old days, on a city street, when Senga had been caught in the rain without an umbrella. But what was astonishing to Senga was that Buffy seemed to be expecting her, or at least to be expecting someone.

Buffy lumbered through the screen of saplings that separated her from her old friend, and paused to pull Senga to her feet before striding on to where the men's screams were loudest. She looked down, then turned a toothy grin to Senga. “Got 'em.”

Where she had them, Senga now saw as she approached, was in a hole in the ground that had been covered over with leaves: a

trap. She might have fallen into it herself. Buffy's face was split by her smile.

"Luna was stealing my shit," she explained unhelpfully, but Senga understood; Buffy had dug the pit to catch her. "Um," Buffy said, puzzled, looking down at her catch. "Those are guys."

Warily, Senga shook her head. "Yeah," she said. "Those are guys." She hooted and slapped Buffy on the back. "You have an amazing grasp of the fucking obvious." She laughed. Curses and wordless screams came from the pit, and clods of earth flew out at the two women as well, as the men, enraged and in pain, began grabbing handfuls of earth and hurling them up and out of the trap. Senga's high spirits were returning. *There are others, we're not alone, and I'm alive; I'm safe.* If these two were alive, maybe others were also, others who could be approached—in the safety of numbers, of course.

A clod of earth with roots attached hit her on the forehead and broke apart. She wiped the crumbs off and grinned. It could have been worse. She smiled to herself, shaking her head. It could have been her in the trap, or getting worked over by these two—

"Why were you running?" Buffy asked.

Senga made a wry face and shrugged. "I panicked."

Buffy looked like she had heard the word "panic" before at some point during her life and was struggling to call up its meaning. She squinted at Senga.

"You stay here," she suggested finally. "I'll go get the Abbess."

Fucking hell, thought Senga, *like I'm going to stay here and listen to this. Or wait for that bitch.* The men were making an awful racket; the fall had hardly been straight down, as Buffy's trap was not an engineered thing, not a well but a lazy, badly made thing

of equal parts expedience and inexperience. But Senga nodded in agreement, and Buffy turned to go.

Deeper Voice seemed to have landed unscathed, but Putty Hair was hurt; his reedy screams were painful to hear. Senga removed herself as far from earshot as she dared and waited to see what would happen when the Abbess arrived. Senga would enjoy sticking the pin into her little "World of Women" bullshit bubble! Senga's heart was still thudding, and her chest still hurt from the inside out. But she smiled. *Yes! I win! You won't be able to pretend we're alone now. You've got to admit there's something out there, other people, help—*Relief washed over her, and a giddy sense of triumph.

She lounged on the grass while she waited for Buffy to return with the Abbess. *There are others,* she told herself, smiling. *If the forest let them in, it might let us out. We can leave the forest—we're going home!* She cradled her head in her arms and dozed off, as the shouts of the men grew fainter and less frequent. Senga slept that way for a while.

TWELVE

They ate Putty Hair first.

Senga was sitting cross-legged in the grass, recovering her wits, when the Abbess marched up, flanked by two...*archers*? Senga thought she recognized Renee, but the other woman she couldn't name. Their kit was clearly handmade and improvised, but there was no doubt: they were archers.

The Abbess stepped delicately and deliberately up to the very edge of the pit, and the screaming stopped briefly, as the men sensed hope of rescue. They couldn't notice, but Senga did, the almost imperceptible signal to which the archers immediately responded. Before she could cry out, they had nocked their arrows and let fly, straight down into the pit. Putty Hair's final scream was a pitiable thing, less a scream really than a bubbling whine that trailed off into a gurgling whimper. He had screamed much louder on first falling into the trap. A curse from Deeper Voice flew out of the pit, followed by silence.

The Abbess turned to smile at Senga, whose mouth still formed the word "no," although she had made no sound.

"A mercy, really," the Abbess said, smiling beatifically.

If Senga had thought herself beyond shock, she was to discover on this day that she was not. Rooted and frozen, she watched as the Abbess gave orders, and within minutes, the archers were covering the remaining man in the pit, while Buffy came panting back along the path carrying a rusted, clanking pulley, followed by Luna and Marie, who each had an ordinary wooden carpenter's ladder, and Alice, who brought up the rear with a long branch stripped of leaves and a good length of stout hemp rope, the loose and dangling end of which threatened to trip her.

As Senga watched in dumb amazement, the women, directed with gestures and a few monosyllabic utterances by the Abbess, worked rapidly, planting the legs of each ladder sturdily in the ground on either side of the hole. Then Alice balanced the stripped branch across the hole, from the top step of one ladder to the top step of the other. Buffy, tall and strong, reached across and suspended the protesting pulley, through which she'd already threaded the rope, from the branch. They threw one free end of rope down to the man who remained alive in the pit. The pulley squeaked. The Abbess stepped up to the edge of the pit and cleared her throat. "Tie it around him," she commanded.

The man in the pit resisted, but the archers nocked their bows. He began to comply. Putty Hair was a slippery, stiffening mess, but Buffy was, like her namesake, a beast of burden, and once the ropes were tight around the corpse, she made short work of pulling it out of the hole as the pulley shrieked and clanked.

The archers re-slung their bows onto their backs and helped wrestle the body across the lip of the hole and onto the grass. They humped and bumped him onto Buffy's shoulders, where he hung like a deer, dripping blood from his broken leg and his other wounds. Buffy set off down the path toward the carousel,

an archer on each side to prevent the blood-sodden mass that had been a man from slipping off her shoulders. The Abbess made to follow them but turned to Senga, as Luna and Alice packed up what they had brought.

"You are welcome to join us," she said politely, as if she were speaking of tea and sandwiches. Senga looked toward the pit, so lately full of sound and fury and now so silent. The Abbess approached her. Her eyes sparkled, like those of a sweet child sharing a confidence, and tapped Senga on her nose. "He'll keep." She wagged her fingers at the living man in the pit, and put her arm around Senga to lead her away from the death trap.

"Sisters shouldn't be strangers," she crooned, only a whisper of reproach in her honeyed voice. Senga was too shocked; she gave no reply, but allowed the Abbess to lead her by the hand through the woods toward the carousel. "We have much to do, and much to tell you. And maybe you have much to tell us? Hmm?"

She continued to hold Senga's hand as her words wound around her like cords, slowly pulling her along the Abbess's path. Stray strands of hair had fallen across Senga's face; the Abbess smoothed them away tenderly, but her words were cold and direct: "I said, you have much to tell us, too, don't you? Hmm?" By way of reply, Senga looked blankly at the Abbess and shuddered inwardly, but said nothing. The walk back to the carousel was long, and Senga's steps were slow, somnambulant. But she allowed herself to be led by the hand like a child, while the Abbess pointed out various perfectly ordinary natural features as if they were recent discoveries, or exclaimed over some utterly pedestrian phenomenon, like a butterfly or a bee. *How I hate her*, Senga was thinking, when suddenly they were...where?

She saw now how the archers had been fetched so quickly. Here (by the giant rhododendrons—she remembered them) the forest road curved, and suddenly there was a kind of encampment, or something between a bivouac and a garrison—at any rate it was an edifice, a rude fortification of wattle and daub. A frightened-looking preteen girl peered out of an opening in a wall and greeted them with what could have been a salute or just a tremulous wave. The Abbess accepted the salutation with another of her beatific nods. She and Senga continued to walk, past features Senga no longer quite recognized, and the Abbess kept up her anodyne monologue, eventually subsiding into a barely audible humming that put Senga's teeth ever so slightly on edge.

And so in this way they continued, until they reached the vicinity of the carousel, and still Senga recognized . . . nothing. How long ago had it been since she walked away? *A month, maybe. Maybe two.*

She tried to calculate the length of time using the number of meals she'd had; she had eked out the remaining bus rations as long as she could (including last night's beef jerky) and had lately been living off the strawberries and (more recently, spurred by hunger) some plants she recognized as bittercress and Johnny-jump-ups. And of course she had been drinking from what she had begun to think of as "her" stream. Eggs from strange birds she had pilfered and sucked down raw, always being careful to leave at least one in the nests she plundered. The few nuts she had been able to extract from pine cones by snapping off the scales, as she had seen squirrels do, had hardly been worth the effort. She hadn't been wasting her energy, but she hadn't accomplished much either.

She had seen chipmunks and of course squirrels, but had neither the heart nor the skill to catch and eat them. She had tried a

worm, but couldn't bring herself to do more than put in her mouth and spit it back out again. It might have been two months since she had walked away from the others. It felt like two months. She didn't think she'd had two months' worth of meals. She lost count and started over as she walked into the women's camp.

"Hi, Senga..."

"Hey!"

"What the..."

"How are you?"

"Where have you been?"

"We thought you were dead!"

Calls came from women she hardly recognized and filled the air as the Abbess walked her across the wide, empty, recently swept earthen patch that seemed to unroll like a tongue from the mouth of the carousel. Around the periphery of the tongue were shelters, lean-tos mostly, but Senga discerned a couple of crude tipis. Beyond and behind them stretched the darkening forest.

On the far side of the earth-and-patchy-grass field, partly concealed by the carousel itself, was a scaffold or stage of some kind. There Buffy and the archers were doing something to the body of the man they had killed. These women had been busy, and Senga's face grew red, thinking of her own inactivity over the past few...she didn't even know how long. She remembered her inward gloating of just hours ago, and her spirits sank.

The Abbess had led her to the entrance of the carousel, which Senga now saw had been barricaded, and the barricade was staffed by none other than Alma. Suddenly Senga realized what was making the women so unrecognizable: they were clean. They were all dressed alike (except for Buffy, whose bib overalls seemed to

have become a part of her body), and apart from Buffy, they were astonishingly clean.

“I love what you’ve done with the place,” she joked weakly.

Alma pushed aside the papers she had been pretending to do something with, looked up at the Abbess, then pinched her nose and nodded toward Senga.

“Yes,” said the Abbess, reading Alma’s unsubtle grimace and wiping her hands against each other as if to rid them of filth, the hands with which she had lately so tenderly led Senga and touched her hair. “She needs a bath. See to it, Alma. I need to change and then lie down.” The Abbess disappeared into the labyrinth of the carousel’s remodeled interior, momentarily parting a curtain that wafted toward Senga an aroma like frankincense as it fluttered closed behind her.

Alma drew herself out from behind her post and took Senga by the elbow so that only the merest edges of her bony fingertips touched Senga’s skin, as if it were poison ivy. If Alma had had a pair of tongs, she would have used them. “Come with me, and don’t argue,” she commanded.

“Who’s arguing?” Senga allowed herself to be guided around to the back entrance of the carousel, stumbling a little against the steps that she had forgotten were there, though she had walked them once or twice in her life before. Alma sucked her teeth in impatience and pushed her along.

“Just don’t start. Tonight’s an important night. I have...we all have a lot to prepare. We haven’t all been rolling around like pigs in shit like you have, from the look and the smell of you...”

“You haven’t changed a bit,” Senga was about to say, when she was brought up short alongside a dented metal wall, at least five feet tall and about eight feet long. It was the side of a rectangular

sheet-metal...box, Senga supposed. Then she realized it was called a “dumpster,” and that she had seen lots of them before, in the local parks during municipal renovations, and at construction sites in the city. This one was propped up on concrete blocks and had a wood fire burning underneath, tended by two of Alma’s girls.

Strip,” Alma ordered her, and the teenagers giggled.

“What?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You heard me. Take off those rags—they need to be burned. And get yourself into that tub. You’re lucky it’s bath night.”

So Senga had her first bath since the bus crash in a dumpster filled with water that percolated with the grime of who knew how many other women’s bodies. But it was warm, and deep enough so that she could submerge herself, and it felt good.

“Use soap,” Alma snapped, passing Senga a sliver of some oily substance that smelled of a familiar something but that Senga couldn’t name. “Get your hair too. And hurry up; I haven’t got all day.” She had already taken Senga’s clothes and shoved them into the shallow pit under the dumpster, where the fire had almost gone out. It flamed up again, but just enough to keep the water warm—not enough to scorch Senga when her body floated against the sides of the metal tank, hitting them and making them emanate a hollow, watery, bonging sound.

Alma was scowling and pointing and saying something to the girls that Senga couldn’t hear, and she didn’t care to try. Her body was stirring up warm currents from the fire-heated bottom of the tank, and the warmth, instead of soothing her to sleep as it might have once done, was waking her up. The unfamiliarity of what should have been the old sensation of bathing jolted her, and the results of the industriousness of the others began to shake her and

make her ashamed. She had thought she would bring welcome news to them. Instead she saw that they hadn't been waiting for her, and that her news was neither welcome, nor was it news. They had begun to live the lives they wanted to live.

Senga began to realize that she had been asleep in her bower too long. It was early evening, and as she floated in the tub on her back in the gloaming, she could look up and out between the branches overhead and see the blushing dusk, and a single naked star. Nighttime. Time to wake up.

THIRTEEN

While Senga bathed, the girls who had tended the fire were joined by some others, and together they deftly assisted her out of the tank and into a long, pale garment similar to the ones she had seen the others wearing as she'd approached the carousel. The coarse fabric, as it passed over her face, gave off a clean scent Senga sharply recognized from childhood, when her mother had hung their household laundry out on the roof to dry in the sun. She sneezed in the light evening breeze, and a sweet-faced, tallish teenager stepped up with a rough but similarly immaculate cloth to rub-dry her hair for her, after which a smaller girl began to dress it with some sweet-smelling oil and untangle it with a wide-toothed comb. The taller girl gave her clean water to drink. Senga didn't resist, didn't assist. She looked on, as if at something happening to someone else, as she was given a pair of soft fabric shoes for her feet; more like small cloth bags, or socks, really, which tied around her ankles. Then she was led by the youngest of the fire girls, who took her hand and guided her to where the Abbess sat.

A buzz of activity accelerated as some women readied the carousel lawn for the gathering, grunting and pulling the heavy wooden

benches and long tables into place, but the Abbess, as usual, only presided; she did no work. A fire burned in a small clearing on the far side of the carousel lawn, and a rich smell of roasting meat perfumed the air. Senga realized what it was she had seen Buffy doing to the body of Putty Hair. It was his flesh that had been spitted and was now being turned into a sizzling, reeking meal.

She looked at the Abbess, who smiled and patted the bench nearest her. "We had almost given you up for dead," she said, smiling her dead-eyed smile, and Senga knew suddenly that if she had been caught sleeping in her glade, or if she had fallen into Buffy's trap, it would have been her body they were turning on the spit, without rue or remorse. But she sat down next to the Abbess nonetheless, and smiled, albeit mirthlessly, and although she felt dazed, she determined that she would say nothing. In fact, there was nothing she could say. She was wandering around like an animal. They were building a civilization. What could she say to them?

The Abbess smoothed out the folds of her linen gown as women began to approach the assembled benches and long tables in front of the carousel. She would address the gathering before the meal. As Senga looked on, bemused, it seemed to her that time passed quickly, then slowly, then stopped altogether, and the full moon was caught in the branches of the trees that ringed the carousel lawn. The Abbess patted Senga's hand, and Senga was jolted back into the moment. Again the Abbess's pert nose crinkled. "We'll talk later. I'm sure you have much to ask us, and we want to know all about what you have been up to as well." Senga just stared at her like an owl. The Abbess winked and then rose and crossed to the front of the platform to speak to the gathered crowd in the flesh-scented evening.

Senga remained where she was; she could do little else. She was dazed, and exhausted, and hungry, and she wondered what it was that they were preparing to eat, since an entire person could not, she reasoned, be completely cooked in the time that had elapsed since the killing of Putty Hair. It had taken some time to dress him and spit him and build up the fire. Still, from the time she had entered the carousel clearing, she had smelled cooking meat; it was not so long since she had cooked a steak herself that she would have forgotten the smell. Were they preparing something else? But what? What else could they have to prepare? Were there cows? She thought back to that first Full Moon Gathering and her gorge started to rise, but her stomach griped. She might have to eat whatever it was, or whoever it was. Putty Hair was one thing, but she would, she thought, draw the line at one of the other women, because... Nothing was making sense, least of all her own thoughts, but she tried to clear her head, to focus.

She was desperate to know, first of all: had they really started killing and cooking each other? She squinted hard across the clearing at the spot where Buffy's young helper was turning the spit. Where was Buffy? And how could she do this? Had she really joined *them*? Senga strained her weak vision in the gathering dark, and soon she was able to see her, using planks to move hot rocks from the base of the fire to a spot some yards away, adding them to rocks that already smoldered there. So they had a pit fire as well as the spit, and whatever had been cooking in the pit during the day was probably what they had been preparing to eat that night. Putty Hair was an afterthought, a bonus—a kind of meaty dessert. Or, more likely, tomorrow's lunch.

Senga decided to ignore her stomach until she could see what came out of the pit. She had just about decided that she wouldn't

eat anyone she knew. Or anyone younger than fifteen. (Or thereabouts.) But the pieces of meat the young women were—

“Sisters!” the Abbess was saying. “Rejoice! For the great Goddess Mother has answered our prayers, and given us not just food, but a way forward. We finally have...a man! A live one!” Whistles and wolf calls, yip, yow-yow-yowwww, went up from the assembled audience. Of course this announcement was not a surprise; with the return of Buffy and the archers to the carousel lawn, word had spread like oil across a pane of glass. But the living man was a long-awaited and evidently a long-prayed-for boon. Clearly, the Abbess and her Acolytes had thought long and deeply about the continuation of their world in the woods, and had made their plans real while Senga had been sleeping.

Senga turned her head and noticed Buffy’s young helpers slapping each other’s backs and heard their cheers—cheers that went on for some time, to the Abbess’s very evident pleasure. When the noises began to subside, a medium-sized girl from each of the three long tables padded across the grass to the firepit where Buffy and her helpers handed each an enormous trencher piled with something grisly and smoking from the rocky oven pit. Returning laden with the charred meat, the girls stepped up to the dais first and inclined their heads toward the Abbess, who indicated wordlessly that they were to serve the others. She continued to address the crowd as the women ate, pulling meat from bone with scorched fingers, indecorously, like the half-wild hungry things they had become.

A girl stepped up onto the dais and handed a bone with some flesh on it, wrapped in a strip of clean cloth, to Senga, who frowned at it. It smelled rank, but her stomach twisted toward it. The Abbess went on.

“It has happened, as it was foretold—”

“You told us it would,” cheered Alma, and the others repeated after her.

“Told us it would!”

“Tonight we will fill our bellies with the last of our late beloved sister, Mae, who in death has sustained our lives for another day, and for which we give thanks.” Heads were bowed throughout the assembly. “Tomorrow we will feast on man for the first time, before our first riding.”

Senga dropped the hunk of bone as it was halfway to her mouth, and the same girl who had served it to her scrambled to her feet and grabbed it up. Senga’s gorge rose, and her head swam, and she passed out of consciousness for a moment as she leaned against the wall of the carousel.

The Abbess droned on. The moon had escaped the trees now and bleached the carousel lawn with its brilliance, staining the grass an icy white and casting blacker-than-black shadows. Buffy continued turning the spit, and wood against wood squeaked and squealed.

“We were delivered from the world of men to this world of women in the woods. In a most powerful and awesome way, our Heavenly Mother delivered us from rape and degradation. Through hardship and long toil she has tested us, and now we have proven ourselves worthy. We are ready to receive this boon, and we honor our Mother as we accept her gift. Eat well this evening. Sleep well tonight, sisters, for tomorrow we take the first steps on the road to our destiny.”

FOURTEEN

When it happened, that first Snatch was a messy affair. It took place not on the day after the Full of the Moon, as promised, but two days after that. Deeper Voice turned out to be a fiercer fighter than he'd seemed. He wouldn't cooperate even slightly in his own demise, and so they'd had to leave him down in the pit for a day or two to let hunger wear him out to an even greater degree than it already had. Even after that, the two women who'd been sent to fetch him out of the trap couldn't quite manage it, and ultimately it was Buffy who got down in the dirt and grappled with him, first dropping a large rock onto his head, and then finally managing to half strangle him until he lost consciousness. At the edge of the pit, Renee and Alice clutched each other and cried, "Don't kill him!" and "We need him alive!" Finally they and Buffy hauled him, semiconscious, out of the pit, using the same rope and pulley they'd used to get the dead Putty Hair out, and lashed him to a sledge that the women had prepared for the task.

Of course, when Deeper Voice came to, he struggled and thrashed, but the hemp ropes were thick and strongly knotted. Buffy and the two other women took turns dragging the sledge

and sitting on Deeper Voice's chest, laughing, on the road back to the carousel lawn, where the rest of the women were picking the remains of Putty Hair out of their teeth.

Senga's plan, insofar as she had one, was to feign contrition and a desire to rejoin the Abbess's group until she could think of a better idea. And so she helped put the finishing touches on the man cage, the crude device the Abbess had designed and the women had built out of felled saplings and ropes. If Senga had thought that the forest provided for her needs because it intuited that she was alone and unviolent, like the peaceable South Americans, she soon had to rethink that notion. The Abbess's followers were embarked on what seemed to Senga a perverse and deadly quest, yet even so, the forest had provided them every bit of raw material they needed, as well as it had to her.

Out of what the forest provided they had constructed the shelters and huts Senga had seen ringing the carousel lawn, and they had the metal tanks, the dumpsters, which they used for bathing, and rock pits for cooking. They had the broken school bus too, out of which they had fashioned both a schoolhouse and a dormitory. In the carousel itself there was shelter in bad weather for the entire tribe, and some comfort too. Everyone scavenged, and although there were days when the scavenging parties emerged from the forest and returned to the carousel lawn with empty hands, there were evenings enough when they came back with treasures. When they needed to dig, they found spades in the carousel's maintenance shed. They needed tools, and the thin edges of the woods gave up a hammer and an axe. A saw was desired, and one was discovered. The hammer was no good without nails, and lo! They found nails. Cloth for their clothing came from what they surmised had been a warehouse overgrown with vines along the southwestern border of

the forest. In fact it had once been a dry goods store situated on a street called Jamaica Avenue, a street that had been swallowed by the forest and, before that, riven by the quake, and was preserved seemingly for them to use. And use it they did. One day it had been discovered by Renee, and the women had raced to plunder it, in their haste collapsing the crooked mezzanine level onto the ground floor. However, no one important was hurt, and they treated the remains the same way they would eventually treat Mae, and Putty Hair, and anyone else who happened to die: as protein.

So on the day before the first Snatch, Senga was handed some rope and told to fortify the cage where Deeper Voice would be kept, naked, bruised, and living, until he was needed. Her instructions were not to speak to him when she passed him his ration of food. None of the women spoke to him, although his cage was positioned in the center of the carousel lawn for three days. *He* spoke—he spat, and screamed, and clutched and wrung the bars with filthy hands, and lunged for Senga whenever she brought him his rations.

On the second day, the other women began to approach him with sticks, and to poke him through the bars. The younger girls pelted him with pebbles. But the ones who were budding and supple—they were being scrubbed and softened and sent to entice him, dressed in diaphanous shifts that were tight over their pink, or tawny breasts, gliding past his cage with something like mercy in their eyes as they smuggled him berries and eggs. As they had been taught to do, they caught and gazed into his eyes, and if he had been himself, he would have seen what was happening. But it was long since he had been himself.

In the abuse each woman inflicted on him, she got a little revenge for something that had been done to her in the Time Before. Some of the women had been stabbed, and they stabbed at

him with sharpened sticks. Some had been beaten, and they pelted him with rocks as big as they could throw. It didn't matter to them anymore that this particular man might have been an innocent. He was in their power now.

In his despair, he looked in the eager eyes of the blossoming young ones for a chance to escape, unaware that what he was seeing was in truth his deeper entrapment. When the bolder of the young girls let her finger stroke his in the gathering dark of the second evening, as she deposited her offering of extra food, he believed he had found his accomplice. In truth, she had him. She placed a finger against her lips, then reached through the bars and touched his arm, mouthing just one word: "Later."

