

The Furies from Borås

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Underryd Dance Hall is a long way into the forest. Between the towns of Värnamo, Borås and Jönköping in a black-as-night corner of north Småland. There's always been dancing in Underryd. Since God knows when and long before that. First on stony heaths and then at the actual cross-roads, where the roads from three towns meet, to the sound of shawm and fiddle, then the accordion. The dance pavilion built in the nineteen-twenties evolved into a park right in the middle of the forest. In the eighties, the feasting was moved into a barn, a large barn, which someone had the notion of painting purple. Later it was extended into a dance palace with five bars, three dance floors and a pizzeria; a parking area worthy of a major supermarket was added and the best acts were signed up. Thorleifs for mum and dad. Jerry Williams for the rockers. Freestyle, Pontus & Amerikanerna and Petter for the kids. Underryd rocks. Everyone in the village works at the Dance Hall.

In Underryd they dance five days a week. There's a discotheque on Wednesdays, elderdance or a concert on Thursdays, a dance band on Fridays, a discotheque again on Saturdays and pensioners' dancing on Sundays in the daytime. At seven o'clock on dance nights, the purple Dance Hall buses do the rounds of Värnamo, Borås and Jönköping. The shuttles to the big parking area outside the purple barn are free of charge. Whatever crowd is being bused in, there's drinking, make-upping and make-outing on board. Those who get too disorderly are dropped by the side of the road. At half past two the last buses go back.

Most of the girls take the eight fifteen bus from Borås. They sit together and talk about school, boys, music. They get text messages from girlfriends also on their way to the dance. They fix their hairstyles. Check out boys. Have you invited anyone? He was quite cute, but he was bringing his mates. That one's cute. "He's doing motor vehicle mechanics at Almås Technical Gymnasium", says Sofie. "Thick as a sheep but pretty to look at. He'll spend his life working at a garage and go to all of Elfsborg's home games. Oh what an idyllic life."

"Does everyone have to have a go at me just because I live in Töllsjö?" Laughing, pushing. Alexandra just can't keep living out there in the sticks. "It's not as if you're meeting any geniuses in Borås."

"You don't get geniuses in Borås."

"As if you care."

"It's all about timing", says Elin. "Right now I'm going to hit on cute guys, okay? When I want kids I'll go on the pull at the Chalmers University library." Laughter and more taunts. "Or I'll get knocked up by some looker at the gym and then get married to Olle the Nerd, the one who hangs in the library. Someone with thick glasses and a thirty grand a month starting salary." More laughter and high fives. Elin Andersson from Lundby is really cool.

Text message from Kari Cederlind on the Gothenburg bus. "Cute meat climbing all over me. Could be something." Lenni Larsson texts from Värnamo: "Only pissed kids here. And me." More laughter. The rising buzz of voices in the bus. Since leaving the bus station, the volume has risen two levels. The girls laugh louder and are a little more vulgar. The boys roar into the air. Their telephones ring endlessly. They beep, ring, burp and fart. Who has the coolest ringtone? Anna's telephone howls like a wolf. Elin's plays Shakira.

The smell of vomit greets them as they swarm off the bus. Dusk is falling. The parking area is loaded with hormones, H&M and hooch. The

girls gather at the entrance. Peck each other's cheeks and comment on outfits. They're into cheap mail order, Pink and skirts that are too short. Or there's an Emo edge to things. Long nails are hot in either case. And jewellery with snakes. Roxette is booming out from inside the barn. Guys walking past stare at them. Kari points out Meat standing by himself slightly to the side, smoking. Good-looking, dark, a little over twenty. Nike on his feet and MP3 cords round his neck. White singlet and Levi's.

"Is he an immigrant?"

"No , from Hisingen."

"Do people really live there?"

"Doubt it."

"Why is he by himself?" Anna is suspicious. Guys on their own in bars can be troublesome. Sex maniacs. Psychos who have ventured out of their homes for the first time in fifteen years.

"He's meeting his team here."

"Team?"

"Handball team."

"Is he famous?"

"Maybe in Hisingen. He plays once a week with his mates, sort of thing."

Anna looks at Meat and smiles enthusiastically. "Is the fucker on steroids?"

"How am I supposed to bloody know?" says Kari and waves at him. He smiles back.

Anna sighs. "He'll do for now. Let's go in."

The dance is on in Underryd. As it has been for aeons. Boys and girls strutting. Jumping and prancing and horsing around. Boozing and staggering about. Just like their parents did once. Sometimes you even see someone who can dance. For real.

The girls hang out at the bar by the small dance floor. One floor up. Distancing themselves a bit from the worst dross. They sit, stand and dance, evenly scattered across the space. We oooooown that bar. Anna sits drinking wine in the most imposing sofa. On a throne, like a mafia daughter. Page-boy haircut, white blouse and chalk-stripe waistcoat. No one bugs Anna Lundman from Parkstaden. Wherever Anna is, you can smoke inside Underryd Barn. Because Anna smokes. Non-stop. She surveys the dance floor. Elin and Lenni are dancing with each other. Sexy. Kari and Meat sit at the bar. Meat is talking about handball. Sofie sips a parasol drink and keeps the place under observation. Ash-blond Alexandra and a few of the younger girls sit at the table behind Anna. Alexandra tells the stories and the girls listen. Their ears are flapping. Especially little Nalim and Emma from Nitta, it's their first time. "This is what girls do", says Alexandra. Listen and learn. How they sit, where they stand. Alexandra lays down the law. We oooooown the place.

