

Season for Dryads.

For days now she had kept to high ground thinking it safer. The farmhouses had not been raided. They provided her with tinned food, bottles of wine, often a bed or downstairs settee. Sometimes she stayed to pick strawberries or raspberries running wild from kitchen gardens. She dug out carrots, scraped them clean with her knife and ate them raw. In overgrown, shady corners she pulled apples from the trees on hot afternoons when the air was filled with the drone of bees.

Now, on a ridge overlooking the wooded valley, she found shelter behind a dyke, took off her pack and opened a can of peaches. The sun was high, the air humid and still. She reckoned it must be about midday, sometime in July or August. She looked round at the neglected fields full of weeds, thistles and sprouting birch trees mixed in with barley and wheat, patches of potatoes, escaped garden flowers and rose bushes. From all around she could hear the gentle, persistent cooing of wood pigeons, the buzzing of insects and the scuttling of unseen mammals through the undergrowth.

This ruined, deserted countryside was a transitory phase between cultivation and Nature's whim. Soon the birch would take hold and the forests return. Who could tell if they would be cleared a second time?

Walking quietly through these weed infested fields she had found tractors, their doors hanging open, brambles twisting round the wheels, grass growing in the cabs or nesting field mice squeaking blindly in the torn foam of the driver's chair. Once she came face to face with a bull; wide eyed and as startled as herself it had plunged off into the bushes leaving her standing with loudly beating heart. Occasionally there was the noise of a dog pack but mostly it was peaceful and for once everything was new under the sun.

It had only taken the world to be cleared of people for it to change utterly and redefine itself. The machines had stopped and she roamed through a magical land of freedom and dread, excitement and fear. Though millions had died it was already as though they had never existed. Strange that she should feel not sorrow but relief. Only sadness when she remembered those she had known. Their absence was deafening, a yawning vacancy that could never be filled. But beyond them, beyond her own painful bereavements, was this sense of mystery and enchantment as though the world had revealed more of its beauty to the few who remained.

For there were others. At times the far off sound of a lone car betrayed their presence, or smoke from a fire, a gunshot, a house with smashed windows, once a glimpse of two figures on horseback galloping through the trees.

She felt no inclination to seek them out. When she did the spell would be broken, the marvellous dream interrupted and pale routine might return. Besides, she was twenty-two, perhaps already twenty-three. Men liked her but what that meant now she had no idea. An exaggerated courtesy perhaps or bondage, chivalry or slavery: they were two sides of the same coin. One day there might be a voice, a touch, but not yet. Dr Fenton had been right: the chief peril for humanity was humankind itself.

Draining the can of its syrup she tossed it aside. The hills were blue in the afternoon heat and she was still thirsty. Deciding to look for a stream she pulled on her pack and headed downhill. Her yellow hair swayed slightly in the whisper of a sudden breeze that reached her ear as if to impart some deep secret....

Higher still in some dark trees a bent and gasping figure hauled itself through the bracken and came to rest against the rough bark of an oak. Earlier

the trail had gone cold and angry panic had set in. The need to end this, to complete, had been thwarted. But now the girl was in sight and the ragged sniper clawed at itself, unslung its rifle and carefully took aim...

She heard the noise and went towards it, found the bubbling stream and stooped to drink, enjoying the coolness in her hands as she lifted the water to her mouth. Rising, she gazed again at the line of hills and wondered where she would find to sleep that night. An odd sensation passed over her then and she turned around. She was plunged into a great well of light that flashed out in all directions. Spiralling upwards she knew everything in an instant, joyous and easy, then she was gone. An ever-widening red ribbon flowed down the bank and found itself embraced, carried downstream in the empty afternoon.

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