Later, when the dark was deepest, she came to him with a knife. Her name was Skye. She was naked under a rough blanket, and when she had cut through the rope lashings, she faced her victim and smiled. The moon was past the full, but there was enough light for Senga, where she was hidden with the others, to see what was happening and to play her part. She went to the edge of the lean-to she had been assigned to share and coughed. Loud enough to be heard across the lawn, loud enough to make cover for the young girl to enter the cage and clutch at the arm of the young man who thought she was rescuing him. The girl shook her head and placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Careful," she mouthed, and he nodded. Senga, seemingly awakened from sleep, played out her part. Walking to the edge of the lawn, she squatted and noisily pissed.

In the cage, young woman and young man squirmed against each other in the tight quarters, and young flesh called to young flesh. Covering them both with the woolly blanket, the young woman smiled up into Deeper Voice's eyes and reached down

between his legs for what she had been told she would find there. Find it she did, and she stroked it to make and keep it hard as she'd been taught, as she looked directly into his eyes. She licked two of her fingers and held them up to him for him to spit on them too. He did, and she wiped the resulting mixture against her body's inner walls as she pushed the dazed and weakened young man onto his back and took him into herself. The ride was quick, but his climax could be felt—his thick cock pulsed inside her, once, twice, three times, and he was spent, and she knew he was spent.

Before he caught his breath, his strange partner was out of the cage and away, and Senga and Buffy were lashing the bars shut again. The girl called Skye scampered into the carousel to cheers and applause, and was given the best bed to sleep in (with her feet propped up to help the spunk she was harboring to do its job).

If Deeper Voice had been a different sort of man, he could have stretched his life out for a few more miserable days, and perhaps even had another rider or two. However, he screamed and cursed so much that night that Alma dispatched him before dawn with a knife between the ribs, so she could get some sleep.

Over the course of the days that followed, the women celebrated. Of course, Skye was kept in bed; this was an historic first, and care had to be taken. No one wanted anything to upset the natural order: conception, pregnancy, birth. They would worry about other things later, things like the possibility that the child so conceived could be male. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," said the Abbess.

She and her Acolytes were holding court in the best bedchamber of the carousel with Skye now, and in groups of twos and threes, the rest of the women and girls were ushered in and then ushered out. The bed was piled high with flowers, and some of the girls

brought fruits, wild strawberries like the ones Senga had found near her stream, tiny but bright red and bursting sweet. Grapes were brought, too, tart, from wild vines, but laden with juice.

Senga entered the carousel to pay respects to Skye in her turn. She wished her well, but it was to the Abbess that she wanted to speak.

“Senga, you performed your part beautifully,” the Abbess gushed. Taking their cues from their leader, the Acolytes beamed at this somehow newly rehabilitated Senga.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t know Alma was gonna kill him.”

The Abbess laughed her silvery, tinkling laugh and wrinkled her nose.

“Well, it might have been done more elegantly, but still it would have had to be done.”

“Why not just bring him back to the edge of the forest and let him go back to wherever he came from? He wouldn’t come back, not once he saw what we did to the other one. Why did it have to be killing?” Senga now remembered the first Full Moon Meeting and the meaning of the Rules of the Forest, which she had laughed at.

The Abbess chuckled. “What, ‘release him into the wild?’” Her retainers laughed.

Senga shrugged.

“Oh, Senga, think. How long do you imagine it would be before men were swarming into the forest, to ruin it the way they ruined everything else?”

One of the listening Acolytes snorted.

“Just think how they’d love to have us here, ‘poor defenseless women.’”

“Ripe for the taking,” tsked the other, nameless one. Senga looked at the floor.

“Well anyway, thanks for the bath and the clothes and everything, but I’m gonna be going now. I’m sure any one of these ladies will be able to take my place next time the moon is full...”

The Abbess excused herself from her coterie with a grim nod, and walked toward the curtained wall of the bedchamber with Senga.

“Consider,” she said meaningfully, placing a restraining hand on Senga’s arm. With the other hand she drew a twig along Senga’s cheek.

“I have done nothing but since I got here,” said Senga.

If the bus had not crashed, and the world had not ended, if the Abbess had taken her place in the society that was now finished, she might have said something to Senga like, “I’m offering you an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of something big.” For truly, those were the terms in which the Abbess thought. The forest was to her a golden opportunity to impose her will on everyone in it. Senga smiled a crooked, close-lipped smile. “No thanks,” she said, as if reading the Abbess’s thoughts. “I’ll be going now. I wish you the best. Really.” As Senga slipped out of the carousel, she heard rather than saw the Abbess break the twig she had been holding. Without turning to look, she made her way slowly back toward her glade by the stream and the rockfall. She would begin again there.

FIFTEEN

Another woman did take Senga's place, and Buffy dug more holes to trap more men. At the next full of the moon, there were two wooden cages in the clearing on the carousel lawn, with two new men howling and shaking the bars. Three more of the youngest teenage girls were primed to ride, so the three would take turns riding the captives, and Alma was under strict orders that no matter how loudly the men protested, she was to leave at least one alive until each newly adolescent girl had ridden at least once.

It was left to Senga to wonder how much the Abbess had foreseen and how much she had engineered during those first few weeks when she had formed the idea of the Snatch. Back when Senga had stumbled onto the first Full Moon Meeting—that was at least how far back this plan went. As she made her way back to her camp on the night of her own first Snatch, Senga realized that she had let contempt for the Abbess blind her to the woman's intelligence. She would be doubly on her guard, now and in future, she promised herself.

The South Americans were rewarded by the forest for their move to a safer site; they had fresh water and fertile soil, and if the

vegetarian diet on which they mainly subsisted sometimes seemed flat, they could always eke it out with eggs and small game. Never would they resort to eating anything from the other women, *las mujeres malas*, even in later years when it would be offered to them by the playful, wild-haired little girl who sometimes appeared at their camp, pointing at herself and saying “Yuki-Kai.” She came and went like an animal, a feral thing, and the South American women made a pet of her, but they never trusted that the food she carried in a small sack slung over her shoulder hadn’t recently been human.

Senga went back to her bower, where she constructed a large tepee like the ones she had observed at the carousel lawn. She talked to herself, said the women the Abbess sent to spy on her periodically, and the Abbess smiled sadly and shook her head as if to say “poor thing,” but she kept sending the women to check.

It was to this tepee that Maureen would come when she was in labor with Pink, and it was to the South Americans that Maureen went to die, and they buried her in their little churchyard. Neither Senga nor the Abbess ever knew where she went. Anything could happen in that forest; anything did. Animals and birds died and became food for other animals, and Maureen was just a big, two-legged animal, after all. Senga assumed the forest must have eaten her up. Senga was right.

So Pink and Yuki grew up in the forest, motherless girls living side by side but ignorant of each other, the one kept in secret by Senga, the other subjected to the Abbess’s rule. Pink had never been hit. Yuki-Kai was beaten frequently, and with great ceremony, for all kinds of infractions, until Alma’s arm was sore, but the beatings only seemed to drive the wildness further into the core of her being instead of casting it out.

Senga found the relay station when Pink was an infant, and Senga felt relief. They would leave the tepee; here they would be safer. At least they would be drier, for when summer came to the forest, it brought monsoonal rains the likes of which Senga had never experienced before. The red tile roof kept them dry, and in the old, white-tiled kitchen, there was a large stove, which of course was no longer gasified but which was still fireproof. Senga taught Pink how to make “cats” out of paper and twigs and, as she grew, allowed her to help light the fires that warmed them and made the wet winters bearable.

They celebrated Christmas in the relay station every year. Senga would climb one of the few conifers in the forest and saw the top of the trunk off to make a Christmas tree. She’d drag it into the station, and at first she by herself, and in later years she and Pink together, would hang on it objects they had found, to each other’s delight. Pink favored the shiny chewing-gum wrappers she would find when Senga took her walking. Senga loved bird’s nests. And after the tree was decorated, on whatever day Senga deemed Christmas Eve, she would rock her girl to sleep, singing “Silent Night,” until Pink’s dreams could almost be seen, setting her paper-thin eyelids fluttering. “Merry Christmas,” Senga would whisper in the echoing dark, before daring to fall asleep herself, one arm around her foster daughter and one ear open. That’s how it went for a long time. Winters brought to Senga and Pink weak imitations of Christmases past.

When snow fell in the forest, the black trunks of the trees and their blacker branches stood out starkly against the mysteriously violet sky. Then Senga kept Pink inside the relay station, not only for warmth but because the naked trees gave no cover. It would

have been possible to see long distances, and Senga distrusted the Abbess.

Indoors, of course, there was no television like Senga had enjoyed as a child in winter, when her father, a bricklayer, would be released early from work. Mortar wouldn't adhere to the bricks when the wet snow fell, and so home he would come, stamping his feet in his work boots with their complicated hooks and leather laces, shedding his cold, wet clothes until he was down to the socks his mother-in-law had knitted him, and something called "combination underwear." He'd sip whisky and watch television with Senga, his spicy male smell warm and comforting as he'd let her burrow into the crook of his arm, and her mother would cover them both with a blanket she'd made herself of a kaleidoscopic array of odd bits of yarn left over from sweaters and other projects. Outside, the violet light made the sky magical, and inside the blue-gray light from the television flickered and jumped in time with the lights that bubbled on the family's Christmas tree. Senga missed her father. And her mother too.

Here in the now, in the Time After, she couldn't watch television at Christmas in a cozy apartment under a blanket with Pink, but there were books in the forest, and Pink learned to read them at Senga's hand. Sometimes Senga read them to her in the fading winter light. Some of the books Senga had found in her explorations of the relay station while the infant Pink was asleep; most of these had been left behind in the bathrooms, along with what used to be called "girly" magazines. Senga burned these in the stove; she didn't want Pink to see them. She didn't want to see them herself either, not because she disapproved, but what good would it do her to get switched on when there was little chance of being switched off again in the way she preferred, in a feather bed, by a

hairy-legged young man, not too tall, heavily muscled, with dark eyes and a smile that could make the angels weep. She laughed at herself as she burned the magazines and said, "Sayonara, sex."

Senga devised games as Pink grew, games to train her to survive, like the pain game, and games to occupy her curious, growing mind. Like all children, Pink asked "why" about things Senga could explain and about things she couldn't—and about things Senga wouldn't explain. Pink learned to be satisfied with whatever Senga told her. She had to.

A game they both loved to play was one they called "Alphabet." In this game, Pink sat between Senga's legs with her back to Senga, who traced letters with her index finger on Pink's small, straight back. Pink learned quickly, and soon progressed to spelling out entire words, then sentences, as Senga wrote them on her skin. In fact, she soon surpassed Senga's ability to "read" the words spelled out on her own back by Pink.

So she taught Pink to read and write, with materials provided by the forest, or rather by those who had left them behind for the forest to unearth. Right after the initial cataclysm, when the forest had begun eating up larger and larger patches of Brooklyn and Queens, the roots of the fast-growing trees churned up everything in their path, breaking through asphalt and tilling whatever they found underneath. The trees chewed through all, including sewers and gas lines and garbage dumps; and it was from these last that many of the raw materials the forest dwellers lived on came. The broken sewer pipes and gas mains were of course hazards to be avoided.

There had been a small New York City public library building near the old store that had been similarly semi-demolished, which was the source of much of what the women plundered.

Senga complained to herself that the pool of books in the library was never wide enough. She also complained to herself that books, despite being made of something as seemingly light as paper, were terribly heavy when she was carrying them back to Pink.

Eventually it seemed the forest had turned against the library. It began to pull the building down quickly, throwing up ivy and pulling down more and more of the building day by day, blocking the windows with creepers and liana-like vines faster than Senga could rip them out, until finally she had to admit defeat. The books she had managed to salvage would have to do.

PART TWO

SIXTEEN

Most of those who had lived in Old Brooklyn had died quickly once the estuarial waters of the East River rose up and commingled with the lagoon that had been Jamaica Bay. Throughout the wider region, the higher elevations of Staten Island were spared, but tiny Governor's Island was devoured entirely by the flood as it spread, engulfing Red Hook, Park Slope, and all of Carroll Gardens. Borough Park went under, and most of Brooklyn south and west of Bensonhurst, including Coney Island, Sheepshead Bay, and Brighton Beach—all these were sunk as well.

What was left of Old Brooklyn now began somewhere in the vicinity of what had been Crown Heights and stretched south to Midwood, which now sat on the oily shore of what had been Gravesend Bay. Bedford-Stuyvesant was spared the flooding, but the fires, which raged for several years after the cataclysm, destroyed much that had escaped the flood. The northeastern fringe of Prospect Park, where it joined the forest, blended into the boundary between the what remained of Brooklyn and Queens.

Everything else was forest, fire, and flood.

Brooklyn had been filled with fuel—banks and offices filled with paper, and courthouses, warehouses, markets, museums, and jails, buildings that burned and burned and burned. Structures had collapsed as the earth had convulsed, and in the spots where there was no green forest able to gain purchase, only the rocks and cobbles and pipes and tubes now remained of the streets. What had been varied, industrious, mercantile Brooklyn became a hard moonscape inhabited by distrustful, warring tribes, men and women scabbling for survival and supremacy. And a few of them ventured into the forest at its western end.

The Abbess knew. She knew there were many men, and other women as well, although she hid the knowledge from her followers. She'd only let Alma in on the secret because it served one of her purposes.

"How many are there?"

"I don't know that. But we can assume there are more of *them* than of us."

"Does the forest grow there, too?" asked Alma.

"Well, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*." The Abbess's sense of humor was poor to none. Even so, it was wasted on Alma.

"Huh?"

"No. Never mind." The Abbess and Alma had walked through the previous night and some of an early autumn morning, leaving Buffy in charge of the rest of the followers. It was a habit of the Abbess to pace through the woods, in part to measure the extent of her domain. She'd done this beginning soon after the cataclysm happened. There was not much that happened in the forest that the Abbess didn't know, no matter what Senga believed.

"We're almost there."

Alma was wary. The forest here seemed to have fewer trees, and more shrubbery. Some bushes grew as high as small saplings, with slender branches shaped like jets from a fountain, and leaves like fans or feathers. The Abbess seemed familiar with this place, but Alma was not. The two stopped before a long, earthen berm that crossed their path. It had been thrown up by the original cataclysm, topped with bracken ferns and with sloping walls covered now with shining ivy, and pea-green and yellow gorse. Could they have reached the end of the forest?

The berm, Alma noticed, was flanked by long, tall hedges that curved back toward the overhanging forest trees from which the two women had emerged.

"Get down." The Abbess gestured at Alma. "And shut up. And wait."

The two hid themselves under the fountaining plants, down among the shrubs, which pinched and poked, skinny Alma especially. The Abbess seemed oblivious.

The sun had risen high enough to send shafts of early September light raying down to the spot where Alma and the Abbess were hidden. Between the spiky bushes and the surprising heat, Alma was being tortured. She began to notice flies, too, large ones that buzzed loudly, but she had been too cowed by the Abbess for too long to complain. Long minutes passed. After an endless half hour, the bushes, the cramp in her bony backside, the flies, and the heat had become too much for Alma. As she shifted, something else happened. A shuffling sound and a waving motion from the bracken on top of the berm stopped Alma before she could cry out. It must be some kind of animal, a big one. She grabbed for the Abbess, but the Abbess was already quickly on her own feet.

“Hello,” she called, and at the same time dug an elbow into Alma, who was paralyzed.

The creature that seemed to Alma to emerge from the side of the berm was immediately recognizable. It was a man. It was dirty. It stank. It was smiling. And it had been expected.

“Hello,” it said back to the Abbess. Alma now had to grip the Abbess’s arm to hold herself up. The Abbess was nonplussed. She shrugged off Alma’s hand.

The Abbess and it knew each other, clearly. And this meeting had been arranged.

“Hey,” it said as it came nearer. It tipped its head toward Alma. “I thought we was supposed to come alone.”

The Abbess smiled. “Don’t worry,” she lied. “She’s in on everything.”

Alma stared, first at it, then at the Abbess. What was she was supposed to be in on?

“What about what we discussed?” the Abbess asked.

“I did like you said. Told just one or two.”

“Only men?”

It was staring at Alma in a way she didn’t like.

“Yeah, yeah. Just guys, like you said.”

“Just young ones?”

“That’s practically all we got left, but yeah, they’re young.”

“Wonderful,” said the Abbess. She turned slightly, as if she were about to walk away.

“Hey, uh, lady..”

The Abbess turned back. “Yes?”

“Ain’t ya forgettin’ something? I got something comin’ to me.” It looked meaningfully at Alma.

“Oh, yes,” she said, and for a moment Alma thought she knew why the Abbess had insisted on bringing her along on her mystery trip this morning. She was going to be given to this man. She squirmed inwardly.

But the Abbess was full of surprises. She stepped forward, and in an instant she had pulled out a knife. In a few more seconds, she had slashed its throat.

As it fell to the forest floor, burbling its life out, the Abbess calmly stowed the knife in the folds of her gown, where it had lived, hidden, until needed.

“Well,” she said to Alma. “He’s not going to walk onto the spit himself.”

So together the Abbess and Alma retraced their steps, carrying the dead weight between them. The Abbess took the lead, carrying the legs, one hand hooked under each knee, leaving speechless Alma to put one hand under each of its arms, which were slippery with gore. As they humped it back through the deepening forest to the carousel lawn, the Abbess filled Alma in on as much of her plan as she wanted Alma to know. By the time they reached their destination, the thing they were carrying was a sodden, bloody mess, attracting flies.

Alma was shocked and numb. But as the numbness wore off, she began to understand. She understood that the Abbess had meant everything she’d said at that first Moon Meeting about building a world of women. Alma had believed her, believed that there really was a Goddess who’d provide for all their needs. The unfortunate men like Deeper Voice and Putty Hair seemed to prove that the Goddess really was meeting their needs. When a future random man or two stumbled into the forest, the Women of the Woods went hunting for spunk, and thanked the Goddess, as the

Abbess had predicted they would. However, what the Abbess' followers didn't know was that the Goddess didn't work fast enough for the Abbess. Alma was learning that the Abbess was not above helping the Goddess along.

Just like the Women of the Woods, the New Brooklynites scavenged along the old roads, as far as they could follow them. Roads in New Brooklyn tended to stop and start, interrupted in places by spurs the forest had sent out and then seemed to lose interest in. Linden Boulevard, Atlantic Avenue, and Jamaica Avenue all skimmed the edges of the forest. And the old elevated tracks that had carried trains above these streets remained in some places. The trains themselves were defunct.

Close as they lived to the forest, New Brooklynites avoided it. Some said it was haunted. But their young ones, daring each other, would brave the forest's sparser eaves. That was what Deeper Voice and Putty Hair had been up to, which proved to be their undoing. That was what the young men from New Brooklyn kept doing, and that was what kept the Women in the Woods hunting them.



Old Parry was fit, and not especially old. His son took after him in build; they were both short (Royston was a little shorter, but he hadn't finished growing yet), and the word that came to mind upon first seeing either of them was "hard." Stocky, muscular, working-men's bodies were what they both had. Father and son had the same broad shoulders tapering in a V to their waists, flat bellies, and heavily muscled glutes, and thighs that led down to wiry calves. When they stood side by side the way they did, with their arms folded across their chests and hands tucked into

their armpits, they were hard to tell apart from the back. Royston was slimmer, as young people are, and not-so-old Parry's hair was streaked with white, but they had come, as people said, from the same mold. Royston's mother was dead, and all the two men had was each other.

"Haunted, my ass," Old Parry was slurring. He spilled his drink. "That forest is filled with real, live human beings, and they've been preying on our young men for too long. We should torch it."

Some of his listeners nodded agreement, but there were more who demurred.

"You have no proof," said a man older than Old Parry, who had been a civil servant in the Time Before and was therefore considered the leader of their group. When he spoke up, it was always of caution and patience and order. The others usually listened to him.

"And you have no sons!" Old Parry thundered, clapping his son's shoulder with one of his hard pink hands. "It's only ever our sons that get taken!"

"You mean it's only ever our sons who are stupid enough to go into the woods," said a woman who had lost a son to the forest the previous year. "We tell them and tell them, but they won't listen for shit! My Joey was a good boy, but he wouldn't listen, either, and look what happened."

"You don't know for sure he's...deceased," said the civil servant. "Sometimes boys his age need to explore. He could be okay, and there's no way we'd know that either." Some of the listeners nodded.

"Or he coulda got killed by an animal...like a zoo animal," said someone.

"A *zoo* animal...from that old zoo?"

"Yeah, a zoo animal. Like from Prospect Park."

“Oh, what, like a *raccoon*?”

“Hey, they could have whaddaya call it—rabies!”

“Who knows what the hell’s in there,” said someone else. “There *could* be animals, or anything. Maybe snakes and shit from the zoo! Or maybe there’s nothing.”

Parry finished his drink and banged the glass on the table. One word borrowed another, and the group’s discussion quickly degenerated into insults and shouting.

“You mark my words,” said Old Parry, rising to leave, “the time is coming when I’ll do something about it myself, if you won’t. They won’t get my son!” He swayed, and his son was there to steady him.

“Come on, Pop. Time to go.” Royston knew better than to suggest that his father had had too much to drink; it was better to let him come to that conclusion himself. Royston dug in his trousers pockets and flipped a coin he found there toward the sexton, who also ran this improvised tavern that was one of the Brooklynites’ gathering places. Try as he did to steer him, Royston was unable to prevent old Parry from bumping into the door frame on his way out of the bar.

Parry also swayed and bumped his way upstairs to bed in the squat he and Royston were currently occupying. “Don’t you think of it.” Parry gripped his son’s hand as the younger man put him to bed. They had been living lately under the ruins of the old Broadway Junction elevated train station, a broken steel-and-concrete labyrinth in the air, on the northeastern tip of the remaining inhabitable sliver of East New York. But no one in Brooklyn lived anywhere for very long. That land produced nomads, and scavengers too, maintaining a rough urbanity even in the extremity of their situation. This was a favorite spot of theirs despite its proximity to the forest, but Parry had almost made up

his mind not to return to it anymore, now that his son was of disappearing age. Parry seemed immensely old to his son, but he had only been twenty-one when the cataclysm happened, fewer than twenty years ago.

“I *won’t* think of it, Pop,” Royston crooned as he smoothed his father’s graying hair over his hard, round head. Parry closed his eyes. But think of it Royston did. He hadn’t stopped thinking about it since the last time he’d ventured into the forest and come out again. No one had seen him, he was sure. But he had seen someone. He had seen her. He had seen Pink.

It had been several weeks ago. He had been walking along the old tracks of the elevated train that had bisected the borough of Brooklyn, tracks that almost disappeared into forest, then boldly reappeared, and ended in a stairway with steps that led downward. While his father slept, Royston was quick to disobey. Closing the door to the bedchamber quietly, he’d set off for the very place he’d promised not to go.

A green, ferny profusion of leaves and the composty earth in which they grew had almost obliterated the old steps, turning them into a slippery ramp, and because he was so excited he wasn’t paying attention, and Royston slid all the way down to the foot of it, coming to a painful stop against a wall of vegetation. The dreaded woods. As he recovered his footing and attempted to climb back up to the train tracks in the air, he noticed a movement down by his feet. The thorny shrubs seemed to part for him. Without caution, he put first his head, then his shoulders into the widening gap, and as soon as he could get his legs into the opening, he found he could stand in a widening clearing. He looked over his shoulder and saw the steps that led up to the train tracks and safety. He

turned and looked ahead; the opening was getting wider, parting like grass before a cyclone, inviting him in.

A house of pale yellow brick and a red tile roof peeked through the trees beyond the tangled mass of swiftly parting brambles. A shaft of yellowest sunlight pierced the clouds above and the forest canopy below and drew his eye to an upper window of that house, and in that upper window was a girl, golden and rosy. She was beautiful, with a beauty worth dying to see and hold, and Royston was lost.

He moved forward closer to her, but she was called away from the window, and the sunlight faded, and the brambles began to sigh and crack around his legs. He turned his head. He could still see the steps that led back to safety, and he began to run for them, falling against them as the briar hedge snapped shut behind him.

SEVENTEEN

Running flat out, Senga pelted into the relay station, frantic. Her eyes were wide as she dashed back to the rooms Pink had picked for herself. Pink's screams had subsided to moans now, and she held herself around her middle and gave voice to her pain and betrayal as Senga took her into her arms and rocked her to and fro on the floor. The spasm of grief subsided. Senga took Pink's face into both of her hands and wiped back the blazing strands of hair that so mesmerized Yuki-Kai.