"This is all you need. You're gonna own it."

"What do you say to your folks?"

"Nothing."

"Do we only have to come here?"

"This is the best place. A couple of times a year is good."

Alexandra explains the dangers. Kari is standing next to Meat now. Close enough to feel his breath. Soon they'll start making out. It's only a question of time until he falls into the slot. Elin and Lenni are making out on the dance floor. They put on a teenage lesbo show for Meat and the other boys. Frighten them out of their wits with tongue-kisses and roving hands under their tops. The bartender looks away with a blush. The DJ plays Shakira. Colombian hip-rolling music. People stare and breathe heavily.

Anna has a gulp of wine and gazes at the world through the bottom of her glass. It almost looks more normal that way. As if a fairground

mirror would twist everything into recognition. She closes her eyes, allows everything to spin round. She thinks about the daughters of daughters of daughters of the snake. Aeons of light. Forests of slowly swaying arms. Tentacles thick as tree trunks. Death. Nowadays her dreams are like an addict's figments.

Sofie sits down with her.

"Meat seems okay."

"No friends?"

"He said hello to a few people but they're keeping away. He went over to that guy for a chat a moment ago." She points at an immigrant guy with dark locks sitting by himself at a table, sending an SMS.

"Cute", Anna mumbles.

"Yeah. But our friend Meat wants to be left alone with his pick-up."

"Is that it?"

"What if he shoots up heroin, has AIDS and leukaemia and jaundice?"

Sofie sniggers.

Anna ignores her. Sofie grimaces. Bloody boss style. But she knows. The girls want healthy meat. No drugs, no steroids and no split upper lips.

Anna nods. It's all looking good. The girls give her sidelong glances. All the others are staring at Elin and Lenni.

"Well then", she says.

"Come, you thousand young." They whisper together.

Sofie hugs her hard. Best girlfriends, sort of thing. The queens of Underryd. Sofie walks past Meat and nods. Kari nibbles Meat's lower lip. Mid-sentence, as he's explaining about penalty balls. He stiffens and all the girls are surreptitiously checking him out. Holding their breath. Then he gets started with a lot of tongue. The girls breathe out. Quick glances seem to say: "It's working." "Get ready." Meat

fiddles with his glass of beer. Puts it down behind his back and grips Kari's ass instead. They go into a real marathon snog, leaning against the bar. Anna closes her eyes, sees primeval swamps behind her eyelids. Swamps and rain and kisses. The DJ plays Pussycat Dolls. *Don't you wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?* Sofie scans the place. She's thinking about her history project. There's a lot going on in your head in the final year. The region of Västergötland, industrialism, swamps and kisses.

Sofie circles the dance floor. A teenage girl, not too tall, with blond frizzy hair, black jeans and a Nirvana T-shirt. Not the sort of girl you stare at. But Sofie's got the measure of the place. Like an eagle. Check it out: Elin and Lenni have gone to the bar and are standing a few steps behind Meat. Alexandra and the younger girls are also swarming round the bar. Alexandra offers them all sweets. Special girlie sweets. Small black lumps that taste of tar. Very exclusive stuff. One time Sofie gave a dealer's Rottweiler a decent sample. The evening paper wrote two pages about it, without mentioning the way the bloody dog tried to fuck its owner while eating his face.

Justin Timberlake whimpers. More people are dancing now. From where Sofie's standing you can hardly see Meat for all the girls round him. They're circling him like a shoal of fish. Hiding him from his friends. Sofie has checked out three guys that know him. They're sitting further off, laughing, drinking their beer.

"Some have all the luck."

"We won't be seeing him again tonight."

They don't see Alexandra lacing Meat's beer. They don't see Kari rooting about inside Meat's clothing. Undoing his belt. Digging in his trousers. The air is heavy at the centre of the girlie shoal. The girls pretend to look anywhere except at the couple by the bar. Nonetheless they know what's going on. They give them sidelong glances, whispering

the details. Hear the boy's breathing. Kari's naughty. She's doing Law at Lund after she's finished High School. She licks the palm of her hand. Spits on it. Then her hand disappears inside Meat's trousers. While kissing him like a snake.

Anna nods at Sofie. Soon midnight. "Get them moving." Sofie checks that the heavy girls are in position. She nods at Alexandra and Elin. Checks that Saga is with it. Saga sits by a table next to Meat's friends; she's big and heavy and on her own. Saga stares and intimidates people trying to take photos with their cameras. Looks nasty. If you take a photo I'll crush your fucking telephone against your forehead. Alexandra distributes more sweets. Alexandra is good at chemistry. She'll finish High School with top grades in everything. And then work as a doctor or something. Sofie swallows one of the bitter little lumps. There's a stinging in her throat. Her stomach grows warm. The group round Meat inches in closer. The shoal starts moving away from the dance floor. Towards the emergency exit by the bar. People look away. Don't stare. Don't annoy them. Just be glad it isn't you.

One of the youngest girls comes up to Sofie. Black skirt. Tights. Fifteen years old. Might be in her last few years at secondary. On her singlet it says *Porn Star*. Malin? Ida? She looks excited and nervous at the same time.

"I don't know if this is important..."

"What?" The warmth in her stomach turns to a corrosive bubble.

"I think he took a tablet. The guy, I mean."

"When?" Panic rises in Sofie's throat. She's missed something. A Guardian does not miss things. "Tell me!"

"I think he got something from that guy over there." Malin points at the pretty immigrant boy still sitting there fiddling with his mobile.

"Got what?!" Sofie cries. In a loud sweetie-voice.

"A tablet. Or something."

The flock is slowly making its way out of the emergency exit. Slowly, so no one needs to notice what's happening. As if they cared. As if anyone wanted to notice them.

Sofie shoves Ida-Malin against the bar. Shakes her. Hard.

"And now you tell me?"

Ida-Malin looks petrified. Her eyes fill with tears. "I didn't know if it was important."

"Let me be the judge of that, you silly cow!"

Big Bad Saga stands beside them. "What's going on?"

Sofie takes a deep breath. Swallows the vomiting impulse. "We have a problem."

The flock heads down a gloomy spiral staircase. They escort Kari and Meat. Have some more sweets. The dark is filled with footsteps, girls tittering and music. The Ark from one direction and Robbie Williams from another. Meat holds Kari by the hand. She laughs and pulls him along. He doesn't give much thought as to why the other girls are tagging along. He doesn't think very much at all. He just wants to get into the dark and start fucking. Everything else is uninteresting. And the girl holding his hand knows the way into the dark, the wet, hot dark. The girl has told him she'll show him things he's never seen before. Things he'll never get to see again. Things the guys in the team will never experience in their pathetic lives. There's going to be fucking like no one's ever fucked before.

The pretty immigrant guy wants to go by the name of Juju. Bloody stupid. "Juju has whatever you need." A pair of eyes, blue and girlish, glitter and want to discuss how much. Somewhere in a quieter place. He doesn't ask what she's after, just shambles along behind Sofie into the handicap toilet. Sofie closes the door without turning on the light. Saga head-butts Juju to the ground in the dark. Sofie turns on the light

and watches Saga shoving his head down the toilet. She flushes twice before allowing Juju to breathe a bit. Sofie waits impatiently. Saga is mean, but also a bit long-winded. She kicks Juju in the kidneys and stamps hard on his hand, fumbling towards his bootleg. Crunch. No little knife for Juju.

"What did you give him?"

"Fucking whore!" spits Juju. Saga smiles. The idiot is giving her every excuse in the world. "My mates are gonna murder you and your fat bloody whore-friend."

Saga kicks Juju in the head. Horribly hard. "Fat? Did you say fat, you bastard?"

"Cool it down." Sofie crouches beside Juju. Tries to focus. There's blood running into Juju's eyebrows. "My friend gets a bit worked up. Just tell me and things will work out."

Juju doesn't answer. Saga has him halfway down the toilet by the time he tries to say something. Never bloody mind, Saga flushes anyway. Back in Borås, Saga goes to a special needs class. People say she has behavioural issues. She cracked her mother's ex-boyfriend's skull. With a hot iron. Killer girl power. Don't talk back to the teenage tykes of Tosseryd.

"Viagra!" Juju roars once he gets some air. "Viagra!"

"Viagra?" says Sofie. That was unexpected.

Saga slams Juju's head so hard into the toilet bowl that it cracks. Water gushes over the floor.

"Viagra? Sofie repeats.

"What old blokes take to get a boner on", says Saga.

"But why does Kari's guy need it?"

"It's a fuck-fix", slurs Juju.

Sofie gives him a kick for each syllable. "Why does a bloody sports guy need it?" Kick, kick, kick. The vomit impulse comes again. And Juju

can't answer. Sofie understands what'll happen now anyway. She pulls Saga out. Out of the toilet and down the fire exit stairs.

The flock has already had time to get away. Saga and Sofie run down the stairs, stumble in the dark, into the night. They are light-headed and out-of-breath.

The summer's night is warm. There's a smell of grass, Yellow Blend cigarettes and six kinds of shampoo. Sofie stops and looks round. Saga runs into her. She's panting like an eighty-year-old. It's dark behind the Barn but Sofie can see the path leading to the forest. The path to Underryd marsh. The moon illuminates broken blades of grass. A road of silver. Thousands of years old. The road from the dance pavilion to the grove by the marsh. The marsh where the tree-branches look like slowly swaying octopus tentacles. The road taken by the flock every fourth full moon.

She sees them. The flock has already reached the place where the forest grows more densely. The place where cigarettes are stubbed out and telephones turned off. Just to be on the safe side. Sofie fleetingly sees a girl's white top through the trees. And hears a laugh. The sweets are buzzing like a wasps' nest in her head. Sounds seem to come to her from afar. But the sweets also give her night-vision. They intensify the light. The world turns black and corrosively white. Looking at the moon hurts one's eyes. The slightest sparkle in the grass becomes a star.