"What happened to you?"

Pink couldn't say. She had tricked Senga, and she had paid a price. Her breath shuddered out of her. Now she knew shame. She had lost her innocence—not by means of her sex game with Yuki; that was almost incidental. Her innocence, which Senga had trusted in, had gone the moment Pink had started to keep the secret of Yuki-Kai, the thing of her own that Senga knew nothing about.

As Pink cried and moaned, Senga felt her head for fever and found none.

"Someone else did this to you," Senga said to her evenly, when her tears had subsided. Pink nodded, sniffing. "What I need to

know right now is not who or why, but if we are in danger from that someone.”

Pink shook her head violently, her mass of red ringlets flying, her breath shuddering into and out of her as she labored to calm herself.

“Okay,” said Senga, her mind racing but her demeanor cool. “Lie down and let me see you. You don’t have to tell me anything. Just let me see how you’re hurt.” But as Pink lay down and allowed Senga’s hands to begin examining her, she did tell her, everything. When the girl was finished talking, Senga smiled her crooked, rueful smile and said, “I might have known. That Yuki-Kai is a menace.” Senga shook her head.

“How long has she known?”

“I dunno...awhile.”

“Then if she wanted to tell them, she would have already.”

“She won’t.”

Senga frowned. By this time she had stripped off Pink’s undergarments and washed between her legs with clean water; she’d had no time to heat it, so Pink shivered as the cold liquid touched her delicate flesh.

“Looks like she got you with one of her nails,” Senga said, lifting and looking at one of the pink leaflike folds that bled profusely even though the wound was not deep. “The thumb, I guess. Keep that clean,” she instructed. “Yuki’s nails are probably filthy.”

“Thank you, Senga,” said Pink, suddenly shy of this woman who had fed her and raised her and kept her from harm, and who even now could surprise her.

“I mean it. The worst thing would be to get an infection. We wouldn’t be able to do anything about that, and it’s a nasty way to die.” Senga bustled as she spoke, putting away the water bowl

and the washcloth, and Pink surprised her when she rose suddenly, grabbed her, and knocked her breathless as she encircled her waist from behind. She was nearly as tall as Senga now, and she wriggled around to face her without removing her arms from Senga’s waist.

“Well,” said Senga, when she’d recovered her breath, “I don’t know what the hell you two were doing, and I don’t wanna know.”

Pink nodded her head, which was buried in the crook of Senga’s neck. Senga lifted the young girl’s chin and looked into her eyes.

“I’m not mad, but I’m telling you—this is trouble. Are you sure she won’t tell anyone else about finding you?”

Pink shrugged and shook her head and mumbled something that sounded like “Pretty sure.”

Senga sighed. It was long past time for her to do what she had to do now. She would tell Pink everything, and Pink would understand. Then they’d bolt. They’d get ready to leave quickly; they’d walk through the forest and find a way out. Senga had wanted to use one of her tunnels. The way she had figured it, until she was sure of what she might find in the world outside, she wanted to be able to get back into the forest if they needed to. She and Pink might not be able to live out there. Walking out of the forest was riskier, and at the end they’d have to hack their way through. They couldn’t count on getting out unnoticed either. The tunnels would have offered the advantage of secrecy, except...Senga shook her head. She didn’t want to think about it.

So instead, she took Pink by the hand and led her out into their garden, and told her their story, the story of them, from the very beginning. The buses, the crash, the drivers, the women, the Snatch, Maureen—everything she could remember. Pink’s eyes widened, then narrowed, and her brows knitted together, and it was well after dusk when Senga had finally finished telling Pink

her tale. In the gathering darkness, she peered at her foster daughter hopefully, but couldn't read the expression on her face. But Pink's hand had gone still in Senga's hand, and that wasn't a good sign.

"I'm sorry, Pink." She lifted one shoulder. "I couldn't let them have you. But I didn't think this far ahead..."

"You lied to me!" Pink said, with all the indignation of her youth. "And you had no right to keep me from my real mother!"

"But," Senga began to say, but the mercury in Pink's thermometer exploded. "I hate you!" she cried, as capriciously and forcefully as she had embraced Senga in filial love earlier. "I'm leaving! I'm going to find Yuki-Kai. And I never want to see you again."

"Pink, no—"

Too late. Over their short garden wall of dry-stacked stone Pink leaped, and Senga was too exhausted and too brokenhearted to catch her. She couldn't call out to her, and she couldn't ask the others for help. She wandered in the dark as far as she dared, then came back to the relay station, collapsed, and slept where she lay. Morning would come soon enough, and bring with it its own problems.

Protect her, Senga pleaded silently, praying as only unbelievers pray. Heavenly Mother, protect her.

EIGHTEEN

In the years between the first Snatch and Pink's long-delayed explosion, there had been stretches of time when every infant born in the forest was female, and then the tenderest meat was missing from the stewpots. Some years, the meat the Abbess and her followers lived on was stringy and tough, and came from older men who had followed young ones into the forest for their own purposes, and found themselves in one of Buffy's traps. Of course, every man who found his way into the forest, young or old, came to an end in the stewpot or on the spit; some simply got there sooner rather than later.

The traps were of three kinds. There were pits of two sorts, and snares, and there were several rings of them around the part of the forest controlled by the Abbess. One type of pit was staked; at first it had been thought necessary to guard the forest against any intruders, but as it became clear that the forest had ways of defending itself, construction of this type of trap was abandoned. Buffy had been instructed to fill them in on her rounds, but sometimes she forgot.

This left a relatively unprotected portion of the forest around the relay station. Seen from above, the trap system would have looked like a map of the long-destroyed state of Michigan, with Pink and Senga residing in what would have been the webbing between thumb and fingers.

Senga used snare traps as well, to catch small game like chipmunks and squirrels, but the snares Buffy constructed to the Abbess's design were huge, the better to catch men. It was easier to subdue men caught in this way, for some unknown reason, and less likely to damage the men's reproductive organs, which was an important consideration.

The pit traps were easier to maintain, of course, not having to be reset after each successful use, but sometimes Buffy missed one on her rounds, and the men caught in it died, and by the time she found them, they had putrefied, and were no good for either spunk or meat. When that happened, Buffy would surreptitiously fill the hole, transforming it into a grave, and dig another nearby. And although Buffy could have killed the Abbess with one blow from the back of her sizeable right hand, she was afraid of her and of her authority. Her authority, her temper, and her rages, which flared up more and more frequently as the years went on. Several gaps opened up in the ring of traps in this manner, as the ones Buffy missed tended to be located near each other, and the new pits she dug had to be considerably farther away from the sides of the old pit, or they would collapse.

Whenever the proportion of boy babies to girl babies born was commensurate with what it had been in the World Before, that was still a good year for the Abbess. In the world before the crash, more boys had always been born than girls, but fewer boys survived. In the World of the Woods, none did.

At first, and at Buffy's suggestion, the women had tried a sort of rough-and-ready castration technique that involved twine and a sharp knife, but the results were predictable: death by exsanguination (and a complete refusal of the butchers to ever attempt anything like it again). Alma had opposed this experiment anyway, on the grounds that Buffy was an idiot, and that "a boy without a penis is just a boy without a penis—cutting it off doesn't make him a girl, any more than blindfolding someone's eyes makes them blind." Much easier on the killers' consciences were the slow starvation of the boy babies (left deep in the forest where their ever-weaker cries wouldn't bring down the useless milk in their mothers' breasts), the painful, punitive binding of those young mothers' breasts, and the ceremonial feasts that followed.

The women had divided themselves according to the tasks they performed. The butchers, of course, taught by Buffy, dressed the men and spitted them. The farmers and gatherers, Maenads led by Alma, grew crops and scavenged. Early on they had found wild onions and lemongrass, and the strawberries that grew along the old roadway. From what had been the very edge of the forest's border with Brooklyn, they stumbled into the remains of a householder's garden, containing established tomato vines and some wild runner beans, potatoes, and eggplants, along with what Alma called a "Mary on the Half-Shell," a plaster statue of a woman standing on a globe of the earth, crushing the head of a snake with her sandaled foot. The head of the statue was covered with a white plaster mantle, and her gown was blue and long, and modestly draped. She held her hands out with the palms upturned, in a gesture halfway between welcome and supplication. One finger was chipped.

"A what?" asked a small girl on the day they found her.

“Never mind,” Alma snapped, momentarily disconcerted. Even when she had counted herself a Christian, she had never been a “Mary worshipper,” and now, as one of these particular women in this particular forest, she wasn’t sure how she was supposed to feel about what the figure represented, a woman whose usage as a vessel had always seemed to Alma to place her in the first rank of the world’s great female doormats. It was difficult to think of her when praying to the amorphous, abstract Goddess, but Alma had no other idea of female divinity to pray to. Perhaps that was why Alma prayed to the Goddess less and less.

“Leave it alone,” she snarled at the girls, who were beginning to pull and paw at it, loosening it from its bathtub-shaped grotto. “Take all the vegetables you can carry and bring them back to the cooks, and bring some to the farmers so they can use the seeds. The Abbess will let you know what we want to do with the statue.”

The Abbess knew exactly what she wanted done with the Mary in the forest.

“Bury it.”

“It’s half buried already,” said Alma.

The Abbess’s voice was icy-crisp, the individual words she spoke sinking into Alma’s mind with condescending clarity: “Then it should be twice as easy to bury completely.”

It was unlike the Abbess to ignore a find like this, which even Alma could imagine would have some ceremonial use. But when the Abbess was in this mood, there were only one or two ways to deal with her. Distractedly, Alma rubbed her jaw.

“Will do,” she said, and left.

There had been a licensed practical nurse on one bus, and she had become the de facto medicine woman. Of course, the women all had access to Buffy’s pharmacopeia, and there were willow

trees whose bark the nurse combined with small amounts of wild meadowsweet to relieve fevers and simple aches and pains. It was this practical nurse, whose name was Jessie, who pointed out early on that the sanitary supplies the women had brought with them were quite inadequate, and out of spare clothing and scraps she invented a kind of padded cloth envelope that buttoned onto the women’s and girls’ undergarments and made a serviceable hygienic pad (the first several were filled with batting from the bus seats). Using Jessie’s prototype as a template, each woman who needed one sewed her own (except for the Abbess, of course) and in time, although Jessie’s invention was washable and reusable, they began filling their “envelopes” with the scraps of soft paper and fabric that Senga brought them during her trips back to their civilization. She traded paper and rags for vegetables, thus bulking up her own and Pink’s diet and providing it with some variety.

Before and after Pink came to her, Senga spent some portion of every week (she still counted weeks, as did the other women; it was easy to do and kept their lives organized) traveling to the northeastern edge of the forest and digging the large tunnel she hoped to use to escape back to the world someday. Even if the world of her memory had been destroyed, the thought that it might not have been, and the effort of trying to reach it, both soothed and strengthened her until the tunnels became too dark and too deep. It was necessary to dig them deep to avoid the biggest roots. She had dug many testing tunnels around the rim of the forest near the relay station, and it was in the northeast corner that the forest seemed most willing to let her in. That suited her, as it positioned the station itself between the tunnel entrance and the carousel.

Every woman ate, so every woman farmed (except the Abbess), and each one had a small garden patch near her own shelter. The

tomatoes and runner beans were transplanted successfully, and grew easily and well. The potatoes flourished, but the eggplants were thick skinned and unappetizing. Of course there were mushrooms, as in all forests, but being wild, they were leathery, and potentially poisonous.

Small game was never abandoned but was used more and more as a stopgap measure; the men and boys caught for the Snatch provided ample protein for all except Senga and of course Pink. Only the Abbess ever cracked open the bones and sucked the marrow; it was really the only unsightly thing she ever did, and she did it in private, in the carousel. “My guilty pleasure,” she said to her reflection in the broken, fly-specked, gilt-framed mirror that sheathed the remains of the carousel’s ancient calliope. Her reflection smiled back at her.

It was almost nine months after that first Snatch, in which the girl named Skye had conceived, that the midwives debuted in their roles. Surprisingly, it was not Jessie but Alma who took the lead. With a Maenad as an apprentice, she had prepared what she would need from plans in her head, made up of everything she knew or remembered about labor and delivery. Her father had been a collector of medical books, and she had spent many transfixed hours poring over his collection, which, fortunately, tended toward the antique and obscure. She used the knowledge so gained during the months of Skye’s pregnancy to prepare what tools she could, chiefly a birthing chair and an obstetrical fillet.

On one of Senga’s first trading trips, when she brought paper and rags to the carousel lawn to trade for vegetables, Alma had been out in front of her shelter, fashioning the chair from a suitable log. Senga, a basket of vegetables balanced on one hip, stopped to watch her.

“Where’d you get the mallet?”

Alma paused only briefly to indicate, with a stretch of her neck and a toss of her head, somewhere out there in the thin edge of the woods. She wiped sweat from her forehead with her upper arm.

“The old store. That place must have sold everything. I got a packet of darning needles there once.”

Senga grunted agreement. “Yeah. I got beeswax. What are you making?”

Alma told her.

“So that girl’s still...”

“Pregnant.”

“You’d better go back and see if the store sold sandpaper. That wood looks rough.”

Alma snorted. Why was Senga such a pain?

As if she were thinking the same about Alma, Senga shifted the basket from her hip to her shoulder uncomfortably.

“See ya,” she said.

“See ya,” said Alma.

Alma turned out to have a knack for midwifery. The girl Skye was almost at term when her water broke, and Alma’s birthing chair was finished just in time to be put to use. The girl’s undeveloped hips were slim, but Alma plied the fillet with skill, and afterward, there was a new baby girl in the forest.

“I’ll call her—”

“Nova,” said the Abbess, sweeping into the shelter where, a moment before, Alma’s apprentice had placed the newborn into its mother’s arms. She pounced on the infant and held her aloft, as proudly as if she had borne her herself. Her smile was almost too broad. Her browless eyes bulged unpleasantly in the moonlight.

“Nova,” repeated the ubiquitous Acolytes gathered outside. It was a tight fit in the birthing shelter, especially when the Abbess turned to face Alma, her nightgown swirling around her. “Well done,” she said, beaming.

Skye lay back, spent and sore, with an expression of stupefied confusion. How quickly her star had become tinsel. For nine months she had been worshipped, and now she was to be cast aside and ignored. As a Maenad placed a stick between Skye’s jaws and two others held her legs, Alma sewed Skye’s perineum back together where the baby’s head had ripped it. The darning needles had found their use.

The Abbess flounced out of the confines of the shelter with the squalling newborn in her arms, and the Acolytes followed her to the center of the clearing. Although it was deep nighttime, news that Skye was in labor had spread to every woman and girl around the carousel lawn, and they were clustered outside, waiting for the Abbess to bring them what they had waited for. And in the sudden stark desolation of the birthing shelter, Skye heard the name she would never have picked for her daughter shouted aloud. Alma sighed and began to perform her ablutions between the girl’s legs as Skye looked down at her silently, in grave puzzlement. Alma felt something like sympathy for Skye, but she still had work to do.

“Put your hands on your belly, like I showed you, and push down.”

“It feels gross. It’s all...wobbly...” Skye protested, pulling her hands back. Alma grabbed an apprentice and placed one of her hands roughly onto Skye’s collapsing belly.

“Find the uterus, and push it down to where it’s supposed to be,” she instructed through clenched teeth. “And massage it so she

doesn’t bleed too much.” The unlucky apprentice, grimacing, did as she was told, and another put the kettle on for tea.

So Skye spent her first hours as a mother listening to the women outside worshipping her child while Alma took pains to see that she would be fit to ride again soon. She’d proven she was fertile. That was almost as important as the means by which she’d proven it.

Almost every month after that first Snatch, if there were girls who were fertile but not pregnant, and fresh men in the traps in the woods, there would be a riding, a regular event around which the society of the forest began to be organized.

And so the women were kept busy. Traps had to be checked, cages built and rebuilt, clothes made and mended, babies nursed, goods scavenged or bartered for from Senga. Maenads had to be instructed, men slaughtered, vegetables grown and harvested and cooked. What they couldn’t get from Senga the women got for themselves, from the almost-but-somehow-never-quite-exhausted store at the edge of the forest. There were fires going day and night, and these had to be watched by the most trusted of the women. No one who was a fire watcher was permitted near Buffy’s pot plantation or her still; although the women had no moral qualms about intoxication, they had a sense of self-preservation, and they knew that the stoners, though well meaning, couldn’t be trusted to remember.

When the infants began to be born in numbers, there was more work to do. The sorting of boy from girl babies was handled as quickly and cleanly as could be arranged. Buffy and the stoners attended to the males, bringing them squirming and squalling to the dying field and then carrying their tiny corpses, stiff and still, back to the stewpots. One year the number of men caught and ridden was low, and Buffy suggested letting the boy babies grow a

bit bigger in order to provide more meat, but this idea was shouted down by even the other stoners. “We’re not running a fucking nursery school” was the general sentiment. Buffy was wounded by this. All her ideas were shot down.

As the first child, Nova, began to toddle, she was joined by Starla, Diamante, and Melisande. If their mothers had had any ideas about naming them, the Abbess had disabused them of these notions with dispatch, as she had done to Skye. Over the next years, flower names came into fashion. These years brought the twins, Rosie and Posie (not strictly a flower); a tiny, squalling thing the Abbess named Violet; and plain, snub-nosed Daisy. Mythological names, like Diana, and then Bible names came into fashion briefly and then disappeared, but not before Tabitha and Sarah were named.

NINETEEN

Compared to the Maenads, Pink had lived a bounded and trammelled life, and although only that morning she had argued for more freedom, nonetheless she found herself astonished by the bigness and darkness of the forest outside the relay station once she was outside in it. It was so much more—bigger, noisier, darker, and almost altogether more alien than it had seemed from her window, or than it was under the sun. She was almost overcome by the sensation that she was drowning at the bottom of a vast ocean of darkness. She knew she couldn’t outrun the feeling, yet she began to try.

The fallen leaves and dry twigs underfoot crackled disquietingly, and she began to wish she had paid more attention on her trips to and from the tunnel mouth with Senga. Where was she? Above all, she wished she had put on a pair of shoes. Then she wished she had brought some food with her. The ground was stony, her feet were sore, her stomach was growling, it was getting cold, and the dark was entirely unfamiliar. In her mind, she blamed Senga.

“It’s the way she raised me. She stole me from my mother and she kept me like a prisoner in that stupid place...like Rapunzel.”

Pink looked behind her and was dismayed when she couldn't make out the shape of that stupid place in the forbidding dark. She tried widening and closing her eyes as she had seen nearsighted Senga do, but still she couldn't discern her surroundings. Surely Senga would come to look for her. But Senga was sleeping where she had fallen, worn out with age and worry and the strain of the previous day. When Senga didn't wake up and look for her daughter, anger, outrage, misery, and panic all chased each other across Pink's mind and left their traces quivering in her body.

In the relay station, she and Senga had had candles to light their nights. Pink was entirely unprepared for the grim and unalleviated blackness of the forest night. After whining and dithering for some time, she collapsed—as dramatically as she could, in case Senga were following her after all—and began to whimper, but her heart wasn't in it. In spite of her fear and discomfort, deep inside she was alive with the buds of exhilaration, of approaching destiny, of becoming that are the very essence and character of youth. And Pink was young, just fourteen.

When it became clear that Senga was not coming after her, Pink decided she would let Senga worry about her for one night, before she'd go back. That would show *her*.

As in her mind's eye Pink planned her victorious return to the no doubt stricken and suitably chastened Senga, she lulled herself with images of her triumphant homecoming. She fell asleep, not very far from the stream and the strawberry patch where Putty Hair and Deeper Voice had broken into the forest, almost on the same spot where Senga, before her, had slept when she, too, could go on no more.

Like Pink, Yuki-Kai, too, was escaping. After the incident in the classroom and Glynis's awkward tears, she'd decided to return

to Pink, to apologize. It would be easy to take the roundabout route from there to South America, and if Pink wouldn't go with her, she would go on her own. She had been there many times before. She wasn't going back to the others, she was certain of that. She was her own woman now. She'd stay with the South Americans.

She was on her way there, and better prepared than Pink was to be out in the forest in the dark, stealthily melting into the nightshade that grew around the bus. She had stopped to put on shoes, and she had a sleeve of crackers she had planned to gorge on privately when she'd lifted them earlier that day from the common store. They were still wrapped in crinkly paper, just as they had come from the shelf in the old store on Jamaica Avenue, and they were dry and hard, having survived unopened for all the years since the breaking of the world. But she had eaten crackers from that store before; she liked the salty, flaky, crumbling dryness between her teeth, and at least they were free of mold. The ones she had eaten before had done her no harm. Anyway, once she arrived at the relay station, she would get some food from Pink and Senga's stores, and in South America food had never been a problem. The stolen crackers were just to add to her sense of adventure and panache.

Having wrapped herself in a blanket as she slipped away from the bus where the Maenads slept, Yuki-Kai felt bold and free as she crept through the familiar night, past the outlying shelter where Buffy snored and hiccupped, sleeping her noisy, drunken, innocent sleep.

On the lip of the shallow, wooded valley, in the carousel, Alma and the Abbess turned their backs to one another in bed as they struggled to find their separate ways into the maze of oblivion. They had argued; it had become physical. The Abbess's rule, which Alma had always observed, was "not in the face." Alma understood—she

even agreed; after all, it would be difficult to command the necessary respect from the rest of the women in the woods while sporting a burst eyelid, or a bruised lip, or even a nail-scratched cheek. And of course, some of the obeisance the others showered on the Abbess had splashed onto Alma too, as her lieutenant. But the Abbess needed to watch her step; Alma needed to be respected too. Of course she remembered the Abbess's knife, but it had been so long since she'd used it in her presence, Alma had begun to lose her fear of it. And after all, she'd made herself indispensable to the Abbess in so many ways. It wasn't easy keeping a pack of surging teenage girls in check, and the Abbess needed to mind how she spoke to Alma, that was all. Especially in front of the Maenads.

This time it had been over the Half-Shell Mary; it had disappeared long ago, when Alma had gone back to bury it as the Abbess had ordered, which meant that the South Americans must have taken it, because anything else was too unbelievable. For women who professed a belief in a benevolent Goddess, Alma and the Abbess had a shocking lack of imaginative faith. However, the Half-Shell Mary was gone. The Abbess maintained that perhaps the forest, in the way that it had, had simply swallowed it up. After all, it was certainly real, three-dimensional, and solid, no airy manifestation. Anyway, what would it be a manifestation of? No, it had to have been taken by the South Americans; they were nuns, after all. They liked that sort of thing.

The more she thought about this simple explanation, however, the more enraged the Abbess became. More and more she hated any sign that the entire forest was not under her control, and she dwelled upon it and revisited it in her mind.

"Let them have their plaster Mary. They've already got a church—" Alma had started to say, when the Abbess had checked her with a clout across the jaw.

The force of the blow dropped Alma to one knee. "See what you've made me do!" cried the Abbess, as she scurried over to help Alma up. Alma pushed her away and staggered to her feet herself.

"I made you?" She shook her head. "I made you do nothing. You are losing your mind. . . what's left of it." Alma hauled herself up and sat on the edge of the bed.

She thought back to the beginning of their time in the woods, when the Abbess and she had begun to build the world of women, and she wondered that she hadn't seen it before. Yes, the Abbess had been proud, and overconfident, and . . . bossy, but they had needed someone like that, hadn't they? What would have become of them without her? Look at Senga, muttering to herself and hiding like a bandit, acting like everyone was out to get her. . . or, Goddess help them, look at Buffy, a drooling, drunken idiot. They had needed the Abbess's drive and her ideas—and her knife—in the beginning.

But lately. . . Alma had to face it, the Abbess's ideas had become more and more grotesque, and her actions more violent.

Alma looked across at her erstwhile bedmate, who offered a smile that was all apology and artifice. A slow-growing bubble of nausea trembled and then subsided inside Alma.