They run along the path. Through a mishmash of black and white. Saga follows, she'll never be a runner. She stumbles in the grass and there's a crash as if a rhino has fallen into the bushes. Sofie keeps running. To the edge of the trees, where she slows down. This is no place for running. The forest does not appreciate it, the forest has no sense of humour, no patience with excuses. People disappear here. And the police in Gislaved doesn't waste very much time looking for them.

There's no point. In nineteen ninety-six a whole family disappeared out here. Why were they picking berries there, the farmers muttered. In Underryd? There are no berries there. There's nothing at all. Sofie heard that story while she was in the intermediate class at school. One of the Senior girls had been to the bog. Found clothes and a pair of child's shoes. Sofie wanted to know more. She was curious and bored and tired of hanging at the riding stables or gawping at the farm lads on their mopeds. The first time she went with the others to the forest she was fourteen years old.

A bird shrieks. Some kind of bird of prey, maybe an owl. Sofie breathes in deep. It's pitch-black between the trees. Just the odd shard of moonlight seeks its way down to her, lighting up leaves and branches and mist. It's always misty here in the forest. Something to do with residual warmth in the ground. Spindrift. Ancient forest and bog. Sofie is crap at Natural Sciences. But when you're at the front of the flock you see the haze and moonshine making the cobwebs glitter. The webs hang like curtains of silver across the path. You can easily start seeing things through curtains and swathes of mist. Even things that don't exist.

Sofie hears the wails from afar. They come riding on the acid-white fingers of mist. They echo between the trees as if that's what they have always done. Girls roaring as if at a football match. Roaring like horny monkeys. Roaring as if calling down a god.

Out on the bog there's a fuckfest going on. Kari and Meat are rolling in the grass. They yap and claw each other like two dogs. The girls stand partially undressed around them in a breathless half-circle. They hold each other's hands hard. Stare at Kari arching her back. Her panties hanging on a juniper bush. Meat is pounding like a lunatic. They pant and snort and claw and tug. Alexandra's sweets are kicking in hard now. Kari's eyes have turned black. She sees fire and trolls and trees

with huge cocks. The trees promise to fulfil her wishes. She dribbles. Bloody vile. Babbling like she's speaking in tongues. A machine hitting and hitting and hitting. With blood under the nails. The moon colours the blood black. And all skin becomes white and milky. The girls howl when they see the blood. They lean forward to get a better look. They wish for beautiful children and happy lives. Journeys far beyond Borås. That is what the Goat promises. The girls press themselves against Anna, standing at the centre of everything.

They gasp, they fumble for each other and stare at the blood. Then the first sounds start coming from the bog beyond them. Whispering; crazy tittle-tattle. A branch snaps with a crack. A few of the girls no longer know what to look at: the fucking or the darkness. Some of them keep staring at the fucking so they don't have to see. There's sobbing and panting. Elin wrestles one of the secondary-school girls to the ground and starts tearing at her tank top. Kari takes Meat's throat in a stranglehold. He grins like a madman when she starts squeezing.

Anna unpicks herself from the tangle of girls' limbs. She walks past the fuck-heap, towards the darkness. The lunar haze spins round her. Sweat glitters on her naked legs. She holds up her arms to welcome the thing approaching through the forest. They can all hear it now. The sound of the Messenger. The spawn of the Goat. The thing making the trees sway. Wrapped in moon-mist and partially hidden by branches it comes closer. It wades through the pools and steps into quagmires. Trips on rotten stumps. Splashes like an elephant, a big bloody monster elephant, in fact. At the edge of the bog it snaps a spruce at the root. Twenty-five metres of tree comes crashing. Its crown hits the ground in front of Anna. Pine-needles and droplets of water cascade over Meat and the girls. For anyone with sweet-eyes it looks as if the bog has exploded in a cloud of diamonds. Anna does not back away. She raises her

hands against the madness beyond the tree-crown and howls. The girls howl with her and the Messenger answers.

The Black Goat has a thousand young. The howls echo between the trees. Hoarse girls' voices and the roar of the Messenger beyond time and space and reason. The sounds carry all the way to the Barn. The security guards tell people to come inside. In Underryd you stay indoors on nights like this. You could catch cold if you hang about outside. In the parking area, people look away nervously. They exchange glances as if to say "It's time once again". And turn up their car stereos. Knock back another glass. Hurry into the Barn. The mist hanging over the parking area is loaded with death. Death, which can only be impeded by lust. You there, come into the car. With me, into the back seat. People are being as swinish as they can. Fighting, shouting. Cars rock to and fro in the mist. Children are conceived, young people are crying. In a ditch a seventeen year-old girl lies, covered in vomit, calling for her mother.

The roar makes Sofie trip on the path through the undergrowth. She falls over a juniper and scratches up her arms and face. Hits her head against a rock. She vomits wine and black magic mushrooms and a cheap Chinese dinner. When she closes her eyes she sees spirals of eerie light circling the Aldebaran. Wet and bleeding, she stands up. Gets back on the path. Guardians do not lie vomiting in ditches. The Guardian in Underryd has a responsibility and tradition to watch over. Her mother was a Guardian once. And her grandmother's sister. It has been like this for years. For bloody aeons.

She reaches the glade by the bog and sees everything in flash-frame white. Trees and mist. White girls' bodies in a panting heap. Their paper bags with utilitarian things tossed at the end of the path. The small piles of clothes. Jackets and trousers one does not want to get dirty. And then: Kari on top of Meat. Anna, with her arms open, turned

towards the thing that is just emerging from the thickets by the pools. The girls shrieking like mad. Kari, orgasmically wailing. Meat's legs thrashing. Half-strangled he shoots the wad of his life. Then catches sight of the living mess of arms, branches and mouths. He roars without a voice. He flails with his arms and points. Can't you see how big it is? Says "Run for fuck's sake" with his eyes. Croaks like a raven.

Meat sees that the girls are not afraid. They look happy to be seeing things rising out of the undergrowth. Only he is scared out of his wits. The penny starts to drop for him. Drugged, drunk, strangled and fucked he may be, but he isn't stupid. These girls do not look frightened. They're howling with excitement, not fear. They're entirely in on this. Meat tries to shake off Kari. He arches his body. Tries to hit her. Claws her hands.

The girls grab his arms. Press him down. Laugh at his panic. Cover his mouth.

The Black Goat has a thousand young. The forest echoes with the yells of the girls and the Messenger. Sofie remembers her first time in the forest. Remembers the kick it gave her. Fourteen years old. High on magic mushrooms and red wine. Someone's hand feeling her, inside her top. Standing so close to the people fucking that one could see everything. Like in a hardcore porn film. And then that big, incomprehensible thing just standing there, rocking, at the edge of the trees. Like a ten-metre high piece of kelp on legs like bridge-piers. Lit up by the moon it looks like a dead tree. One that moves. With braying noises it lashes out here and there with its tentacles. One arm thick as a fire-hose searches towards Anna. Another lashes the moss on the ground like an enormous dog-tail. A third tentacle fumbles for the moon. Sofie pissed herself the first time she saw it. Then she screamed non-stop for five minutes. It took a week before she could speak. She could not remember what she had wished for.

But the sickest thing of all. Out there like nothing else. Is what happens next, once the Messenger has acknowledged them. Sofie is surprised every time. Even though she has been in Kari's place. She does not see who strikes the first blow. But suddenly there's blood everywhere. And girls clawing, girls tearing and girls kicking. Girls who throw Kari aside so they can also have a ride. Kari tumbles over the moss, lies there motionless with her bare arse. Meat keeps fucking in his drugged death-throes. His brain dies but his cock fights on.

Sofie stumbles towards the jumble of teenage girls. She remembers her Meat. Alexander from Rottne in the heart of Småland. Dumb as a sheep. Wanted to be a musician. Heavy metal. She still keeps his skull-emblazoned ring threaded on a string round her neck. When she came home that morning her mother helped her shower. She washed her as if she was a small child. Sofie remembers the smell of blood in her hair. And how her father started avoiding her. Never again a hard word from him. Once you've been to the marsh at night you can stay out late. The magic mushrooms make her stumble against something. She falls and rolls over the moss, with the water beneath. Her trousers are soaked. The water smells of blood and fucking and rotten plants.

The girls tear and tear at Meat. Cartilage and tendons are cracking. Elin and Lenni break one of his elbows. Snap it the wrong way. They bend and bend and bend. Twist it off like a bloody chicken wing. Overhead, the Messenger looms. Checking what Larsson, junior champion in gymnastics, and Andersson, soon to be a teacher, get up to in their spare time. The smell of blood gets it worked up. Braying and vibrating, its arms lash the air above them. Then Alexandra holds up a bloody bundle over her head and screams shrilly. "Iä Iä!" The girls cheer. "Iä! Iä!" Anna roars at the Messenger in Pre-Cambrian. Blood-spattered hands wave strips of flesh. Sofie joins in with the shrieking. Forgetting her role. She wants to feast on the flesh. She tosses aside a couple of

jabbering upper secondary schoolgirls. Julia and Lova. Or Lova and Maja? Who gives a shit? Let the Guardian come through. She sees a girl straddling Meat's hips while three others rip his belly open. Intestines everywhere. They split and stink of shit and vomit. Someone throws up. Someone comes, howling like some deranged thing. Lenni grins like a moron, her mouth full of forearm muscle. Hunger tugs at Sofie. She bares her teeth and hisses. Lenni backs off a little. The whites of her eyes shine palely in a mask of black blood. She defers to Sofie, who snatches the arm for herself. Sinks her teeth into a fleshy fold by the thumb. Briefly she catches sight of Meat's face among the pullulating girls. Meets his eyes. Sees his terror and pain. She thinks to herself, "That stupid fuck is still alive" and swallows flesh.