"Tch, tch, tch," the Abbess chided, as if it were she who had been wronged. She held out her arms, and Alma, swallowing hard, crawled into them. Arms locked around each other, they knelt upright together and rocked almost like mother and child on their bed in the candlelit gloom. The wind was picking up outside, and chips of twig and leaf were being blown against the walls of the carousel, *tch, tch, tch*, their sounds a mimicry of the Abbess's

clucking tongue. Alma permitted herself to relax in the Abbess's embrace, and to allow the Abbess to stroke her hair, but she resolved to remember her anger.

Everyone knew the Abbess ate the brains of those they killed. Alma didn't care about that. But the Abbess didn't know that Alma had seen her sucking the marrow out of the cracked bones of the men and boys they killed. Alma had seen her once and wished she hadn't; once was enough. In the flickering candlelight, when she'd thought herself alone, the Abbess had looked to Alma like a devil, staring up at herself and grinning in the speckled glass, her eyes bulging up from under her hairless brows in the night. Her face had gleamed with smeared fat, and almost glowed with pleasure as she cracked the bones with her teeth, and sucked and sucked like a fiend.



The South Americans, as they did most evenings, had retired soon after their evening prayers. There were fewer of them than there had been when the buses had first crashed, but the ones that were left slept peacefully in the open, sheltered in the space between their chapel and their gardens. White crosses marked the graves of the sisters who had died.

During their waking hours, they were as unaware as they could keep themselves from being of the things that the others in the forest did. They were pious women, and they made a virtue of survival. And when the Mary statue, loosened by the small hands of the Maenads, had toppled down the wooded hill and come to rest outside their small stone chapel, the South American women had accepted it as a blessing. As they slept now, a moon-dappled

night breeze kissed the statue as it stood watch over them, and almost made its face appear to smile.

As the Abbess and Alma began to snore, some miles away Royston had just breached the forest again, after leaving Old Parry to sleep off a night of hard drinking. Royston had tucked his father into bed and kissed his white hair, noticing as he did so that it was still plentiful on his head, and as soft as feathers, surprisingly soft when the rest of Old Parry was so ruddy and hard. Old Parry had taught his son to read and write, and Royston had debated with himself the wisdom of leaving his father a note; but ultimately he'd reckoned that if all went to plan, he might be back here in Brooklyn with the girl before his father came to. He had known Old Parry to sleep for days after imbibing Social Security's homebrew before.

As he checked his supplies at the edge of the woods, Royston felt happily exhilarated, and noticed with pleasure the blood pounding in his ears, and his heart thudding within his chest. He had brought with him into the forest his own and his father's flashlights, and they swung now from his belt. He also had a length of rope coiled around one shoulder, over the top of his body and under his arm, as well as a large and serviceable knife tucked into his belt. He knew he wouldn't use it, especially not against the girl. It was just for show, and just to make himself feel stronger. In case he had to defend himself, he'd use it. But he hoped that just seeing it might convince the girl that he was a grim and fearless rescuer who'd come to deliver her from the evil crone who, in Royston's imagination, must be keeping her captive. But he was really hoping to persuade her without knife or rope or fist; he imagined perhaps she would want to leave the forest with him of her Own free will. In fact, he'd dreamed of it.

He knew he was desirable. After all, the old women in New Brooklyn were always trying to kiss and paw at him when he came to the tavern to find his father, though for his part he was sickened by their slack-jawed, toothless mouths and the stench that came off the filthy rags they wore. He knew he looked good to them, and within his mind was the barely formed thought that the girl with the red hair might think he looked good too. Good enough to follow out of the forest. But the girl might not speak English, or speak at all, or the shock of seeing him might frighten her so much he'd have no choice but to tie her arms behind her and make her walk before him, and to do that he'd need at least to have the knife to wave at her as a threat. He wouldn't use it. Not for cutting. Not for cutting her. He tightened his belt as a night breeze lifted the fringe of hair that hung over his straight, black brows, and he clicked on his father's flashlight as he set out under the pale moon to find his heart, the girl with the fiery hair who lived in the golden house in the forest. He remembered the way.

PART THREE

TWENTY

Afterward, the thing no one could ever agree on was this: was it this day or that one that was the beginning of the end? Was it that day or this one that was the end of the beginning? All anyone could agree on afterward was that there had been a beginning and that there was now an end.

In the morning of the day that no one could agree on, the moon had set late and the sun rose early, pale and tired above a gray tent of clouds, sending out feeble rays that never managed to pierce the gloom. Rain teemed down throughout what had been called the Greater New York area, and the forest became a sodden misery, gullies churning and foaming with muddy rivulets, and the leaf mold underfoot turning to slippery slime that made walking on all but the old paved roads a hazard.

Buffy looked out from her lean-to and studied the curtain of rain. Quickly she stripped off her threadbare bib overalls and draped them over a sopping laurel bush. Then she stood under a downspout that had formed in the V-shaped notch between the rock wall of her lean-to and the sky. She stood there naked, arms akimbo and feet planted wide apart, for long moments, shaking

the water off her head and her hands every few minutes, shivering with cold and also with pleasure; it had been long since she had had a shower, and the other women balked at letting her share their baths. "It's true," she said to herself, as if someone were there to disagree with her, "a cleaning is a comfort."

A sudden sheet of rain woke Senga up on the now-muddy apron of grass that served the relay station as a back doorstep and she was momentarily confused. Why was she waking up outside, and why was it raining? Then she remembered the night before, and the argument with Pink. "Shit," she swore, and pushed herself up onto all fours before standing up, and then promptly slipped and slid wildly on the mud that had pooled as she slept. "*Shit!*" she said again, and slipped again, and slowly made her way indoors. The search for Pink would have to be delayed. It wasn't as if Senga or any of the women had foul-weather gear, and the rain showed no sign of letting up. Senga would put on a kettle; her head hurt and she needed to think.

The Abbess and Alma woke up on separate sides of the large mattress they shared in the makeshift bedchamber of the carousel. Unfortunately the vents in the carousel's roof, so useful at times for letting smoke escape, were now admitting veritable spouts of water, and the mattress was soaked. "Shift that, will you," sniffed the Abbess, pulling her day robe around her.

"Shift it yourself," Alma growled, and she meant it. She wasn't ready to make up yet. She grabbed a dampish blanket and stalked off to find shelter with the Maenads in the dormitory bus.

"Remember what day it is," the Abbess called after her. Alma pretended not to hear. She knew the next Snatch would take place today, whether the rain stopped or not, and whether she helped the Abbess to prepare or not. Rain would make the Maenads miserable,

but it would make their victims even more miserable. The Maenads and Acolytes knew their roles and performed them like robots; the Abbess had trained them well. Nothing would go wrong. *I'm not needed*, she thought, *and I don't care*.

The Maenads, excited by the novelty of the gushing downpour, were nevertheless none too pleased to have Alma force herself into their midst. Quite apart from her snoring and farting, her being there meant she would commandeer a berth, and two of the young girls would have to squeeze into a single bunk. They might as well get up and go outside, but the intensity of the rain made that prospect less appealing than it normally would have been.

The South Americans, stoic, phlegmatic, went about doing whatever it was they had planned that day to do. As on most days, it would be something useful; if they couldn't fish, they could mend their nets. It was just rain.

In New Brooklyn, Old Parry slept on, all unaware that his son had gone into the forest. In boundless dreaming he was free to visit the town, near in space but far in time, where he had been born. Despite the amounts he drank, Parry dreamed. He danced in his dreams in the arms of an impertinent girl whose family had dared to give her the dreadful, prosaic, and utterly homely name "Agnes." In his dreams he could dance like a satyr, and the girl with the homely name felt like a sylph in his hands. He slept on long after the rain began, and long after Royston disappeared into the woods.

For the young ones, Yuki-Kai, Royston, and Pink, who had walked or wept or whimpered for most of the night, and who might have looked forward to sleeping during this day, the rain was unwelcome, uncomfortable, and unpleasant, but nothing more. They were young and would not be deterred from their quests, even if they were wet and worn out.

Coming back to the relay station toward morning, Yuki-Kai had spied Senga's sleeping form on the doorstep in the slowly lightening gloom before the rain came bucketing down, and surmised that something was wrong. Creeping closer, she paused only long enough to see the rising and falling of Senga's chest, assuring herself that the older woman was alive, before slinking through the half-open back door of the station.

Once inside that familiar, homey place, she quickly sensed that Pink wasn't there—the station felt lifeless. At least it was devoid of the one Yuki sought. So, with many nervous glances over her shoulder toward the sleeping figure on the doorstep, Yuki snatched an apple from a bowl, dropped it into the bag she carried, and moved through the empty spaces toward the front door.

She paused before the entrance to Pink's bedchamber and thought about the things she had seen inside, things that could be useful in the rainy forest. The pale sun was only just rising, and by its wan light she could begin to make out, as her eyes adjusted, the blurred outlines of entryways and obstacles in the gloaming. If this was the bedroom where Pink had slept, farther on was the kitchen. There were matches in the kitchen, Yuki-Kai remembered, as well as some candles and string.

She remembered a box on a high shelf in the kitchen, too, with whose contents Pink had once sought to impress her. A thing like a knife without a haft, and another thing like a metal ball with a handle attached to a ring. "Senga hid them," Pink had said. "They're dangerous. She doesn't know I know." Yuki-kai had shrugged, feigning disinterest then, but the thought occurred to her now that these dangerous items might be useful, although she didn't know what they were nor how they were intended to be used. But dangerous things would be better off in her and Pink's

hands than lying around where Senga or the Abbess could get them. This was, in fact, the same reasoning that had led Senga to stash the hand grenade and the bayonet in the relay station when she had first found them years ago.

Yuki was considering how best to carry these items away with her when she realized she was not alone. A second later, a wet and wiry hand had clamped itself onto Yuki's shoulder from behind. "Hey, you," said a stern voice. Senga's.

Any thought of resistance was shaken off by the tightening of those tough fingers. Senga turned Yuki around bodily to face her. "If you're looking for Pink, she's gone. She ran away last night," Senga said. Yuki-Kai began to reply, but Senga cut her off. "I know you fought. I know—I know." She stopped herself from saying "everything," realizing how untrue that assertion was. But she understood many things.

The easy acceptance with which Senga seemed to understand everything there was to understand shook the unshakeable Yuki-Kai. Senga's grip on Yuki's shoulder softened, but she made up for it by doubling her hold on the girl, placing one hand on each of Yuki's malnourished biceps. "I know," was all she said, and all she needed to say. And then the untamable, unmothered Yuki moved into the circle of Senga's arms and placed her wild head on Senga's shoulder. She wept, and Senga petted her wet hair and thought, *These girls.*

"You're cold," Senga told her, and Yuki nodded miserably. "You're hungry as well," she said, and Yuki agreed. "Well, we won't lose very much time by having something to eat, like civilized people. Sit. She may come back on her own, caught out in this weather."

Senga moved them both toward the kitchen, and indicated a stool.

“Where do you think she went?” she asked the suddenly pliable and complaisant child, Yuki-Kai, who sucked her lower lip in reply.

Senga sighed.

“Where would *you* go?” she asked.

Yuki made a wry face and raised both her shoulders.

“There aren’t really that many places to go,” said the girl, speaking directly to Senga for the first time.

Senga nodded. She began to bustle around the kitchen. She felt odd. This was so...ordinary, like a scene from her own childhood. Except...Senga thought suddenly of Grandma Mosher, who’d lived next door to them in the apartment house on Parsons Boulevard. Grandma Mosher, whose grandson Steven had played “Für Elise” on the upright piano, and whose sweet face Senga loved, with its collapsing, ancient cheeks that were as soft as baby roses, and whom a lustrous, sugary, powdery scent always seemed to surround. Senga had always been thrilled to be invited into the Mosher family’s clean, warm kitchen, to eat stewed fruit from a tiny, cut-glass bowl, with a silver spoon that had come, Grandma had said, from her own mother’s house in Leopoldstadt, wherever that was.

Senga shook her head to clear it. She drew a wooden safety match from a box, lit it, and tossed it into the oven, and Yuki’s eyes widened. Senga had almost forgotten what a luxury it was to have this shelter, the solid relay station, and the means with which to easily heat it. “Bring your stool closer,” she instructed Yuki, “and get your wet clothes off.”

None of the Maenads, especially not the bold Yuki-Kai, had any shame about nakedness. And so she stripped, staying close to the open oven door for warmth, as Senga sped through the rooms

of the station, gathering spare clothes for Yuki-Kai and for Pink too, for when they’d find her. There were other things she thought they might need as well. When her arms were full, she returned to the kitchen and dumped it all on the table. Then she cracked some eggs into a metal pan and stuck it into the oven before flinging some of Pink’s dry clothing at Yuki, who was hopping up and down in front of the oven door for warmth.

“Aaah,” cried Yuki, aghast, reaching for the pan with the eggs in it. “Why did you do that?”

“I’m cooking them,” Senga replied. “What did you think I was going to do with them?”

“We just usually suck them.”

“I see.” Senga, furrowing her brow, dropped her gaze, then raised it. “I like them cooked,” she stated.

Yuki hopped on one leg as she struggled into Pink’s things.

“What’s that on your leg?” Senga scowled.

“Nothing. I...Buffy did it. Some of the other girls have them...”

Senga gripped Yuki’s bare legs and held them apart. Above the knee, each of her inner thighs was embellished with an elaborate tattoo. Sweet-looking tracteries of vines and buds at the knee grew thicker and thornier as they made their way up the inside of Yuki’s legs, giving way to a tangled, thorny mass of inky briars that guarded the entrance to her body. Senga, crouching, studied each leg silently. Then she whistled.

“This took some time.”

Yuki nodded.

“It must’ve hurt.”

Yuki shrugged.

“Anyway, finish getting dressed, and eat these eggs.” Senga let go of Yuki’s knees slowly, then stood and pulled the pan out of the oven and handed Yuki a fork.

“Things have changed. You eat. We have to talk.” What Senga meant was that there were things she had to ask Yuki, and things she had to tell her too.

Miles away, Pink was waking up in the woods, drenched and shivering and alone.

“Ugh.” She realized she would have to tuck tail and return home to Senga if she didn’t want to catch wet death. “Bother,” she huffed as, pulling her wet shift around her and wiping her hair off her face, she turned to face the direction she thought she’d come from the night before, which is often a mistake made by the inattentive and the inexperienced.

TWENTY-ONE

Parry came to from his drunken dreams to the certain knowledge that his son had gone into the forest.

The older man made his way to the bathroom and threw up; he was a seasoned drinker, he could do it almost as an act of will, without all the retching and moaning of the inexperienced boozier. It was a part of his morning routine, and had been for many years. Raking his fingers upward alongside his dorsal flank, he scratched himself and cleared his throat. His white hair stood up from his head, and he patted it down with shaking fingers. He looked around for his tobacco and his pipe; he would have preferred to roll a smoke, but he had run out of rolling paper days ago. The idea that his son might have gone out to trade for some brightened his morning momentarily, but no, Royston was just gone, and Parry just knew it. The house had that decidedly abandoned feel; small as it was, it echoed this morning.

It had been a find, this squat of theirs, and Parry would be sorry to lose it, but he knew his duty. If that stupid boy had gone into the forest, it was up to his father to get him back out. But first things first: a curer. A smoke and a curer were needed, and

with much trembling, Parry managed to fill his old clay pipe and light it, and he held it between his teeth, drawing on it while he looked, under furniture and on shelves, for the last of the whisky he'd brought home last night. The bottles he rummaged through clinked discouragingly until his scrabbling fingers lit upon one that still contained some pale golden fluid.

"*Uisge beatha*," he said, beaming. "Water of life." He shuddered it down, pulling his thin lips thinner over his white teeth as if in pain as he did so.

The whisky stayed down, so he set about leaving the house in readiness for the next squatter. It was the way things were done in New Brooklyn. No house was entirely whole, and none had had power or plumbing for years, but the facilities for plumbing still snaked their way through the walls and foundations, and there were ways to use them.

Parry clenched the stump of his pipe in his teeth while he made his way down the treacherous stairs to the backyard rain barrel. In New Brooklyn householders carried buckets of water from the alleys that ran across the backs of the buildings into the houses where water was needed. The barrels were always kept filled, but they had been topped up to brimming by this morning's rain. When Parry got this morning's buckets upstairs, he heaved them one by one onto his shoulder and emptied them into the toilet he had just used. In New Brooklyn, a squatter who left his filth behind was no better than an animal, and anyone who did eventually found himself barred from even the rudest of squats.

Vagabond Parry had just a few possessions, and so to pack up and leave a place, any place, was always a simple matter of moments, but today he spent several vexing minutes searching for his flashlight before admitting to himself that his son must have taken

it. "Shit," he swore, and gave one last look around, then closed the warped and crooked doors behind him. Stepping out into the rain, he whipped a cap out of one of the pockets of his coat and slapped it firmly onto his head, but not before a gigantic raindrop had landed, splash, on his head, finding its way down his neck and inside the back of his shirt, making him shiver. "Shit," he said again, and adjusted his bag and set off down the road toward the place he thought his son would have most been likely to enter the forest, by the remains of the old elevated train tracks that had run along Jamaica Avenue.

Parry was right; he knew his son's mind well, knew what his son would do and say on many subjects without having to ask him. Father and son not only resembled each other in looks but in mind, and back in the days before he'd had a wife or a son, and when he himself had been younger, Parry had been called a romantic. He'd never quite understood what a young woman meant when she described him with that word, and it was probably too late to bother about it now. One lover had said he was "sensitive," while wrapped in his arms and running her fingers through his fine, dark hair. One said he was "such a good lover," while similarly engaged. But another had called him "an extremist," and said he took things too seriously when he'd asked her to marry him the first time they met.

"Whatever I am, he's my spit and image," Parry said to himself as he walked through the windy drizzle, approaching the edge of the forest. "And stupid boy that he is, he is in there, and after a female. Nothing else makes sense."

After a female Royston was, and in fact, he had found her, although he didn't realize it for some moments. He had walked through the night, only using his flashlight when he had to,

walking into the blackness in the direction where he thought he remembered seeing her. Some good luck was with him, because that was exactly what he was doing, walking toward her through the velvet darkness, and then through both darkness and rain, slipping in the mud and pulling himself up by grasping branches and vines, and always making his way toward the memory of a yellow-brick house with a red tile roof.

She was sitting on her heels, rocking and crying and looking decidedly unlike the siren of red-gold hair and rose-pink cheeks with the high, proud bosom and the fine, rounded limbs who had captured him weeks ago. This girl was pale and scrawny, and her inadequate wet shift clung to her slender frame like a shroud, showing off not her mounded bosom but her cold-shriveled, pointed nipples and her mud-streaked gooseflesh.

That girl had had a halo of gold, red, auburn, and straw-colored curls; this creature had something dark and wet and lank stuck to her head, something that drooped and dripped down onto her shoulders and hung across her upper back like nothing so much as a string of rats' tails. *Is it even a girl?* Royston wondered, when suddenly she saw him, and screamed. *That's a girl*, he thought. He'd known enough women and girls to know that was one of the sounds they made.

As his son had been trying to figure out how to approach the wet girl, Parry was approaching the edge of the forest. It was marked by a naked chain-link fence that was twisted and barely standing. However, that wasn't what kept people like himself out of the forest. No one could see how it was accomplished, and yet everyone who entered had experienced it: the forest itself kept them out. But not this day. Old Parry walked up to the fence where it sagged outward and pulled down on it as his son had done hours

before. He swallowed two lungfuls of air, set his lips in a tight line, and stepped over the fencing—and the trees at the edge of the woods let him pass.

TWENTY-TWO

“Did you get enough to eat?”

Yuki shook her head, but her eyes darted to the shelf above the oven where she'd watched Senga replace the eggs.

“I could make you another egg, if you're still hungry,” offered Senga.

“I'd like another egg,” Yuki admitted. “But you don't have to cook it.”

Senga handed her the egg and turned away. It wasn't that she had never sucked an egg herself, but watching someone else do it made her gorge rise. She busied herself separating the items she had collected into two piles, and stacking them each on the table. One for herself to carry, one for Yuki.

“Will you help me find Pink?” she asked the girl.

Yuki nodded.

“When I find her, she and I are leaving the forest.”

“No one can leave the forest,” Yuki started to say, but Senga stopped her with a finger across her lips and a look that said, *Did you hear that?* Yuki shook her head, truthfully. Senga told herself she'd imagined a noise, and continued.

“Yes,” she whispered, “there is a way. I’ve been working on it for a long time. We could have used it before, but I got lazy. Well—that’s not exactly true,” she admitted. “I got frightened.”

“Frightened of what?” asked bold Yuki, who had been born in the forest, and knew no fear other than Alma’s punishments. “What’s there to be afraid of? Anyway, where would you two go? There’s nothing out there.”

“Oh, child,” said Senga, shaking her head. If the forest wouldn’t let them out, they might have to escape through the last tunnel, and...should she explain to this fearless child about the cave-in that had buried her playmate alive, how the candles had guttered and then blown out completely, and the darkness come down like a shroud? How she had had to dig the child Pink out, grabbing fistfuls of the living dirt she was terrified to touch? Or the fear of darkness itself that had haunted Senga all her life? Only her mother love for Pink had sustained her; only her need for the living child had strengthened her will to plunge into the treacherous, verminous earth to rescue her foster daughter. And even if she could tell Yuki that, how could she explain what the world had been like to this child who knew only the woods?

“Yes,” she said finally, “there is. I was born there. I think it’s still there. I think the forest comes to an end somewhere around the cemetery fields.” She gestured vaguely out the front door of the relay station.

“That’s the Forbidden Zone!”

“Is that what they call it?” Senga laughed grimly.

“Uh-huh.”

Senga handed a gathering bag to Yuki, and took one for herself. Slinging the bags across their chests, they began stuffing them with the articles piled on the table.

Senga snorted. “Well, good. If it’s forbidden, maybe it’ll keep them out. I don’t want them following us. No matter what we find out there, it’ll be better to face it without these crazy bitches.”

“We’re not supposed to use that word, either,” Yuki said. Senga arched an eyebrow at the girl.

“Oh. I see. Do you always do what you’re supposed to do?”

Yuki reached down and rubbed her leg. The Abbess’s last beating still hurt a bit.

“No.” She smiled grimly.

Senga grinned at her.

“I didn’t think so. Hurry up. If Pink is out there in this, she’s probably frozen. The sooner we get to her, the better. I can’t nurse her through pneumonia; she won’t make it. Her chest is weak. You can come with us or not, but we’re not coming back here.”

“I don’t think they’ll follow us—they don’t like you, and they don’t like me either. And even if they miss us, they’ll probably just think we fell into one of Buffy’s traps.”

“Wouldn’t they expect to find our bodies there the next time they went to check?”

Yuki shrugged. “They’d think we got eaten by something.”

“Bones. They’d expect to find ’em. Anyway, I’m due to deliver a big box of supplies today for the next Snatch. They’ll notice if they don’t get it, and they’ll come after *me*, at least. Look. I don’t want to talk you into anything. You can stay here if you want to. You can have this place. Seems like you know your way around here already...”

Yuki looked around. She was tempted. There was much to explore here, and if Senga had kept the secret of Pink from everyone but her, then it was a place where Yuki could also hide. But she wasn’t the hiding type, any more than Senga was the suicide

type, and as soon as she had thought that thought, she knew she would go with Senga.

“If you won’t leave with us and you want to stay here, okay. But you have to promise not to raise the alarm. You have to let us get away. If not, if they catch us, I swear to the Goddess, I will get away from them and I will kill you, as sure as shit.”

But no, if Pink was going, Yuki would go too. She would go if it meant her death in the world of whatever was out there. The South Americans were quickly forgotten.

“I’m going,” she said.

TWENTY-THREE

The ritual of the Snatch had grown from a scrawny sapling with its puny roots in the earth of bare necessity to a bulbous growth of monstrous proportions. Every year, the Abbess added elements to the spectacle. Every year, there were more young women eligible to ride, and that meant there had to be a system in place to ensure that everyone who had started to bleed got a chance to do so, every cycle. “Waste not, want not,” said the Abbess.