"Iä! Iä! The Black Goat has a thousand young!" The girls fight over Meat. His flesh. The holy sacrifice to the Goat in the forest. The girls from Underryd. They are the girls from Småland. Sussilull and Sussilo feed each other raw and reeking flesh. The girls are poppy blooms and lilies and peonies. Hardcore Bacchae the whole bunch of them. Wailing cannibal chicks feeding a monster of the Abyss a smoking warm liver. Alexandra and Anna hold it up together towards the slither of arms. The Messenger shakes with excitement as he wallows closer. Mashing the peat and dry twigs, blundering onto firmer ground. There's a rustling of thrashing tentacles and a stink of death and marsh gas.

A cluster of arms snatch up the liver. It disappears upwards in a spray of blood into the centre of the Messenger. There's a glimpse of something that might be jaws. Chewing. Some of the girls toss it more meat. Little Nalim squats, her hands full of steaming gunk. She's crying. And laughing. Alexandra kisses Anna and they fall down in a heap. Wrestling, finger-fucking. Kari runs out into the bog. She's only wearing a tank top and her skin shines white in the moonlight. She dances madly in front of the Messenger. Screaming, jumping up and down

in a cloud of water drops. Then Sofie remembers her errand. There may be something wrong with the meat. That was it, yes.

"Wait", she croaks, spitting cartilage and bits of flesh. "Wait."

She stumbles over to Anna, sitting astride Alexandra in the moss. There's blood, and Alexandra's long hair is flying wildly. They feed each other strips of meat. Bare-breasted, with crazed grins. The Messenger hangs over them. Enormous and stinking. It vibrates, jumps up and down on its elephantine legs. "Wait", Sofie calls out. "Wait, damn it!"

Alexandra and Anna look up at her. Some of the girls stop throwing meat. They have empty eyes, all of them. The Messenger sniffs her scent. Who disturbs my feast?

Sofie leans over Anna. Looks into her crazy-shimmering eyes.

"Listen! You have to listen."

Anna collects herself. Nods. "What?" screams Alexandra. Above them, an arm sweeps across with dangerous proximity. Sofie feels her terror breaking through. If the Messenger goes loopy they're all sooooo dead. In a minute she'll just start running. To hell with everything and just go.

"Listen to what?"

"He was drugged."

"WHAT?!"

"The swine took Viagra."

Alexandra slurs something and rummages for Anna's breast. Anna pushes her away. "What? What? What? How the hell could that happen? While you were watching?" Sofie backs away. In the corner of her eye she sees one of the Messenger's eyes staring at them. It's as big as a grapefruit. Ancient and altogether evil. And turned mad by drugs and medicines. An empirical fact. It can cope with the livers of alcoholised dance band muscians. But paracetamol makes it unpredictable. And drugs

turn it crazy. Two priestesses were killed in a tantrum of undiluted fury after it was poisoned. That was in 1969. Marianne Utter was decapitated. The girls had tricked their Meat into taking LSD and three of them were seriously injured. Anna's oldest aunt was another one to be torn to pieces. In 1978. All they found was her right hand. Anna still keeps it in a linen bag at home, on top of her cupboard.

The girls can feel something has changed. The gorging and heavy petting abates. Twenty misty pairs of teenage eyes stare in her direction. "Carry on", Sofie wants to shout at them. "Carry on making swines of yourself so it doesn't notice." Twenty blood-black mouths are jeering at her. Above her head, a tentacle halts itself in the middle of a movement.

Then Kari comes reeling as if out of nowhere. High on magic mushrooms and horror film sex. Her pussy bare. She's covered in blood, with shag curls. The latest look for tykes from Borås.

"Bloody hell!" she laughs. "Bloody, bloody, bloody hell!" Every creature in the bog has its eyes on her. Sofie sees the movement before it has even begun. Mushroom-intensified perception. Not bad. A tentacle as thick as a tree-trunk comes flying. Sofie rams Kari. A good rugby tackle. They fall into a puddle and the arm whooshes over them, hitting a hummock of grass which explodes in a rain of water and pulverised vegetation.

"What the hell!" Kari shouts. "Are you stupid or what?" The next lash impacts a decimetre from her head. The water gushes up like a fountain once again. Kari screams. She's on her legs and halfway to the tree-line in a single movement. All the girls start backing away. The Messenger staggers towards them. It shakes, vibrates. Totters. And strikes. Sparks fly when it hits a rock. Sofie hears herself exclaiming, "Wow". One of the girls screams. A scream of terror. This is no fun any

more. They've been exposed. Half-naked in the forest with a really nasty monster. A girl vomits up raw strips of flesh. Another one sobs deeply. Before long they're all running. Apparently it happened once before, in the late seventeen hundreds. The ritual failed and half the flock was killed. It took years and years to build it up again.

Sofie meets Anna's gaze. Controlled and sober by sheer force of will. She hears her voice as if inside her head. "We have to sort this out". Sofie nods. Time slows down. The girls' screams fade away and the Messenger freezes mid-motion. Sofie mimes: "Get the girls out of here". Anna nods. "Iä! Iä!" Sofie is as good as dead. Tomorrow she'll be sitting beside the Black Goat.

The Head Priestess rises slowly. Glances over her shoulder at the tangle of death hanging in the air overhead. The tangle of tentacles. Ten or so eyes. Total evil. This is heavy. She's blood-soaked everywhere, her panties are half pulled down and her white blouse shines in the moonlight. Moss in her hair. She's as beautiful as a goddess – the sister of the Goat. The snare, the bitch and what grows in the dark. She's the witch that tames the Messenger from the black beyond. She's the cry in the forest that rouses the girls to dance. She's Anna Lundman from Parkstaden in Borås. She's nineteen, going on ten thousand. She's the key to strange aeons.

Anna walks towards the flock with raised arms. Her blouse flaps like wings. Her face says, "Come to me, children." No panic, no fear. She's the secure schoolmistress, the mother, the calm centre around which the whole world revolves. Follow me and you'll be safe. Now let's all stand up. Nice and easy. Walk away from this annoying monster. Aunt Sofie will get rid of it.

The girls start getting up. Sofie holds her breath. Stares at the girls and stares at a telephone pole of a tentacle not a metre from her

forehead. A twitch, and she's dead. Not much fun. And on top of all she has an essay to hand in. She turns round with glacial slowness. The Messenger keeps his gazes on her. Or his gaze? What do you say about something with eyes everywhere? Sofie notices the way her thoughts keep running away with her. As soon as they get a chance they're off. Can so many eyes throw someone a glance? How does one see the world if one can look in all directions? As if from the inside of a dome?

She bows to the Messenger. Lifts her hands. A legion of tentacles are raised slightly, by way of an answer. She has its attention. It recognises her. The girl who comes bearing gifts. Do you hear? If there's anyone to be angry with, it's me. She sees Anna and the girls in the corner of her eye. They are inching back. Together they are saving the flock.

A girl, Sandra from Gislaved, stumbles over what's left of Meat. She falls over and crawls naked among the moss and pieces of flesh. The Messenger is startled. Its tentacles sway like seaweed. It loses interest in Sofie. Turns its eyes to Sandra and Anna and the girls. Picks up the scent of the flock again. Sofie feels the panic rising. Among the girls and inside herself. But she's the Guardian. A custodae. One who has drunk the blood and waded in darkness. One who preserves and protects. She does not feel panic.

Sofie screams right out. With all her strength. Roars to attract its attention. Howls at the night sky like a wolf. She calls for battle. Roars out: "I'm the one you go for, you ugly bloody slime-monster. Do you hear me, you fuck?" The Messenger turns to her again. It looks surprised. Or curious. It's been an eternity since someone shouted at it with defiance. It's been a long time since anyone issued a challenge. It lashes out at the little screaming thing with white hair. The creep ducks. It lashes out again. And again. The creep backs away, stumbles over the hummocks.

Sofie sees all the eyes. Feels how anger causes its mess of arms to tremble and jerk one way, then another. The Messenger is pissed off. First, an offering laced with poison; then she stands there, shouting. It climbs out of the moss and mud. Leaves the thickets. Comes swaying across the turf. Taller than ever it stretches towards the moon. As if wanting to show itself in all its foulness.

Sofie has time to think. An eternity seems to pass, then it attacks again. The first lash passes high above her. A careless sideswipe. The next one comes down obliquely from above. Shorter and straighter. She has time to jump out of the way. And again. She trips, falls over, rolls round in the moss and bounces up again. Her clothes are soaked through. A blow that would have felled a tree thunders into the moss. And then another. Water and mud spurt up. Sofie hops out of the way, retreats. She can cope with single strikes. As long as the Messenger only uses one arm at a time she can make it. And if she can manoeuvre herself in among the spruce trees she can make a run for it. Easier said than done. She stumbles again. Something sharp stabs her in the thigh. Spikes her. When she jumps up again it hurts all the way down to her calf. A tentacle crushes the spot she was just lying in. Another one swipes her across the shoulder. A glancing blow. Another, thin as a finger, whips across her hand. A third over her thigh. The lashes burn, but she's still standing. She fumbles with her thigh and finds the sharp thing. A thick stick driven into her flesh. Losing her concentration for a moment, she takes a clout to her face that throws her like a rag across the tufts of grass.

A tooth snaps. She feels it on her tongue. Her head is thundering and when she opens her eyes she sees the silhouette of the Messenger against the stars. She feels the stink of corpse and mud. Sees the eyes indifferently watching as she crawls on the ground. They don't even hate. They just don't like the idea of her moving. Or breathing. Or even

existing. It has been offered bad meat. Now it wants to kill and pulverise. Sofie tugs the stick out of her flesh. The pain is unbelievable. She disappears into a hole of whiteness. When she comes back the Messenger has drawn closer. A thin tentacle scrapes against her calf. As if curious. Or horny. Another, thick as a thigh, is raised over her face. Ready to club her. Six eyes scrutinise her intently. Additional tentacles come slithering up her leg. One pulls at her shoe. Another forces itself between her thighs. It's so damned disgusting. The piece of shit is groping her. Tentacles on her stomach. On her breasts. She holds her breath. If she moves she'll get the club in her face. It's over. Sofie relaxes. Closes her eyes. She's dead. She'll be one of the young waiting in the dark forest. A sister who got left behind on the marsh. A saga to be told at home in the town. By all means go dancing on the marsh, but it's dangerous. Sofie Granlund, Bodil's daughter, got left behind out there.