One year the Abbess’s system had taken the form of a foot-race, with the four nubile Maenads of the month dressed in filmy, one-shouldered scraps that fluttered down to around the tops of their thighs and were designed to facilitate easy congress with the captured men. When this paled after several months, a gladiatorial-style competition was instituted. This worked well during periods when only one captive was available for riding; the competition added an element of suspense to the goings-on, and Buffy made a small fortune running a bookmaking operation. Of course, since the women had no monetary system, the “fortune” was largely a fiction, but Buffy liked being able to brag about her ability to pick a winner.

In most recent years, the Snatch had been preceded by a pageant, written by the Abbess, narrated by the Abbess, and starring the Abbess, with various adult women and Maenads who had not yet begun to bleed enacting the roles of the riders and the ridden. Tiny, ratlike Mia had been called upon to play the “Fruits of the Riding” in this spectacle, largely because the role called for an actress small enough to be hoisted above the stage by the same squeaking pulley-and-rope system that the women had used to get Putty Hair and Deeper Voice out of the pit years before. Frightened Mia had to hang there, squeaking and shrieking along with the rusty pulley, while below her the assembled women sang the song the Abbess had written for the first Moon Meeting so many years ago, the song Buffy had first sung, to a tune something like “Blueberry Hill.”

It's catch before kill,
'Cause a girl needs a thrill,
We must get our fill,
And don't let any spill!

Two of the sturdier Maenads would be called upon to play the roles of the first two victim, the ones Senga had called Putty Hair and Deeper Voice. They'd be dressed in a motley array of garments, wearing badly fitting, tied-on phalluses made of some kind of papier-mâché, and rather more badly fitting wigs. The costumery varied from production to production, depending on what Senga could find while scavenging.

Sometimes the costumes were rather good, as they were in the years after Senga had plundered the ruins of a dental supply house—sets of dentures that had been made for patients long dead

were inserted into the mouths of the girls playing the unlucky men. They felt painful, looked hideous, and impeded articulate speech, but fortunately the men's lines were supposed to be in the nature of animal screams and grunts, and in every telling of the tale, the characters of Putty Hair and Deeper Voice were described as more and more bestial, so the worse the teeth looked, the better the characterization.

Senga had never taken an active part in the Snatch after that first time when she helped Skye slip into the cage with Deeper Voice to conceive the Maenad named Nova, who was now almost old enough to ride herself. But she traded with the women who did, of course, providing them with props for the pageantry, and sometimes hanging around long enough to watch.

She stood on the doorstep of the relay station now with Yuki as they laid whatever plan they could in such haste. She adjusted the straps of the bag she'd slung across Yuki's chest.

“Meet me back here tonight,” she said. “No matter what. One of us is bound to find her, but if we don't, she may have sense enough to come back here herself.” Into Senga's mind, as she spoke, flashed an image of herself in a housewifely scene from the World Before. She saw herself as if she were buttoning her daughter into a raincoat and handing her a sack lunch. Only there were no housewives, no raincoats, and no lunches in this world. She wiped off a piece of eggshell that was stuck to Yuki's face. There was something about the girl that brought out long-buried feelings in Senga; not even for Pink had she felt anything like this, not in many a year. Maybe it was Yuki's untamed spunk. A conspiratorial smile lit Yuki's spare features.

“I'll go toward South America,” said Senga, who wanted to take the measure of the women there. If there was a chance of

violence—and with the Abbess and Alma, there was always the chance of violence—she thought she owed the South Americans a warning. And she could use allies in the forest in case the Outside proved unlivable. She, Yuki, and Pink might all have to come back.

“And I’ll cover the ground between here and Buffy’s.”

“It’s unlikely she’ll have gone toward the carousel...” Senga didn’t need to complete the thought.

They would all have a chance to escape while the Abbess and the others were occupied with the Snatch. Escape would bring its own terrors—the darkness of the tunnels Senga richly remembered—but unless the forest was in the mood to let them walk out upright, the tunnels and whatever they contained would have to be braved. If the forest wouldn’t let them out, Senga knew what would have to be done.

“If I don’t make it back, I expect I’ll end up on the spit,” Senga mused aloud. She cupped Yuki’s cheek.

“I think you and Pink should try to escape, even if I don’t make it. Pink can show you the way through the relay station and down to the tunnel if you can’t get out any other way. You’ll need candles, and you’ll need to be brave, but I wouldn’t want you to come back here. The world outside can’t be worse than this. I’m sorry I didn’t go sooner. I should have been braver, but I think I was as brave as I could be at the time. Anyway, then I wouldn’t have had the chance to get you out too.”

Yuki blushed.

The memory of that last time in the tunnel made Senga shiver. That last time Senga had dug with Pink, the time after the cave-in that had nearly buried both of them alive, when they had had to screw up all their courage to return to the dark, they had almost

gotten through. They would have, too, if...Senga shuddered. No sense scaring herself now with what might have to be done later.

Senga had always believed that her tunnel, if she could finish it, would carry her out along the northeastern edge of the woods, where the bus had been driving that last day, along Union Turnpike, above the old subway tracks—the E and F lines, they were called. She thought if she could just dig far enough, she would find a way to break through into what she hoped might be left of the manmade, well-ventilated tunnels of the New York City Subway, and from there she believed she had a chance to find her way toward something like home.

Now as she watched Yuki bounding like a deer along the path that led to Buffy’s shack, Senga felt fear, but she also felt vigor, and the stirring of long-deferred hope. She shifted her shoulder bag to a spot higher on her shoulder, and set off for South America. The two hand grenades clanked against the bayonet, and she stopped to separate them. She would give them to the South American leader, the one her followers called la Madre. Beyond that, she couldn’t think clearly, but in case she were caught, she didn’t want those weapons to fall into the hands of the Abbess or Alma. She smiled grimly as she told herself, *There’s almost no chance I’ll get through. But if I stay here, I’m dead anyway. I just couldn’t see.*

TWENTY-FOUR

As if it had been turned off, the rain stopped. However, the wet branches and drooping leaves of the woods continued to drip, even as a ferocious afternoon sun broke through the clouds. As if determined to assert its rights, the heat of it made the forest steam. Pools of sunlight were reflected in the shining water meadows and mud puddles that had appeared in the forest's numerous clearings as a result of the cloudburst.

Pink saw Royston a moment before he saw her, and the sight of each other shocked them both into momentary paralysis. For his part, he had been looking for *his* Pink, his golden siren girl with the freckle-spangled, rosy skin and the mass of copper-colored hair, not this bedraggled urchin with the grime-streaked face and lank, wet coils of blackish twine plastered to her skull and hanging like rat tails down her back.

For her part, it was as if she had seen a faun, or a dinosaur, or something else from one of the long-ago picture books Senga had brought her—a mythological creature, a demon, a something that couldn't exist. She screamed, and he did what anyone else in his

position would do—he screamed too. Then he tried to stop her from screaming.

Lunging toward her and closing the space between them in one leap, he clapped his left hand over her mouth, and with the right he brandished the knife he had intended not to use. In trying to retreat from his advance, she was blocked by a tree at her back. This only caused her to scream harder against his muffling hand, and struggle away from him with widening, panicked eyes. He was forced to drop the knife entirely in order to subdue her with both hands, all the while repeating, “Shut up, shut up, shut up!” This was not working the way he’d hoped. The dropped knife buried itself up to its hilt in the earth.

There was nothing else Royston could think of to do but keep tight hold of the drowned-lizard girl until she got tired of screaming, for as long as it would take. He looked around, he didn’t know what for, and all the while Pink twisted and struggled and hopped from leg to leg, trying to kick him and once or twice succeeding. But his grip never loosened, although they were both wet and slippery. He was strong.

Ultimately, the wet night Pink had spent outdoors, the argument with Senga, and Yuki’s thumbnail scratch between her legs, which was beginning to throb, caused her to weary much sooner than she might otherwise have done. As soon as Royston felt her relaxing under his grip, he loosened it and whispered, “Friend. I’m a friend.”

Gripping her wet face to keep his hand across her mouth, he took the other hand from around her and pointed to himself, and hoped she spoke English. She jerked her head to indicate compliance, and seemed to acquiesce. Then, when his grip relaxed, she bit into whatever she could find of his fingers. Her fine white teeth

met in the fleshy part of his index finger, and as he pulled his hand away, she began to scream once more, as did he.

Royston shook his injured hand and stomped around, bending over double and cursing, allowing Pink time to retreat to a crevice behind a rock. She was panting and frightened, but she wanted a better look at him. Because as startled as she had been, she was also intrigued. She didn’t know that’s what she was, but she was. She looked around and grabbed a fallen branch to use in case he got too close.

“Are you one of them?”

“One of who?” he shouted, and looked around. “*Christ!* That hurts!”

Here Pink was at a loss. Who indeed? What were they called, the ones Yuki had told her about, the ones the women caught, and rode, and killed, and ate?

“Men?” she ventured.

He didn’t hear her.

“Shit!”

“Did you escape?”

Royston held his good hand against his body, tucked into his armpit, as he shook the bitten hand and sucked his teeth.

“*Ow!* Son of a bitch!” Shaking the hand didn’t help, so he clutched it to his shirt front, where a rose of blood began blossoming with alarming speed.

Pink stared at him blankly as an owl. There seemed to be no rejoinder to this, and so she made none. But after he swore and stamped and shook his hand some more, the spoiled, precious, imperious only child she was became annoyed.

“I didn’t even bite you that hard. Anyway, I asked you a question: Did you escape?”

“You did too bite hard, and I heard you, and I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t escape, I just walked up to the trees and...they just let me in, like last time.” He held out his hand and showed her his slick, red, spurting finger. It dripped with gore. Pink had enough sense to hide her pleased surprise. She put on a sad expression.

“Sorry,” she offered, and shrugged. “Maybe you have thin skin.”

“You fucking *bit* me! And I didn’t escape from anyone; I came here to look for someone!”

What the man thing was saying made no sense, but Pink had had no experience with conversation, or with much of anything, so the idea that she and the man, if he were a man, were talking at cross purposes would not have occurred to her. What did occur to her was how fine he looked, with his fierce, straight, slanting brows, his blue eyes with their black lashes, and the shiny black shock of hair that fell over his right eye. His cheeks were flushed under their high cheekbones with exertion and youth and the pain in his hand where she’d bitten him. She tried again, speaking slowly, as Senga had to her when she was small and Senga was trying to explain something complicated and important.

“Are...you...what...they...call...a...man?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I think you might be a man, and if you’re a man, you must have escaped from wherever men live, because men aren’t allowed to just walk around wherever they want here. So...*are* you a man?”

This little lizard of a girl must be crazy. The sun was warming her hair, and while it couldn’t do anything about the streaks of dirt on her face, it was rapidly drying the ropy tangle of twine on

her head. She didn’t look quite so bad as she had at first. Not like his siren, but maybe like her sister, if she had one.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but in New Brooklyn, men are allowed to do whatever they want, and I walked here from New Brooklyn, and it wasn’t that far, it’s all, like, joined on, so it seems to me that the same rules that go for New Brooklyn go for here. Anyway, who’s to stop me? You?” At that his hand gave a twinge, and he hoped she wouldn’t notice the absurdity of his taunt.

And as he was speaking and thinking and twinging, Royston stared. This girl was changing before him into something very like the girl he had braved the forest to find. The sun was drying her hair and her clothing; she looked less like a shivering monkey and more like the creamy pink goal of Royston’s quest.

“What’s your name?” she shouted, poking her tree limb at him; it was stout, which was desirable in a weapon, but heavy, and she’d been threatening him with it for several minutes now. The muscles in her arms were strong but unused to this much sustained exertion, and they were beginning to tremble. Royston noticed.

“It helps if you hold it on your shoulder, like a bat,” he said. Pink frowned. Should she accept his help? Was this a trick? Almost unconsciously, she shifted the branch.

“A what—a bat?”

“Baseball. You know...” And he mimicked a player batting a ball. She shook her head.

“I know ‘bats.’ We have bats here, but they’re...animals. They fly around, and they get in your hair. They live in tunnels in the ground”—she shuddered—“and they fly out at night to eat bugs.”

So it seemed that Pink and this other young person could speak each other’s language, but they still had some difficulty understanding each other. If only she hadn’t parted so badly from

Senga; she needed to ask her about this. That was it. She would have to go back. She sighed.

“You,” she called to him, shifting the branch so that it rested on her shoulder. “What’s your name?”

“Royston. Royston Parry,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“Pink.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Something so strange and momentous had happened that Senga forgot all about chasing after Pink. And for the first time in more than a quarter century, Senga was dozing next to Old Parry. After their long separation and their strange meeting, they had kissed and argued and wept. Emotional, stunned, and shocked, they had worn themselves out with questions and answers, and then they curled into each other and slept like lost children in the woods. Senga woke before he did. She listened for a few moments to his light snoring, and smiled to herself. He turned toward her, onto his back; he was waking, but slowly. She would help him.

She turned onto her side to face him, and ran her hand over the still-taut drum of his abdomen. The hairs that downed it were as she remembered, numerous, but there was gray now among the brown. They still felt fine and soft under her hand. He gave a sharp snort but remained asleep as her hand traveled down to the place where his body ended and what she was looking for began. She found it.

It was stout and hard, and lying upright against his belly. She stroked it and let it move in her hand. *Like riding a bike*, she

thought, and wrapped her hand around it so that with the soft webbing between her thumb and fingers, she could gently peel back the velvet cloak of his foreskin. She sucked once, then placed one hand on the ground on either side of him, and pushed herself up lightly to get one leg over him. Perching above him, one knee on either side of his massive thighs and her head at the level of his cock, she firmly but gently kept him down with one hand pressed against his solar plexus. Lowering her head, she looked up at him from under her eyebrows, and took him into her mouth, and sucked on the thing that was softest and hardest at once, until he gave a muffled growl.

“Not again,” he moaned. He looked down at her briefly, then put his head back on his earthen pillow and smiled. She smiled too.

“Be still,” she whispered, “and know that I am God.”

He made a soft, snorting laugh, but did as she said.

“I guess I’m a true believer.”

She closed her eyes then, and plied him with her tongue, and savored the taste she hadn’t tasted in too many years. The indescribable, gamey, salty, goaty man taste, the same as she remembered—and just as she remembered, it filled her mouth and nose with the iron smell of his living blood. The head of his cock was smooth and slick, and the organ itself pulsed muscular and round against her tongue, and she was close to losing herself in her play when he pushed her off gently, afraid he wouldn’t last long enough in her mouth to get a chance to feel her soft insides, her body’s velvet walls that were as slick as glass and hotter than hot. He turned her around to face him and laid her down, and as he slid into her, she took him with a self-satisfied grunt.

It had happened like this. After parting from Yuki-Kai, Senga had made her way down toward Kettledrum Hill. It was the last

place she and Pink had been together (had it been only yesterday morning?), and for that reason alone, she had hoped she might find the girl there. She had looked along the path the Maenads had taken, she noted the jagged stump where triumphant Yuki-Kai had held the snake aloft, she beat down the ferny undergrowth, but she saw no sign of Pink, for Pink wasn’t there. Instead, Senga found the last person in the world she had thought she would ever see again: it was a man, and not only *a* man, it was *the* man. *Her* man. It was her Parry. She shook her head, but he was still there when she blinked and looked again.

The last time she had seen him he had been putting her on one of the buses that were waiting in parking lot E of the Queens College campus, in the early dark of a May morning in 1972. How long ago? Ten years? No. Almost twenty...more? He hadn’t been her only boyfriend, but he was the only one who could be counted on to see her off on this trip.

“Be careful,” he’d said, and kissed her.

“I will,” she’d said, and kissed back.

“Okay. Go change the world!”

She’d watched him out the window as she took her seat, curling her fingers and giving a little wave, as he’d ridden off on his bike to his job at a drugstore on the eastern edge of Brooklyn. She’d spent some moments settling into the leather seat with its aroma of luxury that the “executive-sized” rented tour bus provided. They were driving along Union Turnpike and had just passed over Queens Boulevard with its landmark of public statuary, *Civic Virtue*, an inartistic, burly, naked young man made of marble and wielding a sword, astride two voluptuous marble women, when the first temblor hit. The actual young women on the buses, buoyant with purpose and fervor to advance their worthy cause, ignored it, if

they felt it at all. It had been cold that day, Senga remembered, but fair, and the sun was not quite up. It was a six-hour drive to Washington from Queens, and they were leaving early to arrive in good time. Parry had a long ride in front of him to work, but he was hours early. It had been worth it to him to see Senga off.

The bus driver had wound the handle of the destination sign in the front window to read “Washington, DC.” The signs and banners the women had painted in the days before the trip were stowed in the luggage bins beneath the bus; it was only to be a day trip, so there had been no need to pack many clothes. The nonperishable canned foods they were bringing—donations for the needy as their price of admission to the demonstration—filled the spaces not taken up by the banners. Some of those nonperishable goods, notably the ones belonging to Buffy, clinked and clattered. Buffy was being so careful with them, Senga remembered; they were only canned goods, weren’t they? She had laughed. Inside, the bus was loud with the noises of young women, and high spirits, and hope. They did intend to change the world.

As they rumbled past *Civic Virtue*, moved to Queens because it offended some bigwig in Manhattan, Senga’s seatmate gave a snort.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” she asked. “So typical—man, the virtuous, trampling women, who, of course, represent vice and sin!” The pretty, prim, bespectacled, soon-to-die blonde wore braids under a kerchief, Senga had noted, and had tiny marks on her even, regular teeth where her braces had recently been. Senga shrugged at her and smiled.

“We’ll change all that someday, won’t we?”

The driver had just made the lane change that would take them onto the Interboro Parkway when chaos erupted into the world. They had thought it was just a rough patch of road or a

sideswiping accident at first, but it had built on itself and grown louder and darker and more and more immense. It tumbled them over and over until they came to a stop just inside the eaves of Forest Park. And the young women had been shaken and shocked, and battered and broken and bruised, and no one had come to help. The ones who lived had had to help themselves. Or die. The forest had begun to come alive, and all around the world, a rough magic broke through and took hold, and this morning it seemed to be taking matters into its own hands again.

In the tumultuous now, Senga had been about to turn back, to return to the relay station to wait for Yuki as they had planned, when she saw Parry. She had already delivered the weapons to the one called La Madre and explained what she intended to do. La Madre had whistled as she felt the weight of the bag Senga handed her, and placed her free hand on Senga’s shoulder in blessing. “Vaya con Dios, amiga mia,” she told her.

“Vaya con Dios to you, too,” Senga answered, and began the slow, uphill walk back to the station. Neither La Madre nor any of the other South Americans had seen a young girl that day, and Senga retraced her steps desultorily. The ferny patch. Yuki’s Stump. Kettledrum Hill...

And then she saw him.

Of course, she thought, *this is it: I’ve finally snapped. Really snapped.* She peered and squinted at him, or it, while trying not to disclose her position. If he was real, he hadn’t seen her yet.

He looked like he’d been sleeping rough, which of course he had, but it would have taken more than a bad night, even after a fifteen- or twenty-odd-year-long separation to make her forget what he looked like. Of course, he had changed and aged prematurely, and it was that which decided her that he wasn’t a mere vision; the

man she was looking at was the same age as she was. Surely if he were only a figment of her imagination, he'd be younger.

His hair, what she could see of it under his useless cap, was wet and looked dark, almost as dark as it had been the last time she'd seen him in life. His skin still looked like some ruddy bark, and his eyes were still a piercing blue above his high-boned cheeks. The nascent gin blossoms didn't look half bad on him—they gave a jaunty color to his cheeks.

Undecided yet as to whether she'd gone mad, she put her hand up to rub her eyes, and suddenly felt self-conscious. She, who had never given a thought to her appearance. She suddenly remembered her binary self; she suddenly remembered she was a woman.

The man, for of course it was Parry, was resting on a rock by the side of the path she had been following. A few more yards and a turn in the road and she'd have collided with him. As she watched him through the natural screen of sparse saplings, it was his actions, even more than the strong limbs, the broad shoulders, or blue eyes, that convinced her he was real. It was the way his hungry hands pattered over his clothing, searching for something he needed. A cigarette.

"Come out, you," he shouted. Senga smiled. It was him, or a hallucination that sounded, looked, and acted exactly like him. What the hell, why not answer?

"Parry?" She reflected that she hadn't left her spot on the path—he must have sensed her rather than seen her.

"Come out!" he repeated, ignoring the use of his name.

"Come out yourself," she answered.

"Goddamn woman, have you been here all along?" He grabbed the cap off his head and twisted it in both hands. He began

cautiously walking toward the sound of her voice, but sideways, like a crab, and she had to laugh.

"What do you mean all along? Where the hell have *you* been?" If this really *were* Parry, Senga knew she had nothing to fear, but lots to be annoyed at. And also a great deal to wonder over and rejoice in. If this was her Parry, then she was safe, and could do everything she needed to do.

TWENTY-SIX

Engaged with each other, neither Senga nor Parry heard Alma approach. Sleep had taken hold of them again, and they were cradled in idyllic oblivion at the side of the road where they had surrendered to insentient and satisfied bliss.

Earlier that morning, Alma had found sleep elusive and decided to walk; the rain, she observed, was letting up, and she still had what she called “a mad on.” Her anger grew cold as she stalked through the woods, but her bitterness toward the Abbess was by now of long standing—easily stirred up, slow to subside. She took this most recent resentment and folded it into tiny, imaginary squares, and tucked it away in the part of her mind marked “enemies.” It was Senga and Parry’s bad luck to be spent and sleeping in each other’s arms near the path Alma had chosen to trudge out her anger that morning. She almost fell over them, and she would have awakened them if she hadn’t caught herself quickly and pulled back.

“Heavenly Mother,” she whispered, “are you kidding me? This is too easy.” It wouldn’t have been, not if her victims had been awake and aware of her, but of course they were not. So it was only

a matter of finding the right weapon and then creeping up quietly, and although she was out of practice, Alma could still do that.

Weapons were everywhere in the woods: rocks and tree limbs for a quick battering, poisonous plants for slow torture, flints for cutting, and, as a last resort, there was always earth for stuffing into victims' mouths until they suffocated. Alma had used each of these at one time or another, and some others as well that she'd improvised, so it was the work of an instant to pick a stout branch for a prod and a rock for a truncheon. Her first blow was delivered to Parry; it was not designed to kill him but to get his attention, once he regained his wits.

Senga, though...Alma had to restrain herself from killing her right then and there. However, Alma was beginning to see a way to get back at the Abbess, so when she tapped Senga's skull, she did it with the measured, practiced touch of an executioner—enough to almost but not quite crack the skull at the temple, where she had reason to know the bone was weakest. Senga would have a bad headache. But she would live.

Having stunned Parry, Alma whipped off the blanket she'd wrapped around herself and threw it over his recumbent, wounded form the same way she and the other women threw nets over prey. It would confound him once he fully came to. With Senga momentarily unconscious, Alma whistled for her most trusted Maenads; they would respond, if within earshot. Her pets were well trained. When they came scurrying up, Alma instructed them to bind Senga's and Parry's hands. "Let them walk, but keep their hands tightly bound." She bade two of the girls to stay with her and her captives, and the rest to return to their cohort. "Not a word, though, if you know what's good for you," she threatened.

"This is *my* surprise." The three smallest girls dashed off, relieved to be released from duty.

The two who remained were agog at the sight of Senga, who was groggily shaking her head and propping herself up on her arms. "No woman shall strike another woman," whispered one to the other in a small, sibilant voice, too low for Alma to hear.

"Without cause," said the second Maenad, her eyes on Senga.

"They added that."

The first girl nodded, eyes wide. "I guess this is the cause."

Parry was stirring; the blanket was doing its job, and the Maenads made quick work of tying his hands as he struggled out of its rough folds. By the time they had bound him, he had shaken it off and was looking from Alma to Senga, enraged.

Alma whistled to the Maenads and jerked her head toward the east. "The sunken road," was all she said. Prodded and bound, the captives had no choice but to move ahead as their captors indicated, but Old Parry's anger was giving off a heat that Senga could feel. It was not directed at her, but if once he got the chance, it would be well not to be in its path. He had never turned the force of his anger on her, but she had seen him fight. She hoped he still could, as she intended to escape, no matter who or what stood in her way. Parry would ever be on her side; she knew that. But any hope of surreptition or stealth was gone now. It would be fighting. So be it.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“That’s not a name for a person.”

“It is too. Anyway, I asked you a question. A few questions.” Pink had the branch on one shoulder now, and Royston’s hand was dripping less and throbbing more. She noticed him wince.

“Hold your arm up above your head,” she ordered. He obeyed, and grinned at her. The throbbing slowed. The eager sun had almost completed its drying of her hair, along with that of the clothes they were each wearing, and just as the rose of blood on Royston’s shirt had blossomed and spread, the great bloom of red-gold hair on Pink’s head was beginning to reassume its massy, bewitching aspect.

Royston was smiling to himself in spite of his pain, because he was beginning to understand some of what he had heard his father and the other old men in New Brooklyn talking about. About women, how they never gave up on an idea once they got it into their heads, and how their mouths were their weapons, how they talked and talked all the time—and he had already heard this one scream—and how beautiful they were and how changeable and

dangerous they could be, but how utterly worth being possessed by, if you could get one to call you her own.

He didn't know it, but when he smiled, he was as handsome as Pink was beautiful, with his smile that was crookedly perfect, off center and white. When he grinned like this, he had a dimple in his cheek. As Pink watched him, her hand went unbidden to her own cheek. Pink's face then grew fierce, but it also assumed a rosy, mottled blush, which spread upward till it disappeared in her beautiful hair. "Are you a man?"

"Okay, okay." He shrugged. "Parry. My full name is Royston Parry. Mostly they call me Royston, or Roy. It means king. And yes, I am what you'd call a man, I guess. A boy, really. Maybe a man. I dunno. A man. A man."

"Well, okay, Royston boy-man King Parry. Now, everybody in this forest has just one name, and mine's Pink, and if you don't like it, that's too bad. And this isn't New Brooklyn, wherever that is, and you are my prisoner. And it's a good thing for you that you are, because even though I bit you, that was just in self-defense. I won't kill you and eat you," she proclaimed. She prodded him forward. "We'll go to my house. My mother will know what to do with you."

Now that he had heard from her lips that this forest really was full of women who actually did kill and eat men, he believed the stories he'd heard back in New Brooklyn. But it was hard to credit this delicate girl, whose beauty was blossoming every moment, as a murderer, or worse, a cannibal. However, he had to admit, she had taken a chunk out of him already.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Royston hesitated. "Won't your mother want to kill me and eat me? And what else did you say—'ride' me?" (What that could be, Royston had a vague idea.)

Pink wrinkled her nose. "Oh, God, no. Senga's too old to ride anyone anymore. Eccch!" She stuck out her tongue, and her mouth formed a rictus of disgust. Royston blinked at her inquiringly, but she didn't explain.

"She's not like the others. They're the ones who ride and kill and eat. They hate her, and she hates them. But they all hate men, though."

"Oh, *good*—I'm so glad you're taking me to meet someone who probably has a million enemies in this crazy place, and who's gonna hate me just because she hates all men. Just as long as she won't try to eat me."

Royston had lost a surprising amount of blood, and Pink pitied him, but she prodded him forward just the same. With his uninjured hand he reached out to steady himself on the tree trunks that bordered the trail.

"Keep an eye out for pits," Pink told him, "or you could end up getting eaten, 'cause I won't be able to get you out. And look for a yellow building with a red roof—that's our house, mine and Senga's. My mother's."

Something in what she said tugged at his memory, but all the talk about getting eaten drove it out.

"Pits...what do you mean, like peach pits?"

"No! Pits, like pits in the ground. You know...holes."

"Like this?" Royston grabbed at a sapling and lifted his foot out of a hole that had opened up before him, and he swayed against Pink, and so did she, from that swooning, swaying, gossamer touch of skin against skin. The tips of her ears grew hot and red under her mane of hair, and she cleared her throat and straightened up.

"Like that." She nodded gravely.

"Well, slow down, will ya? What's the rush?"

“We can’t let them catch us. They’ve never seen me, and I don’t want them to see you, and I really don’t want them to catch either of us. If they saw us, they’d blame Senga, and they’d kill her; she’s broken about a thousand rules. And if they catch you, they’ll definitely kill you, and...We just need to get home to my mother.”

Pink’s suddenly felt a desire to keep Royston as secret as Senga had tried to keep her. The idea of his capture and death had flickered into and out of her eyes in a trice, but it was there long enough for him to catch it. However, something else in what she said puzzled him, and what he said was, “What do you mean, they’ve never seen you?”

“They’ve never seen me. I’m a secret. I hide. Actually, I’ve been hidden—Senga’s been hiding me ever since I was born. She doesn’t want them to get me. She doesn’t want me to become one of them.”

“Is she crazy? You can’t hide a whole person!”

“I think she is a little crazy. But she’s my mother, and I fought with her last night, and I ran away, and that’s how you found me back there. Now hurry up. I’m sorry your hand hurts, but you have to hurry up or the Maenads will find us. They come this way sometimes.”

“If she’s your mother, why do you call her Senga?”

Pink lifted her shoulders. “I dunno. That’s what she taught me to call her; it’s her name. Anyway, she’s not my actual mother... which I just found out...which is one of the things we fought about. Not only did she keep *me* a secret, she kept *that* a secret from me!” As Pink held her tree branch before her, she indicated with her head the direction she wanted Parry to take. Even though she had her weapon, Parry could have subdued her. But he had finally realized that this was the girl he had come to the forest to find, and he was enjoying her company, although her torrent of talk was dizzying.

And so he obeyed her commands, and they made their way single file through the woods, up the slope to where Pink thought the relay station should be. Her commands were silent, but she was not. As they walked, she told him the story Senga had told her the previous night, and they walked and they walked and when she was finished with her story, the relay station was in view. And Royston was in love.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Buffy was singing; that was how Yuki knew where to find her. The lyrics were her own, but the melody was something of a cross between “O Tannenbaum” and “Ach, du Lieber Augustine.” Of course Yuki didn’t know this; she had never heard recorded music, or any music other than what the Abbess’s women sang or what the South Americans played on their pipes. Nevertheless, even her unschooled ears knew Buffy couldn’t sing a lick, so when Yuki heard a tone-deaf contralto braying:

“Your tits are so adorable,
bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo...
“Your bits are so explorable, bloo-bloo-bloo-bloo...
“But why are you so h-o-o-o-rrible, bloo-bloo-bloo-
bloo, to me-e-e-e?”

...she knew it had to be Buffy. Who else would be singing, or indeed doing much of anything out of doors, in the wet after the rain, along the booby-trapped and guarded road that led to Buffy’s pot plantation-cum-distillery?

Her ablutions complete, Buffy was still singing lustily as she swung her arms and walked back to her shelter from her impromptu shower, her feet squelching and splashing mud up along the backs of her just-washed legs. She recognized Yuki-Kai as she approached, even before Yuki-Kai saw her. Buffy liked the wild girl and had been pleased when she had come to her for her initiation tattoo last fall. And although Alma and the Abbess had been disappointed when any of Maenads failed to become pregnant that season, Buffy was glad it hadn't happened that way for Yuki-Kai. Somehow she liked the idea of the lone wild girl, loose and free like herself. She couldn't imagine Yuki-Kai pregnant or nursing.



As Yuki walked toward Buffy, she was making up her mind that she would limit her questions to whether Buffy had seen anyone pass or heard anything unusual that morning, but now that she was here, she began to think that wouldn't do. She faced a choice: Would Buffy be more likely to help her if Yuki told her everything—everything meaning all about Pink? Yuki reasoned that if she and Senga and Pink were leaving the forest anyway, what difference would it make who knew about Pink? And who'd believe old stoned and loaded Buffy if she told the others the truth—that there was a free girl somewhere in the forest who belonged to Senga? Still, Yuki was political enough to understand that what Buffy didn't know, neither Alma nor the Abbess could knife out of her. At the door of Buffy's hut, Yuki paused and called out, "Hey! Anyone at home?"

The rain had stopped completely by this time, and Buffy's arboreal shower had turned itself off altogether. Buffy wasn't home, of course, but she was nearby, striding naked up the path toward Yuki,

wringing out her wet overalls with her meaty, muscular hands as she advanced. She waved at Yuki as soon as she saw her. Yes, she liked this wild girl who gave the mean, scrawny Alma so much trouble.

"Hey, Yuke." She smiled.

"Hey."

"You're...out...early," Buffy observed, slightly out of breath.

"Yeah...um...uh, I was looking for some—uh, something."

Buffy began pulling her wet overalls over her damp, furry legs, a process that took much effort. The wet, heavy denim of the trouser legs stuck to itself, and the wet skin of Buffy's legs added friction and subtracted glide.

"What kind of some-something?" she grunted. Buffy's obstinate trouser legs were taking most of her attention, but she thought she knew what Yuki wanted. A certain number of the Maenads had always been curious about Buffy's pipes and potions. Yuki was just the type too. A little young, maybe.

With a grunt and a heave, Buffy got the bib straps over her shoulders and fastened them; she would let the sun dry the garment on her body. *What the hell*, she thought. *I was her age when I started. Probably.*

Washed and dressed as she now was, she felt clean and calm and at peace with the forest and most everything in it. She was inclined to be generous.

"Let's see what we've got here." She made to enter her shelter—there was a clean pipe and some gentle weed that might do there—but Yuki stopped her with a hand on her arm. She had decided to tell. She'd remembered that with Buffy, it was best to be explicit and direct, and so Yuki decided to tell all she knew. But slowly, a bit at a time.

“There’s a girl...” she began, as Buffy sized her up. “A—a Maenad. She’s, uh...missing.”

Buffy cocked her head at Yuki and pushed out her thick, liver-colored lower lip, then swallowed it with its upper partner. So it wasn’t weed Yuki was after. It was Buffy who measured her words now. “Oh,” she said. “A missing Maenad. I thought you might mean you were looking for Senga’s girl.”

She looked as innocently as she could at Yuki-Kai, whose mouth opened in denial or protest or awe, or a combination of all three.

“You know about her?” Yuki remained openmouthed—too amazed to realize that she had confirmed what Buffy might only have been guessing at. Buffy nodded.

“Sure I do.”

Yuki’s head swam. “But...”

Buffy smirked enigmatically. “Sometimes, when people think you’re stupid, it’s good to let them think it,” she explained jovially. She jerked her head in the direction of the carousel. “People like the Abbess and Alma especially. I don’t mind; I am kinda stupid. But Senga’s okay. She doesn’t hurt anyone. She’s my friend, I guess. If she wants to pretend a baby is hers, and hide her from everyone else, and dig tunnels till she can’t dig anymore, I don’t mind. Why should I?”

Yuki stared for several moments at this completely unexpected version of Buffy before she remembered her errand, and how urgent it had seemed just moments ago. But by the time Yuki had recovered her composure, Buffy had lit up a pipe. She offered it to Yuki, who declined, and waved away the smoke.

Buffy sat on a stump that served for a bench outside her front door, and inhaled, filling her by-now-leathery lungs.

“I knew Senga from before, you know...” she choked out the words as she tried to keep as much of the smoke as possible inside her chest.

Buffy’s attention span was short, and her lonely existence made her eager for any audience she could acquire. Yuki-Kai was impatient, but she liked Buffy, and that made her wait politely. But not for too long.

“Um, Buffy?”

But Buffy continued.

“It was Senga that gave me the name Buffy. Did you know that?”

Yuki was vexed. She shook her head and waved her hand in front of her face to disperse the pungent, sweet-smelling smoke that Buffy was exhaling. Her nose crinkled violently.

“Buffy,” she started, “I need—” but Buffy was off. Crossing her bulky legs at the ankle, she leaned back and folded one arm behind her head. She was lost and reveling in the memory of a day in her long-ago girlhood. She’d known what other girls thought of her; known she was an oversized, ungainly teenager with a center part in her lank, mouse-colored hair, a face full of spots, and an ill-fitting bathing suit. But when she had inspired the quick-witted, pretty, insensitive young Senga to blurt out her tactless thought, Buffy took no offense. It was true, she *had* looked like a large, west African water mammal. But until Senga, no one had been tactless or bold enough to mention it. And then Senga did, forever erasing her new friend’s prosaic given name: it had been Mary Anne.

“Yep. From then on, I was Buffy. I didn’t mind. I liked it—”

“Buffy,” Yuki finally burst, “Senga’s in trouble!”

“Who?”

Yuki grabbed the pipe. “Senga! Your friend! Who gave you your name! I need your help—I need you to pay attention. You can have this later.” She threw the pipe down. Buffy looked innocently hurt, and her eyes scanned the ground for the pipe. But she couldn’t ignore Yuki’s words, which were now tumbling over one another.

“Your friend, our friend, Senga, is in trouble. You were right, it’s her girl that ran away, and I need you to help me find her before the others do. And if you do that, you...you can come with us.”

“Come with you where?”

“Outside the forest. We’re leaving.”

“Gee. I dunno...” Buffy looked toward the marijuana seedlings that were growing in pots she had set out on the cleared space in front of her door, the space she called her veranda.

“You don’t have to come. But we could use your help.”

Buffy decided.

She stood up and pushed open her front door. Entering her shelter, she took a bag off a hook made from a bent nail. From another nail she grabbed a hat, and from somewhere else in the rubbishy mess underfoot, she located a pair of boots into which she jammed her large feet, and a bottle of something she took a gulp from and resealed with a cork. Moving more quickly than Yuki had ever seen her do, she strode to her wash line and plucked a cleanish, rain-dampened rag, which she handed to Yuki.

More delicately than Yuki would have believed possible, Buffy’s hamlike hands picked the dainty cannabis sproutlings from the tubs on the veranda, where they were waiting to be transplanted into the pot field behind her house. She laid each one like a sleeping child in the rag in Yuki’s hands, and then rolled the rag delicately around the lot before placing everything gently into her bag, which she slung over her shoulder.

“If Senga’s not gonna be here, I don’t wanna stay here anymore,” she explained. She stowed the corked bottle in her bib pocket, and crammed the floppy hat onto the back of her head.

Yuki was glad to hear it. She had thought they might need Buffy’s broad back, and if she was on their side, it meant there was one less woman on the Abbess’s side. If there was to be fighting, that would matter.

“Okay,” Yuki said, “let’s go. If you didn’t see anyone or hear anything this morning, we should head back to the relay station. Senga told me to meet her there whether I found Pink or not.”

“Is that her name?” Buffy asked. “The girl we’re looking for?”

Yuki nodded. Buffy bent over suddenly, to Yuki’s alarm.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick?” she cried.

Then she noticed a flash of serrated steel in the sunlight, and Buffy was upright again and handing her a young sapling from which she began stripping the leaves. Yuki was impressed by the speed with which Buffy had produced and used the sizeable knife.

“Everyone is different today,” she thought aloud, “even the rain. Everything is changing.”

Handing a stripped sapling to Yuki and keeping one for herself, Buffy grinned. Her sapling, a walking stick now, still had a jaunty leaf or two on top.

“We’ve got a ways to go, so let’s get going.” In all her years in the forest, Buffy had never been inside the relay station before, but she knew the way there.

TWENTY-NINE

Pink and Royston had reached the relay station in a state of high excitement. Their youth, the danger they were in, the newness of each other, and the raw physical beauty of each in the other's eyes...so much combined to send the blood pumping into their loins and away from their brains. Once reason and custom were so stripped away, Pink knew the form of her desire. And Royston knew his as well, as the drowned monkey girl had become, during their hours-long journey through the woods, the fiery golden siren whose perfection had lured him into this strange world.

When the thick door of the station had boomed shut behind them, once Pink had called "Senga!" and received no reply, she and Royston reached for each other like drowning souls. Hearts knocking in their breasts, they began fumbling out of their thin rags. They tumbled each other to the floor, where they lay for long minutes in each other's arms, writhing and kissing with lips, teeth, and tongues—mouths open as if to devour each other, then exploring with lips gently pressed to each other's softest skin.

Kiss followed kiss as with trembling fingers they searched each other's faces, absorbing each other's loveliness through their naked

skin. Royston's injured hand, which had stopped bleeding, started again. He ignored it, but Pink took it and licked off the blood. His blood, which she had drawn. As she licked and sucked his fingers, he felt more strongly the by now familiar, insistent heaviness between his legs. She, too, felt the weight of her sex gathering to a point between her thighs, pressing her forward to hold herself against him.

His standing member was pounding and stout with blood, and Pink too was ready: wet and dusky and slick. As they dove into each other, they were so intent that, like Senga and Parry earlier that same day, they never knew they were observed.

But their observers were more benign than their parents' had been. For Buffy and Yuki had arrived at the relay station some moments after the young lovers, whom they now spied on through the front window. Wordless and captivated, the two new friends moved closer, the better to observe the lovemaking unfolding before them. Infected by such a contagion of love, their arms crept around each other, Buffy's warm and sisterly around Yuki's thin shoulders, Yuki's around the older woman's substantial waist, and they sighed to see such love and lust so manifest and entwined before their eyes.

Yuki, who despite everything was at bottom ever a good friend, felt a soft twinge of jealousy. But she smiled inwardly to see that Pink had found her heart's true home. Buffy gave her shoulder a consoling squeeze, and Yuki smiled at her wistfully as each of them took a long breath. A tear escaped from Yuki's eyes, and she wiped it off with her wrist.

Buffy exhaled.

"Now that's fucking," she sighed.



One hundred yards behind the watchers, unseeing and unseen by them, traveling along an overgrown, sunken path of her own discovering, Alma passed, prodding Senga and Parry ahead of her. Two Maenads brought up the rear. The angry caravan passed wordlessly, close by the relay station on its way to the carousel lawn.

"Let's give 'em some privacy, huh?" Buffy was whispering hoarsely. Yuki nodded in agreement. Turning their backs to the ongoing love scene unfolding beyond the window, they rested against and then slid down the wall of the station. They came to rest with their knees bent, their seats on the earth and their backs to the wall. Buffy pulled out the bottle she'd stowed in her bib, and pulled the cork.

"Want some?" she offered.

Yuki sniffed, then shrugged. "Sure."

So the two exiles drank together companionably, and Buffy told Yuki the story of how she and Senga had first met, and then lost each other, and come together again on the fateful bus. She had gotten to the part about how she had met Alma, when the stiffness in her knees told her half an hour had passed.

"That's enough time for a healthy-lookin' kid like him," she announced. To Yuki she said, "Go ahead and knock on the door. They should be done now."

They were done—done and gone.

Buffy and Yuki pushed open the heavy wooden door that they had knocked on in vain. Now it was unbarred. Calling and calling Pink's name, for they didn't know Royston Parry's, their voices

echoed off the tiled, high-ceilinged walls and bounced back at them unanswered. They looked at each other, both very much at a loss.

“Where could they be?” each asked the other.

“I’ll look upstairs,” Buffy offered. Then, seeing the spindly metal spiral of steps that led to the upper floor, she thought better of it. “On second thought, you go upstairs. I’ll look around down here.”

But five minutes later they were back in the front hall where Pink and Parry had abandoned themselves so beautifully not an hour ago; the relay station was empty. At least it was empty of human life. Of useful things it was still full. Yuki’s thoughts turned to the dangerous things Pink had showed her. Did Buffy know about them? She had no words for them, no names for the bayonet and the hand grenades. She couldn’t ask.

The sun was slipping down the afternoon side of the sky. With a golden finger it touched the inner walls of the front hall of the relay station with beams of light in which motes of dust danced languidly.

“It’s getting late. I need to get back to the carousel lawn for the Snatch,” Buffy told Yuki-Kai. “If I’m not there, they’ll miss me. I’m pretty important.”

Yuki opened her mouth to protest, but Buffy shushed her.

“It’s important, but it’s over before the riding begins. As soon as it’s done, I’ll come back.”

Yuki didn’t argue. She understood, as almost no other girl in her cohort would have, how unreasonable the Abbess could be, and how cruelly she punished those who would interrupt or delay her dinner, her love life, her speechmaking. It would be worse for anyone who spoiled her sacred pageant—it would be blasphemy. Bold Yuki felt a stab of fear. “I’ll go with you,” she started to say.

“No. Somebody’s got to stay here in case Senga comes back. Somebody’s got to tell her about Pink and that boy. And let her know there’s more of us leaving with them. You wait here. See if you can find anything to fight with. And I’ll be back as soon as I can. Maybe the boy and Pink will come back by themselves. I would, if I had a nice house like this.”

Yuki nodded agreement. This Buffy was being so grown up, so sensible—not at all like the stoner, the drunk, the dresser of meat, the outsider on the edge of the group, whom Yuki had known, she now saw, like the rest of the young ones knew the old ones: only barely.

“Find some food to take with us,” this Buffy was instructing, “but not too much. Water’s more important; fill some bottles. There’ll be plenty in the rain barrels now. If there are knives, get them too.”

Yuki nodded. She thought of the Dangerous Things. She hadn’t seen Senga take them.

“I’ll be back as quick as I can. Bar the door behind me—do you know how?”

Yuki nodded again, and then Buffy was gone. Yuki watched as her new friend vanished into the fast-approaching twilight. She felt oddly alone as she shut and barred the heavy oaken door, then turned so her back was against it.

“Right,” she said aloud, smacking her hands together. “Food, water, and stuff to fight with.”

She didn’t know that Senga had taken the most useful and deadly fighting tools to South America, and although Yuki didn’t know their names, she kept her eyes peeled for the Dangerous Things as she collected the items that Buffy had told her to gather.

And as she browsed and gathered throughout all the echoing rooms of the relay station, rooms that were mostly intact, and rooms that had been stripped to the plaster and lathe for material to shore up the tunnels, a terrible thought occurred to Yuki. What if Pink wouldn't want to leave, now that that man thing had entered the forest? What if the man thing had taken Pink away?

What if she never saw Pink again at all?

THIRTY

As suddenly as that afternoon had turned to dusk, dusk had turned to darkness, and Yuki-Kai was close to frantic. She had made up her mind to disregard the plan she'd agreed to with Buffy and make for the carousel lawn by herself. Something had to be very wrong. First Senga had disappeared, and now Buffy was late—and where the hell were Pink and that boy? She couldn't wait. She had to move. Now.

Stepping outside, she pulled the heavy door closed behind her, and realized that she had left it too late. The sun had gone down, and she had no light she could use to guide her through the night woods. Although the darkness held no terror for her, she was as blind as anyone else would have been in the black-velvet night. She might miss her friends altogether, and she was equally unhappy in the knowledge that she might run smack into her enemies in the dark. She was stuck; she would have to wait here until whatever had happened to the others happened to her too. For she had no doubt by now—something had happened to them.

Her sangfroid deserted her, and she began to bite her fingernails. She was just about to break into the supplies she'd packed

into the bags that she'd draped around herself. A candle to use to make a torch of some kind—when suddenly she became aware of a shaft of light, flickering and dancing its way toward her through the woods. Like the finger of sunlight that had illuminated the relay station that afternoon, the beam of light was moving, bouncing, really, although rapidly and with purpose. Without knowing why, Yuki hid herself. She wanted to see whoever this was before they saw her.

This was an unknown thing to her, this moving, bouncing light, for when the batteries from the flashlight that had pinned Senga in its beam so long ago had died, they had never been replaced. No one had ever found more, in all their scavenging. Neither Yuki nor Pink nor any of the younger Maenads had ever seen a flashlight. There were two lanterns, but they belonged to the Abbess and Alma, who guarded them jealously. Movement at night was almost impossible without light, as Pink had learned, and the power of light had until now been controlled by the Abbess and her lieutenant.

But the light from Royston's flashlight, for that's what it was, bounced jauntily as its owner carried it along through the darkness of the rapidly deepening forest night. It did not behave like lantern light; for one thing, it emitted a beam—it didn't glow. When Royston passed behind a tree or an overgrown bush, or followed the path he was tracing behind an outcropping, the light disappeared. But it would reappear, denser, brighter, closer, soon after, every time it did so. And soon, Yuki heard voices. One she recognized, and her heart leaped. The voice she loved best seemed to be giving directions, and the beam of light was bouncing around in her direction.

Pink and the man-boy-thing were coming back to the relay station! Yuki couldn't believe her luck. But where was Buffy?

Her idea of making a torch now abandoned, Yuki rushed from her hiding place to greet them, then hung back at the last instant. She felt shame, recalling how Pink had been balled up and bleeding after their last meeting. But there was no resentment in the way Pink threw her arms around Yuki now, only relief. And Royston could only watch and wait. But first there was a confusion of questions that had no easy answers, breathless explanations that didn't explain much, apologies, squeals, and many tears.

“Senga and Buffy—”

“What happened to you?”

“I'm sorry—”

“It's nothing; a scratch.”

“Who is this?”

“You go first.”

Tired of waiting, Royston spoke up. “My name's Royston Parry, and I think we should get inside.” He pointed to the relay station. “All those women”—he gestured with his thumb in the direction from which he and Pink had just come—“they might come looking for us.” Yuki nodded grimly, seeing the sense of this suggestion, and Pink beamed up at Royston as if he had discovered fire.

The trio moved back toward the door of the station, which they had barely managed to shut behind them when the *thwock* of an arrow thudded against the wood. Seconds later, the head of another arrow had buried itself up to its shaft in the wood; its tip penetrated the door. The three young ones scrambled to shoot the heavy bar across their side of the door. Another arrow broke through a window and fell uselessly inside the front hall.

“Shit!” The three looked at each other in alarm. The only thought that occurred to any of them now was to barricade the door, and this they tried to do as a fourth arrow crashed against another window, breaking the pane through which Yuki and Buffy had spied on the young lovers that afternoon. Grabbing anything they could, furniture, mattresses, crockery, bottles, papers, boxes, old tires, pillows, clothing, and shoes, they dragged or threw it haphazardly and futilely against the splintering door, which was now being pried open. As Parry had intuited, they had followed the beam of his flashlight, although he’d had no choice but to use it.

The women must have brought some kind of prybar, for they were enlarging the space between the door frame and the door itself. And although it was stout, the old door was starting to give. Yuki, Royston, and Pink drew close to each other in fear. They had thrown everything they could get their hands on at the door, but of course none of it was any good. Royston placed an arm around each girl, Yuki under his right arm, Pink under his left. The only sounds were their ragged, panting breaths and the horrid squeaking of wood as the door began to give way. Seconds passed, and before they could recover enough courage to turn and run out the back door, or at the very least try to hide in some corner, the door was almost shattered by a bigger *thwack*. Pink screamed, and Royston covered her eyes with his hand, but Yuki said, “Listen. Wait.”

Pink pushed Royston’s protective fingers away from her face and scowled up at him. What the three couldn’t see yet was the spear that had shuddered into the outside of the door, flames sprouting from the end of its shaft. It had passed through Renee’s chest, pinning her to the what was left of the wood, bursting her heart. Her dying screams mingled with Alice’s screams of terror as she retreated back toward the carousel lawn. She screamed anew

some minutes later when she fell blindly into a pit, and then she screamed no more.

It was some minutes before the young people could bring themselves to creep out the back door and around the edge of the building to see who or what had saved them. But all they saw when they came around the garden wall was the horrid thing that had been the archer Renee, quite horribly dead and already starting to shrivel as she blackened and burned. Both Pink and Yuki surprised Royston as they stared at the horror with equanimity. They were not like New Brooklyn girls after all.

“Look,” said Pink, pointing to the spear.

The burning shaft was like that of any of the other spears wielded by anyone else in the forest. At one end their weapons were simply sharpened wooden stakes, effective against the flesh of small animals, suitable for prodding the men caught for the Snatch out of their pits and into their cages, but utterly unable to bury themselves in a wooden door as this one had done. The trio edged closer to the pinned corpse that had been Renee, eager to see what had had given this spear its lethal heft. Pink nudged Yuki, but there was no need. She, too, had seen the bayonet affixed to the shaft of the stake and buried in Renee’s back.

“One of the Dangerous Things,” Pink whispered, almost reverently.

Yuki nodded.

“Dangerous Things?” Parry asked.

Both girls looked at him, but Yuki spoke.

“There were three dangerous things in a box in the relay station. We”—she indicated Pink with a jerk of her head—“don’t know what they were called. Someone must’ve stuck this metal

knife thing onto a regular spear, smeared the spear with fat, and set it on fire.”

“Who would do something like that?”

“I dunno.”

“Her mother?” He indicated Pink, who shook her head.

“It’s not that she wouldn’t,” she began to say, defending Senga’s valor, but she was interrupted.

“Her mother went to South America this afternoon,” Yuki said—unhelpfully, as far as Royston was concerned. Pink, whose eyes had never traveled far from his face since she had met him, noticed his puzzlement. She shook her head at Yuki. It would take too long to explain. She turned to Royston.

“I’ll tell you later,” she said.

“Anyway, I looked all over for the Dangerous Things this afternoon, and I couldn’t find them,” Yuki said. “They’re not in the relay station.”

“Where could they be, then?” Pink asked.

Royston nodded. “Yeah, it’d be nice to know...”

“I’m getting to that part. Senga said she was going to South America to let the women there know we were leaving the forest. In case they wanted to come. She must’ve taken the Dangerous Things with her, and she probably gave the Dangerous Things to them. They can’t stand the Abbess, or Alma, or any of the others. They call them *las mujeres malas*. Bad women.”

“And if they’re friendly with Senga...”

“Then maybe they’re friendly to us. Actually, I think they just want us to leave them alone. All of us. But especially the ones they call the bad women. Anyway...” Yuki paused. With a glance, she indicated the burning body stuck to the door. “Whoever did this is a friend to us.”

“How do you *know* it wasn’t her mother?”

“Cause her mother wouldn’t be hiding from *us*. Whoever threw this is gone.”

Royston cast the beam from his flashlight around, illuminating the tree trunks and bushes all around them. The woods, at least as far as his flashlight’s beam could reach, were empty.

As he clicked off the light, the flames from the throwing end of the spear continued licking their way along the shaft of the spear itself, working their way toward the wood of the door. There was plenty of light to see by here. But the hair of Renee’s head was burning and giving off a noxious, sulfurous smell. The flakes of paint that were left on the old door began to bubble. The heat the fire gave off was immense, and as Renee’s scalp began to cook, the smell of it became odious as well.

“I think we’d better get back to the carousel lawn,” said Yuki. “I have a feeling that’s where we’ll find Senga and Buffy. They’re probably in bigger trouble than we are.” She began to strip off some of the bags she had slung around herself and hand them to the others.

“Bigger trouble than getting shot at with arrows?” Royston was incredulous. If there were any kind of trouble bigger than this, he didn’t want to get any nearer to it. He almost said, “I need to get back to my dad; he’ll be worried.”

“It’s just because they saw you,” said Yuki matter-of-factly, and as patiently as she could, but she was finding it hard to be patient when explaining something that should have been so obvious. Pink agreed.

“They probably just wanted to ride you and eat you. They shoot men with arrows all the time here.”

Yuki nodded.

Royston gulped. “That’s another thing. I’m pretty sure I know what the riding is, and I definitely know what eating is. Do you mean you’re all cannibals?”

Pink picked up one of the bags Yuki had taken off and handed it to Royston. “I’ll explain while we walk. But Yuki’s right. We should go now.”

“Can I ask one more question?”

“Depends.”

“Were the other Dangerous Things the same as that one?”

Pink and Yuki spoke at once, each one’s words tumbling over the other’s as they described the metal balls with the handles and the rings. Royston understood, and smiled.

“Hand grenades,” he said. “They’re called hand grenades. You’re right. They are dangerous.” He slipped the bag Pink had handed him onto his shoulder. “And that”—he pointed toward the door, where only the charred stump of the spear was left and the shriveled remains of Renee were beginning to spit and crackle—“is a bayonet. I’d say it was a good one.”

At a crashing sound in the underbrush, they realized their vulnerability, but for the second time that afternoon, their luck was good. It was Buffy, keeping her promise to Yuki-Kai.

THIRTY-ONE

Each one laden with a bag of the haphazardly gathered supplies, the group of four pounded back up the trail toward the carousel lawn. Although the three young ones, helped by Royston’s flashlight, could have sped there and back in less than an hour, they were slowed by Buffy’s exhaustion. She had made the trip at least once before, that awful afternoon. And she was easily winded anyway, due to her years of weed smoking and her fattening home-brew drinking, and to the other three, she seemed terribly old. Yet as they traveled, the young ones insistently plied her with questions, taxing her speed and her breathing all the more. From her answers and from their own knowledge, they pieced together what had happened that day. By the time they reached the fringe of the carousel lawn, each had a good idea of the trouble they were all in, and Buffy had a stitch in her side as well, and a desperate need for a drink.

“Wait up,” she admonished, and collapsed cross-legged onto the pine-needle carpet under an aging and stately conifer whose topmost branches were sighing in the night wind. For long moments she breathed in and out raggedly, until the others finally

realized she was not just being lazy old Buffy; she was truly almost spent. And they still had a fight before them, from the looks of things they could see around the bonfire. The taunts and shouts of the Maenads carried across the lawn, and the choir was singing its horrible little anthem that sounded like “Blueberry Hill.”

Pink flopped down in front of Buffy and pulled off the older woman’s boots. She began to rub her feet. Royston flapped his gathering bag back and forth near Buffy’s face, fanning her until the sweat on her mounded forehead and her upper lip was well dried. Sensing what was really needed, Yuki thrust one hand into the bib of Buffy’s overalls and retrieved the bottle that was stowed there. It still contained a dram, maybe a dribble more. She uncorked it and put it to Buffy’s lips.

“Look,” said Royston, pointing across the Lawn, and he gasped. He had spotted his father. “Oh, shit.”

Buffy roused herself. “You know him?” she asked. Royston did not answer but continued to peer at the man being pulled toward the cages. Slowly he nodded, but said nothing.

Pink left Buffy’s side and stood next to Parry, being careful to stay within the penumbra of the sheltering pine. She peered across the carousel lawn where the fire licked the night. Beside her, Royston looked stricken. She tried to follow his gaze. She saw the cages rock, to cheers and shouts from Maenads and Acolytes alike, as a man was shoved toward it. Royston almost shouted, “That’s my father!” and Yuki, next to him, pointed and whispered, “Holy...that’s—that’s Senga!”

Royston’s head whipped around. “Your mom?” he demanded.

“Up against that platform thing.”

“Where?” Buffy had gotten her shoes back on and collected herself. She joined the group at the edge of the lawn. Pink answered her by pointing.

Buffy let out the faintest of whistles. “Look,” she said, “I’ll go see what’s going on. I’m supposed to be part of this whole thing, so no one’s gonna stop me. I’ll get back here and tell you, and then we can figure out what to do. So you guys all stay here, and once I get back, we’ll make a plan.”

“Great,” said Royston. “Cause that’s worked out so great already.”

Buffy shrugged. “Do you have a better idea?”

When no ideas, better or worse, were offered, she slipped off toward the carousel lawn.



The rough, slatted crates in which the prisoners were held had evolved. No longer rude wooden pens made of branches lashed together with ropes, they were now more like wooden-wheeled carts surmounted by cages that were themselves festooned with skulls. And not only adult skulls; skulls of the unmourned, unremembered infants who had had the bad fortune to be born male in the forest ornamented the lintels of the cages. The skulls of men served as finials on the corner posts. Rib bones and pelvises were hammered into the uprights, as were random femurs, tibias, scapulars, mandibles, sternums, and vertebrae.

Each wheeled cage had a slatted bottom—victims often voided their bowels and bladders before dying, and the slats made the crates somewhat easier to clean. But the bottom of each cage was littered with small bones—carpals, metacarpals, and phalanges

from the hands of past victims, cuboids and metatarsals from their feet. Pubic bones, jawbones, kneecaps, and teeth as well. The bones were thrown there for effect; no one died slowly in the cages, and if they did, their corpses would not have been permitted to repose in the respectful luxury of a slow and peaceful disintegration. The boiled bones of the adult men—the ones that eluded the Abbess's strange addiction—were picked clean and saved for the purpose of adorning the cages, and the bones of the male infants were raked out from the pits and ovens every month. Nothing was wasted.

Bone collector was a Maenad job, slightly higher in status than cage cleaner (which was often reserved as a punishment, one that had been administered to Yuki-Kai with a regularity that added fuel to the fire of her adolescent anger). Thus every girl and woman in the forest had a part in the ritual of the Snatch, and the parts evolved as the particular girls and women changed and grew.

This evening, Mia had been preparing for her part as the Fruits of the Riding, getting into her ropy harness, when her wicked, beady eyes caught sight, in the dusk, of a girl doing nothing. Just staring. With her jaw hanging and her eyes wide open. All the other girls were busy, running to and fro with last-minute preparations. The indolent girl on the opposite side of the carousel lawn, intermittently hidden and illuminated by the leaping flames of the bonfire, would spoil everything. Mia grew angry. Everyone should be helping.

There was the ceremonial last meal to be fed to the captives; although the men who had ended up in the cages were usually too terrified to even think of eating, it was the job of certain Maenads to poke food at them through the bars. "So it was in the beginning, so it shall be to this day, and for all time," the Abbess had ordered. And Mia always agreed with the Abbess.

Angry Mia told herself she needed to do something. The Snatch had a part for every single woman and girl in the woods, and if a girl was just standing and staring at the fire, as this stupid thing seemed to be doing, then the perfection of the Snatch would be spoiled. It was spoiled already. Mia struggled out of the harness and grabbed one of the sharpened stakes that had been prepared for the ceremony. "Come on," she squeaked at her dresser. "Bring the twins. And be quiet. This should be good!"

They sneaked around the long way, staying under the eaves of the trees that ringed the carousel lawn, the better to surprise and frighten the lazy thing. They would come at her from behind.

Of course, the idle girl Mia had seen was Pink. Because of some trick of the firelight, or because they weren't expecting to see him, none of the Maenads noticed Royston until they were facing him. Pink was just raising her hands and moving closer to the young man. She wished—how she wished!—that she and Royston had stayed in the relay station to wait for Senga that afternoon. She wished she hadn't been so eager to show off for him, to show him the woods as if she knew them better than she really did. She wished she hadn't fought with Senga, and that thought led to this one—where *was* Senga?

The small group of captors seemed more menacing than they actually were; in the leaping firelight, they seemed to bristle with spears. Their little rat-faced leader's penetrating screams were piercing Pink's and Royston's eardrums when a deeper voice drowned them out. The owner of the voice was known to the three captives, but she spoke with an unfamiliar, boisterous authority as she barged toward them through the dusk. With a violent crashing of branches and foliage, a large, loud woman wearing a floppy hat and farmer's overalls emerged from the deep woods and addressed the Maenads.

Pink and Royston huddled together, frozen as much with shock and surprise as with fear, while Buffy cheerfully scolded the Maenads who were holding their weapons on the pair. Determinedly ignoring Pink and her young man, Buffy swept past them and scooped Mia up by her naked arm. “What the hell are you doing, Mia? Where’s your harness? Come on, it’s late!” Grabbing one of the twins by the ghastly belt she wore, Buffy swept her along as well, and her minute-younger sister followed in her wake. “Come on!” Buffy turned her head and bellowed back at Mia’s dresser, a not-overbright and easily cowed young girl who, with a last, confused look at the captives, scrambled to catch up.

Pink and Royston did what Buffy had counted on them to do. After a moment’s stunned stillness, they turned and disappeared, running back in the direction of the relay station as Mia squealed, “But there’s a man, there’s a man, there’s a man, and a strange girl!”

Buffy stopped suddenly and put Mia down on the lawn without letting go of her arm. The little creature twisted and snarled, but Buffy crooned to her calmly, as if Mia were years younger and awakening from a bad dream. A shift in the evening breeze carried smoke from the bonfire toward them, tearing at their throats, stinging their eyes. At some distance away from the fire, a chorus of small girls was warming up, singing, “It’s snatch before kill...”

“Of course there’s a man, Mia; look, there’s two.” And Buffy pointed to the raging, terrified men in the cages who were offstage yet, clutching the bars with rigid hands and staring out into the firelit dusk with terrified eyes. Slightly bigger girls, having outgrown the chorus, were poking food at them through the bars, or taunting them by dancing and displaying bare, shapeless backsides to the hapless captives.

“But there was a girl, too, a strange girl,” Mia croaked miserably as Buffy pulled her along by the arm and shoved her into her dressing chamber behind the carousel stage.

“I didn’t see any strange girl,” Buffy lied. “Now c’mon, get into your harness. I’ve gotta do a safety check before I put you on the rope.”

She hoped that her diversion had worked. She couldn’t afford to look back to be certain, but she prayed that Pink and the boy would have had sense and time enough to run away while they could. She hoped that if she pretended that she didn’t understand what Mia was saying, Mia would stop saying it. And in that she underestimated the self-confidence of this small girl who was always believed, because even when she told lies, they were lies her listeners wanted to hear.

So Mia kept insisting, in her penetrating, piercing voice, that there was another man—not just the two in the cages who had been caught days ago and kept alive in a pit until now. Buffy finished fastening Mia’s straps and poked her head through the backdrop. The Abbess was pacing before the half-closed curtain like a nervous ingénue from the days when there had been theaters. Hands behind her back, she was pacing and rapping the palm of her empty hand with the script she held in the other. In the midst of what seemed to Buffy to be scarcely controlled chaos, the Abbess looked to be at peace. She loved this part of the ritual. Absorbed in preparation for her role, she didn’t look at Buffy, who quickly moved to pull her head back in behind the backdrop nonetheless.

“Let’s see if the pulley works,” she was about to say, when she was stricken silent. Even Mia stopped for breath. Across the carousel lawn, at the forefront of a spreading wave of sudden silence,

strode Alma and her prey. In the gathering stillness, the sound of the bonfire crackled. The flames danced high.

And at the sight of Senga with her head bowed and bloody and her wrists bound, an invisible hand reached its steely fingers into the small of Buffy's back and twisted, hard. The wrench almost undid the muscles encircling her lower back, and the pain reached around to her belly. The resulting spasm almost took the strength out of her substantial legs. However, she managed to keep on her feet. But her breath shuddered out of her slowly, and when she could inhale again, it was shallowly, and with considerable pain. Buffy's poor brain, which had already been overtaxed this day, continued to function along the lines of deception, and she recovered enough wit to tell Mia, "I guess you were right." She gulped. "Look. There is a man." And she pointed at Parry, who was second in line in the unhappy procession, behind Senga.

He had been jabbed and poked with Alma's sharpened wooden spear for several miles and what seemed like many hours. His face was clouded with rage, and every step he took had to be prodded out of him. And so the parade made its way jerkily toward the apron of grass at the front of the stage. The skin of Parry's back was scratched and punctured where the spears had poked. On seeing the procession, the Abbess rushed forward.

"Praise the Goddess," she cried. "Praise the Heavenly Mother!" She dropped her script and clapped her hands together at her breast. "Oh, Alma—all is forgiven!"

Alma spat on the earth. She would have a thing or two to discuss with the Abbess tomorrow. She shoved Parry forward, and Senga, who was tethered to him, had to follow. The cord between them was short, and pulled her onto her knees. Parry bent to help her up but was stopped by a Maenad's spear at his chin.

Night had fallen, and there was a breeze, but waves of heat from the bonfire washed toward them. The flames provided the only light; in all the excitement, the torches had not yet been lit.

"Attention, girls." The Abbess clapped her hands together and cleared her throat politely. Then something odd began to happen. The girls who had all been looking at Alma kept looking at her, as if asking for *her* permission to look toward the Abbess. The ones holding the ropes that bound Old Parry looked toward Alma, as did the ones who held their spears on Senga. The ones across the carousel lawn who were piling wood on the bonfire stopped; the ones who were feeding the men in the cages stopped too. The sluggish torchbearers paused with their torches unlit. The choir stopped singing. The ground was shifting under the Abbess's feet, and as she felt her power draining, she quailed. Her hands flew to her throat.

Alma stood on the grassy apron before the platform stage and stared up at the woman she was about to supplant. It felt good to be acknowledged like this at last. But the details could wait until tomorrow. There would be changes to the Snatch, starting tonight. Alma stared at Parry.

"Get another cage," she barked, glancing sidelong at the nearest Maenads. "Where's Buffy? We need her."

Alma glared at Senga. "We'll deal with you later, you useless old bitch."

With a quick hand motion, she ordered two Maenads to tie Senga more soundly. Binding her hands at the wrists and her feet at the ankles, they packaged her into a bundle of pain and propped her against the edge of the stage.

"That's right," said Alma, bringing her face dangerously close to Senga's, whose mouth was too dry to work up any spit, but whose

teeth could still bite. “We’ll let you have a front-row seat.” With one foot she delivered a parting kick that caught Senga’s rump, before jumping up onto the stage next to the Abbess.

Senga grimaced and struggled and writhed, but to little avail. The knots were inexpertly tied, but the cords were tight, and they bound and cut into her just the same. Her knees hurt where she had fallen next to Parry, who was fighting against his bonds, and would have burst them, if not for the spears of the Maenads, some of which were still uncomfortably close to his throat.

Several of the Maenads had been dispatched to push a third skull-bedizened cage over the uneven grass and into the center of the carousel lawn. They positioned it between the two that were already occupied. All three cages now stood between the bonfire and the stage, casting depraved and ink-black shadows.

Swinging the door of the third cage on its leather hinges and holding it open were two grown women. And Parry, stabbed and jabbed with wooden spears and pelted with rocks by a dozen hooting, howling Maenads, was forced inside. As the men on either side of him were doing now, he thundered the bars of his cage and cursed the women. But the little girls dancing around in the firelight like goblins only laughed and showed him their backsides, or laughed and poked him with sticks. They were not cowed.

Buffy, from her place backstage, had just finished testing the pulley, and had strapped Mia into the harness, ready to fly, when she heard Alma call her name.

“Coming,” she bellowed in Alma’s direction, then turned back to face the still-squalling Mia.

“Sorry,” she told her, and slapped the tiny, screeching wretch across the face, hard enough, she hoped, to knock her out. Not hard enough to snap her neck, just enough to shut her up. She pulled

on the rope that she’d tested a moment before, and scrawny Mia sailed up into the darkness. Using a snagged branch behind the open-air stage as a cleat, Buffy fastened the rope and ran, leaving the unconscious rat girl to swing in the night air, arms and legs dangling, squeaking silenced. Flames from the bonfire licked the night air, and a breaking log spit out a shower of sparks. There was a terrible beauty to them, but it was of a sort that no one in the forest was able to see.

And then they all saw her—Senga the crone, Senga the recluse, Senga the outcast, the hermit, the eccentric. She had lost that day whatever power she had found in her preserved isolation, it seemed, and was bundled up like household refuse someone had leaned against a wall before finally disposing of it. Some of the smaller girls had stopped pelting the men in the cages with stones and were starting on her; while her arms were bound behind her, she couldn’t prevent them and she couldn’t dodge them. Her blood-smeared head lolled against the platform where the pageant should have been taking place. Of course, this, to some of the Maenads, was better than Abbess’s script-and-costume playacting. They chose a side and joined in with gusto.

But unseen and unsuspected by any—Maenads, women, the caged men, the Abbess, or Alma—Senga had found a weak spot in the cords that bound her and was working herself loose. Her torpor was only partly real. And when Alma jumped down off the platform to put her taunting face close to Senga’s again, she was unprepared for what Senga did.

THIRTY-TWO

The problem with the Glasgow Kiss, as Senga had been taught to call it by her father long ago, is its potential for disabling not only the intended target but the assailant delivering the blow as well. It is a desperate maneuver, designed for desperate situations. Senga's options were limited, and she had no idea that help was at hand. She might have waited longer, feigning unconsciousness against the platform they called a stage, had she known that four rescuers were at that moment feverishly deciding on the best ways to save her and Parry.

But that she did not know. What she knew was that she had to free Parry, collect Pink and Yuki if she could find them, and once and for all get out of the madder madhouse this forest had lately become. She quailed for a moment at the thought of what she was about to do, but if the situations were reversed, she knew, Alma would have done it or worse to her.

And so when Alma, filled with the pleasure of her malice, and enjoying her moment of ascendancy, jumped down off the platform and put her face near Senga's to whisper some small, cruel, indecent thing, Senga simply waited. She balanced herself, getting a good

grip of the earth with her feet flat under her haunches, but she feigned defeat, hanging limply forward, until the crown of her head was grazing Alma's chest. This posture also served to contract her stomach muscles and round out the curve of her back. She would have to hook her head around, she calculated, as Alma approached her right ear, and she would have to just count on the shock of seeing their leader laid flat to take care of the Maenads, for a moment at least. But a moment was all she would need, she believed.

Goddess help me.

As Alma came close, Senga exploded upward, springing from her calves and thighs, ignoring the pain in her knees and feet, adrenalized and erupting into the side of Alma's head with a perfectly landed, rising head butt. As she had thought it would, the resulting sight of their prostrate and unconscious leader stunned her followers into silence. And Alma was decidedly unconscious. And the sight of the furious, roaring Senga sent the smaller Maenads running. They were suddenly tired of playacting.

Several things happened at once. From their hiding place under the great pine tree, the four rescuers burst across the carousel lawn. Each young one had at least one knife, and Buffy and Pink brandished their walking sticks. Having emptied the bottle she'd brought with her, Buffy held it by the neck and smashed it against a rock; the crystalline edges made it better than a knife for close-quarters fighting. "No way we're gonna surprise them anyway, and we wanna let your parents know we're coming, so yell your heads off," she had told them. "Let's go!"

So they ran, and raged, raising an inarticulate war cry of pain and anger, and as they raced past the bonfire, Yuki grabbed at one of the split logs that formed the bonfire's skeleton. She managed to catch hold of it in both hands. Still running, she swung it in an arc

around her head, and was nearly carried off by the momentum of her swing, but she frightened a good few of the remaining Maenads, and some of the grown women as well, into paralyzed panic. Pink began to grab rocks from the outer circle that was what contained the bonfire, and to heave them into the small clusters of women and girls now leaderless and frozen with shock. Several screamed and fell. The rocks were scorching hot and burned Pink's palms and fingers, but she had learned well from Senga to ignore pain. The pain game had served her in the past, and it seemed to be helping her again.

Senga, although momentarily confused and dazzled from the force of her head butt, suddenly realized what was happening. With a glance back at the still-lifeless-looking form of Alma, whom she expected any instant to see rising to her feet, her immediate impulse was to grab and chastise Pink, but she came quickly to her senses and made for the cage containing Parry instead. She reached it at the same moment Royston did, and assumed that Royston was a prisoner who'd also escaped. Together they fumbled with the leather thongs that were almost better than metal locks; it was nearly impossible to break or pry the sinewy substance apart, and it was not until Senga noticed the knife at Royston's waist that they were able to slice and saw open the leathery lock that held Parry captive.

If there was one thing Parry was good at, it was surviving. He knew when to fight and when to run, and this was a time for both.

"*You!*" he roared at his son. "I'll deal wi' you later! Come on!" And he sprang from the cart bed onto the dry grass between the cage where he'd been so briefly held captive and the stage where the deranged figure of the Abbess was running back and forth uselessly. Senga ran in the opposite direction, toward where Pink

was still pelting Maenads with rocks before they could get too close to her with their spears. Truthfully, there were not many Maenads left in the bonfire clearing now, and when Senga reached her daughter, she spent some moments getting her arms around her, calming Pink and stopping her from a fruitless expenditure of more energy. Most of their enemies had scattered in panic, but there was no telling when they'd gather their courage and their wits and come back to reengage them.

Taking back his knife, Royston sliced open the leather thongs that fastened the cages of the other men. But if he was looking for them to help their side, he was disappointed. They vanished as soon as they could get their legs under them. Whether they knew a way out of the forest or not, they disappeared noisily, crashing through branches and bushes into the night, and they didn't look back.

Royston ran after his father, who had sprung up onto the platform to face the Abbess. She stopped running around like a rabbit and grabbed a small Maenad by the shoulders. She held the terrified child in front of her.

If Senga had felt a momentary hesitation before disabling Alma, Parry felt nothing of the sort when face to face with the Abbess, whom he realized as the author of his anger and fear. She and these women she controlled had killed the young men of New Brooklyn, the sons of his friends and neighbors. And they would have killed his son too. For himself, he wasn't angry, and he wasn't really afraid to die. But he wanted his son to live.

As he advanced on the Abbess, he reached forward and unhooked her fingers from the shoulders of the terrified child she held before her, and pushed the little girl behind him, toward his son. The Abbess's mouth was moving, but no words were emerging from between her dry lips. She retreated, and Old Parry advanced.

The combination of blows that Parry was planning to land on her had been referred to at one time as the "one-two" in boxing, a sport at which he had excelled in his prime. He took the Abbess's measure with a glancing left-handed tap, then smiled his grim smile as he followed it up quickly with a substantial left jab and a swift right cross. The Abbess's mouth stopped moving. She went down like a sack of meal. Blood dribbled out of her split lips and stained the yoke of her white garment, onto which also dropped a tooth. She lay where she'd landed and didn't move.

The older man turned. "Right," he bellowed at his son, in whose brotherly embrace the small girl was still sheltering. Noticing the terrified child, Parry modified his tone. "You and me," he snarled at the boy, and if the small, frightened child cowering between them did not understand what he meant, Royston did. He gulped and opened his mouth to offer a defense when an explosion knocked everyone—man, woman, son, daughter, Maenad, and rebel—off his or her feet. For some moments, each lay stunned and puzzled, before adrenaline got them moving again. "What the hell was that?"

"I'll tell ya later, Pop," said Royston, although he thought he knew.

The South Americans had unleashed one of the Dangerous Things, aiming at, and evidently hitting, the center of the bonfire.

Fragments of the grenade shell combined with the shrapnel it had contained, and with a shower of great clods of dirt and fiery logs, the bonfire had exploded. Seconds later, as the rain of fire plummeted down around them all, a second explosion farther away in the dark tore open the carousel. And soon it was clear that the forest was burning.

"Come on, Pop," said Royston. "You can yell at me later."

The two men picked up the terrified child between them, each holding one of her arms, and ran in the direction they had last seen the others. If they stayed together, they might be able to find their way out before the forest fire devoured them all.

THIRTY-THREE

What sounded like wind for a brief moment, but was really the sound of the forest devouring itself in flame, grew in immensity and began to chase the fighters across what was left of the carousel lawn.

The lawn—as the fighters could now see in the violent fire-light—was being roiled and riven from beneath as if some monstrous underground burrowers, gargantuan moles or snakes, had suddenly wakened from long hibernation and gone desperately, purposefully to work tunneling. Or it may have been the roots of the trees around the lawn, waking angrily and bursting to take vengeance on those who had so badly abused their hospitality. Whatever the cause, the very soil the fighters stood on was unquiet, as it hadn't been since the long-ago day of the crash.

The sound of the wind built on itself and grew louder and darker, and more and more intense, and the earth under the fighters' feet began to become furrowed and folded. It tumbled them over and over amid the sounds of crackling and breaking that accompanied the growing inferno, until they lost all chance to regain their footing. When that happened, they had no choice but to let

themselves be carried along atop a rolling wave of earth. It carried them forward and funneled them onward, faster and harder, back toward the relay station, back toward the mouth of the last tunnel that Senga had built. And there it deposited them, shaken but miraculously unhurt.

And as a householder might shake a sheet to make a bed, the forest floor shook itself smooth again, and became still. The tumbled fighters arose unsteadily, sore in mind and body from all they'd witnessed and endured in the last hours, but alive. The entrance was before them. The earth at their feet gave one last little hiccup before smoothing itself into something that looked like a threshold. Beyond was a mound of earth, and set into the mound, covered with leaves, was a wide wooden board that had been a cellar door in the World Before It.

"You get into the tunnel that way," said Pink. "You pull it up."

Royston pulled at the wide old door, Pink helped, and soon they'd exposed the tunnel mouth. Not so soon, though, that they couldn't hear the angry screams of their enemies grow closer and louder.

"Get inside."

The voice spoke to each of them, Senga, Buffy, Yuki, Pink, and both Parrys. But no one had uttered a word. They looked at each other for some moments, puzzled.

In the distance, children were crying. Their high-pitched keening could be heard like a whining descant above the deepening music of the forest on fire. Smoke was beginning to blur the fighters' vision and sting their eyes. Their throats were becoming raw.

"Some of those Maenads were pretty small," croaked Yuki, staring at the tunnel mouth. The others nodded, but they hesitated. Forward or back?

"They don't sound too far away," said Yuki. "I'll see if I can get at least some of them to follow me." And before they could stop her, her bounding, vital, animal step had carried her back into what was left of the woods. The remaining trees in their now sparse but orderly avenues seemed ready to grab at her, but because she was too quick, or because the will of the forest approved of her, or for some other reason, they allowed her to pass. But they didn't let any of the others, who were ready to do so, follow her. The fighters wasted several uncertain moments looking at each other.

Then the roaring fire sound, the crackling and snapping, combined with the angry war cries of the women who had been the Abbess's followers. They were coming, and their rage was driving them on.

"Get inside."

No one had spoken. But each heard the voice.

Senga was gripped by her old fear, and she stood at the tunnel mouth for long seconds, dread etched on her features.

"I could wait here for Yuki," she started to say.

"No," said Parry, who was beginning to understand the power of these woods. "Look. The forest knows her. The forest will make sure she's all right. C'mon." Parry took Senga by the elbow. She still hesitated.

"I don't want to fight that mob a second time tonight," Parry explained. "Let's go." And as he spoke, he extended his hand for his flashlight, which his disobedient son had clipped to his own belt the previous night. Parry knew of Senga's fear of dark places and small spaces. He would light her way into the tunnel. Much more than that he couldn't do. But he would do what he could.

"Come on," Pink pleaded. "Look. I'll go first." So Royston handed over his father's flashlight and began paying out the length

of rope that he'd carried over his shoulder, under his arm, and across his chest almost since his part in this adventure began, back in Old Brooklyn. The cries of the remaining Maenads and the rest of the Abbess's women grew louder, and were then drowned out again by the ongoing roar of the flames.

"Put your arms up over your head," Royston told Pink, who looked puzzled. But Buffy understood what Royston meant to do. She nudged Pink, and put up her own arms.

"Do like this," she said, "quick," and then Pink understood. Royston began linking them together with the coil of rope. He left a length at the front of the line for himself, and at the back he tied the rope around his father's waist. There wasn't quite enough for Senga.

"I'll take charge of her," said Parry, at which Senga recoiled.

"I'm okay."

"Of course you are," he exhaled. "Now move." And he gestured with the flashlight. But Senga still hesitated. Pink moved closer to her and took one of Senga's hands in hers. "Come on, mom," she said. "Look. I'll go first." Senga turned to take one last look back at the burning forest, and with a deep breath, and her daughter's hand in her own, made her way into the dark.



It was worse than she remembered. There were the familiar fetid smells of the inhabited earth, and the crepitating sounds of the beasts that lived there. Parry noticed her start with alarm, and he also noticed the cause: a tiny, greenish pair of glowing eyes reflected in the flashlights' beams. The eyes were joined by another pair, and then another. "Close your eyes. I got you," he whispered. She

tried this for a few steps, but of course it was useless. Making her own way, even in the dark, was better than being pulled along by someone else. Anyway, the beasties and creepers were still there, even if she couldn't see them. She could hear them shrilly squeaking. She opened her eyes again quickly and squeezed Parry's hand before letting it go.

They moved on awkwardly, crouched and crablike, together into the darkness. The rest of the fighters were stumbling and scrambling forward in the vanguard. They all went on for what seemed like an infinity of time, stooped and half crawling through the shaft that Senga had only made big enough for a woman and child to fit into and through. The inexpert job of shoring that Pink had done was better than nothing, but still there were places where crumbs and clods of earth fell into their hair and ears and eyes. Tree roots intruded into the tunnel roof and in one or two places threatened to impede their progress altogether. Buffy could only squeeze through some passages by sucking in her breath an uncomfortably long time.

Moment piled on moment, and the faster they tried to proceed, the more slowly it seemed they managed to go. But they progressed.

Of the cave-in that had driven Senga out of the shaft the last time she'd worked it, there was no evidence, no mound of loose earth to push away, and this puzzled her until she told herself that if the forest floor could crease and uncrease itself like a sheet, it could clear away a pile of loose earth in a tunnel with no problem. So there was that to be thankful for.

She began to tick things off in her mind. They had a source of light—not wavering fat-candle flames that flickered and threatened to go out at the whisper of a subterranean current, but yellow flashlight beams that were steady and regular.

And she was not alone. Even if she were to die here, underground, someone would take care of Pink. Death was one of the obsessions that had always tormented her in the tunnelly dark—death and, worse than death, burial alive, to feel herself being eaten by the beasts that crept and crawled across her skin, bitten by the spiders whose webs brushed against her face and arms, gnawed upon by the rats whose whiskers she could feel tickling her skin, voracious rats with their malicious appetites, and her, powerless to do anything to stop them. Senga's breath came quicker. Now that her imagination had been unleashed, her memory was sure to follow. Memory of darkness and squeezing, a fumbling, jabbing, horrid something she didn't understand. A mouth on her mouth, a rough beard scratching her cheek in the dark of the dangerous basement, and herself small and powerless. The actual hand that suddenly gripped her heel from behind was almost welcome; it placed her fear outside herself once more. She screamed, and the entire caravan stopped. From behind her Senga heard the voice of an enemy whisper her name.

"Take me with you," it muttered.

Senga turned. There was just enough light from the flashlights ahead of her to see there was someone else in the passage. She grew courage from anger and hissed, "Sorry, sister. No can do," and attacked her pursuer with her nails ready. She gouged and grappled. She silently choked and strangled her foe until finally Parry—after some time, realizing what was happening—turned back to help, only to find his help wasn't needed. He was too late either to help Senga or to save her adversary.

"She's finished," he told her. "Let her go. Enough."

Senga stared at him like a sleepwalker, her hands still tight around her enemy's throat.

"Enough?"

"Yeh" he answered. The woman who lay crumpled on the tunnel floor certainly looked as if enough had been done to her. She looked quite dead.

"Come on." He shook Senga's shoulder. "Well done. Come and see—you got farther than you realized. We're almost out."

She let him take her hand again and moved forward, and left her fear in the tunnel with her half-dead, maybe-all-dead foe. She saw that Parry had not been joking, or pacifying her; a dim glow that was not artificial light was creeping into the tunnel and spreading toward them. Daylight?

"Come on!" yelled Royston, tugging on the rope that joined him to Buffy.

The dim light of day was being filtered through something that was blocking the tunnel's end. Senga, Old Parry, and Buffy recognized at once.

"I knew it." Senga whistled. But she had only surmised; she hadn't known.

Before them, as if it had been lodged there by the force of the original disaster, was the end compartment of a New York City subway train. It blocked the end of the tunnel they had just excavated, just a few yards on from where Senga had stopped digging years ago. Buffy's massive hands had moved the rest of the earth; Royston and Pink had dispersed it. Old Parry had untethered himself and come back to look for Senga.

"I knew the subway was near this part of the park," Senga told him proudly. Her face, like his, was streaked with soot and gleaming with sweat and exhilaration.

Royston and Pink looked dismayed. "Well, what's a subway, and what good does that do us?" Royston asked.

"I'll show you what good," said Buffy. "Get this rope off me. Give me a boost." She and the two other old ones were excited. Senga and Old Parry understood what she intended to do. They had traveled by subway many times in their youths, perhaps in this very car. Certainly they had traveled on this line.

Parry nudged his son. "Bend down."

Royston did as he was told, forming with his bent back a stepping stool for Buffy to climb up on.

"Sorry," she said, as he winced under her weight. Hauling on the grab iron outside the car door, she yanked her bulk off his back and up onto the connector platform. She bent her knees and bounced, mimicking the motion the car would have made as it rolled along the tracks. The rubber-sheathed chains that were supposed to prevent passenger accidents were still there.

"Like old times," she grinned. "Smokin' and ridin' between the cars!"

Parry shone his flashlight beam onto the door of the car. "Just see if you can get that door open, or it's gonna be a long road back, with a fight at the end of it."

Senga shuddered. "Get it open, Buffy. Please."

The sliding handle was rusty, and it squealed when Buffy gripped it, but it didn't budge, as hard as she pushed and pulled. She put her broad back into it, but it was no use. The lock wouldn't move. The handle was frozen.

Parry nodded to his son. "Up you go." He helped Buffy back down onto the tunnel floor, where she crouched next to Senga, whose arm crept around her shoulders.

But Royston had no better luck than Buffy. Senga looked back into the darkness from which they had come; she thought she heard something. Pink was clasping and unclasping her hands.

"You can do it, Royston," she called up to him.

"Come on, Royston," the three adults cried, as Royston gave a last heroic pull, assisted by the surge of adrenaline at hearing Pink call his first name for the first time.

"Got it," Royston grunted. The door of the car slid open.

"Almost there," said Buffy and Senga at once.

Royston leaned down and gave Pink a hand up onto the platform. He turned to his father. "Aren't trains supposed to have tracks under them?" he asked.

Parry nodded, clambering up onto the platform himself.

"It must have jumped them."

Royston hadn't any idea of the behavior of trains and their tracks. He shrugged.

"How many cars do you think there are?" asked Buffy, helping Senga up and into the car.

"We'll soon find out," said Old Parry. "Close that." He nodded at the sliding door.

"No," Senga called. "Leave it...Yuki."

"Ah. Right."

"What'll we do if the other end is stuck?" asked Buffy, making her way down the aisle, swinging from handrail to handrail like the schoolgirl on a trip to the city that she had once been.

Parry grinned.

"In case of emergency, break glass." He pointed to the compartment windows. "We'll find out."

Royston gripped the cold, brass, L-shaped handle on the door at the end of the car and jerked it to the right, then the left. The door, untried for thirty years or more, slid violently and unexpectedly open with the strength of Royston's arm. The tunnellers crowded together in the aperture, gazing with mouths open and

eyes wide at the strange sight that lay before them. Pink jumped down from the small lip at the edge of the door. The others helped each other down.

They were in a cavernous, echoing space, with half-tiled walls and standing pools of water inches deep in places on the uneven concrete floor. There were twisted things the old ones knew were girders, and hanging things that had been lamps. Metal bars outlined a kind of cage, and a flight of stairs, through which pale early morning light was glimmering, led up and out. A subway station. Senga thought she might weep. Parry wiped his nose. Only Buffy seemed unaffected.

“Leave that flashlight there,” Parry told his son. “And leave it on. Yuki *might* find her way.”

The tunnellers walked on trembling legs from the connector platform onto the floor of the station and began the walk up the stairs—into what, they did not know.

THIRTY-FOUR

“I think we might have made a big mistake,” said Senga, as with a gravid, sonorous, roaring *whoomp*, the eaves of the forest, which they could just see behind them, were consumed in a surging sheet of orange flame. Smoke billowed toward the escapees from the base of the blaze, and the heat wave fried the small hairs on their forearms immediately. The force of the heat pushed Senga to take a few steps back, then turn around. She faced the empty avenue of torn and jumbled asphalt paving lined with rusting, long-abandoned automobiles that stretched before her, and which she vaguely thought she recognized. Royston was helping his father up the last steps and onto the pavement that opened before them. And there were Pink and Yuki-Kai, holding each other up and coughing, black clods of dirt stuck to their skin and hair. *She made it*, Senga told herself. *Yuki made it. And she got some young ones out too.*

Before them, away from the forest, the landscape dipped slowly away to what they thought might be the east, a dull, gray grassland studded with the broken pillars of old elevated roadways and the roots of apartment buildings. The hot wind from the burning

forest picked up intensity; it gusted toward them and pulled down a faded metal street sign that had barely been hanging onto its post. Buffy bent down and picked it up. The lettering on it could just still be read. There was a capital *Q*, and an *n* and a *d*. “Queens Boulevard?” several voices guessed at once.

“Let’s get away from here,” said Senga, as bits of breeze-blown embers lighted on her hair. “That way.” She was pointing toward a long, low brick building lying in a shallow grassy declivity. There were no panes in any of the window frames, but the structure seemed largely intact. “Let’s see if they’ll let us stay there.”

“First, let’s find out if there’s any ‘they’ there,” said Buffy, quite sensibly for a change. She and Senga began to herd the others toward the less-broken parts of the roadway that seemed to have been Queens Boulevard. Boulevard of commerce, of traffic, of order, of substance. “Oh, my God,” Senga gasped. “Look.” As the others looked in the direction Senga pointed, Buffy laughed. Then Senga started laughing. Soon they were both wheezing and almost peeing, laughing so hard the others were staring at them and at each other in confusion.

“What’s so funny?”

To the rest of the tunnellers, there was nothing funny about the ugly, dun-colored statue Senga and Buffy were laughing at. Parry, of course, had seen it before, but it had been unremarkable to him. It was a brutal, beefy male figure holding a sword above two writhing female sirens tangled in carved marble nets under his big stone feet.

Buffy and Senga, however, were wheezing and holding themselves around the middle; Buffy was crouching and crossing her legs. And when they could finally speak, they both yelled, “*Civic Virtue!*”

“I guess,” said Buffy, when she’d caught enough breath, “some things don’t change, no matter what happens.”

“I guess not,” panted Senga. “We thought we were gonna change the world, right?”

Buffy nodded. “The world changed us.”

I t's the pale earliest morning, and as far as I can tell, we six are alone; there is no other sign of human activity. Aside from the vast, rumbling note of the fire, there is silence. Not even a scrap of paper is left after all the years of ruin to blow itself against our legs. Everything that can blow has already blown away.

For the umpteenth time, I count the survivors. Buffy, Parry, Royston, Pink, and...I don't see Yuki-Kai. My heart seems to catch and stop for a full count of ten, and then I see the girl, walking out of the still-smoking tunnel mouth with a smaller girl on her shoulders, and another holding her hand, coming up out of the tunnel and into the weak, gray, pre-dawn light.

She got them out.

"She got them out," I say. "Some of them, anyway."

I look at Pink, lingering near the tunnel entrance, peering back inside, holding hands out to the last of the Maenads, choking on smoke.

"Pink," I call, hands cupped around my mouth. "Come away from there. And ask Yuki if any of the South Americans got out."

Yuki hears me herself and shakes her head. I hear myself sigh, and bow my head.

I turn to face Parry, who has come up behind me and slipped his hard hand into mine in the smoke-stained morning. Another moment passes. And now the sudden sunrise breaks the back of the night. The dawn that erupts is pearl colored and peach colored and gold in the distant sky and somehow all around us as well.

There are suddenly jangled notes from a wild chorus of strange birds. Parry smiles, but his smile is tired and grim.

“Well,” he says, and encircles me with his weary arms.

”Well,” I say, pulling out of his too-tight embrace, but still loving the man in whose arms I’m content, for the moment, to be captured.

And at that moment of incongruous emotion, into all the yielding relief, and the sweetness of vengeance, and the rambunctious wonder at being alive and able still to love that suffuses me, an old sensation creeps.

I haven’t felt it for a lifetime, but I recognize that finger’s touch of dread on the webs that are binding my heart.

It is that touch a woman ignores to her peril, but ignore it we do, until we recognize too late that somehow our lives are yoked to that of another, even a good man, even a loved man.

I turn to face my Parry, whose beloved, battered features are grim and set but whose face is open, trustworthy, and strong, determined and hopeful, and I think, *What have I done now?* But I shake off the gossamer brush of my fears and I grip Parry’s hand in my own. I smile at him, and then turn my face toward the glorious ruins of the future. “Well,” I repeat.

And deep in the now-dark heart of the forest, to which they have retreated and where they hope the fire will not reach, something small and wounded scrabbles weakly but purposefully in the dirt, and then stops, then pulls itself forward slowly and painfully, moves, and then stops again. And something scorched and scalded licks its wounds, and sits, and sucks on bones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen H. Moore is a poet and the author of numerous books for children and educators, with such titles as *Pick a Poem* and *A Poem a Day*, published by Scholastic.