She hears Anna's voice. It comes in like a ghoulish signal through the pain and terror. "We're safe! Everyone made it. Thanks to you. You're holy, sister." Sofie weeps. She'd like to tell Anna to go to hell but her voice has gone. Her power is gone. Every scrap of it. The only thing she can think of is the arm above her. She looks up again. The moon gives it a blue-black colour and makes the slime glitter. The gunk hangs down in threads, gelatinous as syrup. The skin beneath is rough. A glittering drop of slime drops in a long string of silver. It looks like a shooting star.

"Wait!" someone calls out. The Messenger grows taut. Those eyes register something behind Sofie. "Take me instead, you fucking..." The voice snags on itself. Saga? "...fucked-up monster!" The tentacles draw away from Sofie. She inhales deeply. It's forgotten her. You're stupid. And I'm too bloody quick for you. Sofie rolls aside. Round, round. Away,

away. Waits for the crushing blow. But nothing happens. She's soaked everywhere and her leg burns like fire. It's wonderful. She's alive.

She looks up. The girls have gone. The remains of Meat lie on the ground in a pile. And there: Big Saga striding over from the edge of the trees. With her hands in her pockets and shoulders up. She lumbers along like always. Straight at the Messenger, who turns to her. Tentacles and eyes and everything. And Saga doesn't stop.

"It's my fault. I'm the one you should take." Saga's voice grows firm. Warlike. Mad. Sofie sees the blood in her hair. She must have fallen in the forest. It's run down and across her rounded face. She looks like one of those Japanese theatre masks. The mask speaks to her: "Sofie, take care of the girls. I'll sort this one out." Sofie doesn't answer. What do you say to someone who's just decided to die in your place? You wave. "Okay." An okay-wave and a farewell-wave in one.

The Messenger stumbles towards Saga. Reeling across the quagmire like a drunk. Hissing and gurgling. Saga goes to her death. Saga, who wanted to be a Guardian. Stupid Saga with her crappy school reports and bloodied knuckles. Stupid Saga who no one dared bully even before she found her way to the flock. Saga the butcher, Sofie's shadow. Loyal as a dog. Kind as a dog. Crazy as a dog. Sofie waves again. The dumbest gesture in the world. Ever.

The Messenger towers over Saga. She looks up at the mess of eyes and arms. She thinks she should say something. Anna would have said something cool, in some ancient tongue. "Iä! Iä!" Or something about that Black Goat. All that stuff Saga never really got. Bloody load of bollocks, really. This is no bloody goat. It's a freaking slime-monster standing two metres from her. Stinking like a refuse room. So bloody gross. She sees the first blow coming in. Far to the right.

"Your little brother sucks old men's cocks!" she shouts. And attacks. She connects a few wheeling punches. It's like punching foam. Then the Messenger strikes back. From all directions. Saga is thrown into the air, like a stone through the branches of a tree. Every other bone is broken. She has time to think of Sofie one last time. Then the arms come together. She disappears in among them. Like a fish in an anenome, Sofie thinks. They'll never even find a finger of her.

And then it's all over. Aeons seem to pass while the Messenger grubs his way back into the marsh. Everything goes silent. Sofie kneels in the mud. Sits with her back to the forest and looks out into the mist, where the Messenger can be made out, like a swaying tree. She sits there feeling the terror and the blood and the magic mushrooms releasing their hold on her. All that's left is a hunched-up frozen girl staring at the swathes of mist.

Slowly they dare to come out. First Anna and Alexandra. They stand at the edge of the trees, Alexandra crouching and Anna erect. Guarded. Well on top of things. Kind of.

Once the Messenger has disappeared completely in the mist, the girls move in closer. Frozen, half-naked and dumbfounded. They tiptoe past Sofie as if afraid of scaring her off. Pointing and whispering. Sneaking over to clothes and bags. Getting out their wet-wipes. Bottles of water and clean underwear. You can't arrive back in Borås looking like Carrie, can you? They help each other, two and two. Blood shining black in the moonlight. No one mentions Saga.

Anna and Alexandra go over to what used to be Meat. They root about in the mess. Pick out his wallet, mobile and jewellery.

"He's had three missed calls from Lina."

Alexandra laughs mutedly. "Oh, must have been love."

The valuables go in a bag that will end up in the RiverViskan. Far from the marsh. The boy will be grub for the badgers. The badgers in Underryd are diligent and bloody fat. You find the odd piece of bone and rags at the edge of the trees but that's it. Some of the clothes are very old. Anna once found a bonnet that would have looked good on Strindberg's girlfriend. You could still see the bloodstains.

The girls wipe and rub. The Bacchae disappear. Transform themselves into high school girls on a camping trip. With pine needles in their panties – and does anyone have a mirror? A couple of small torches flicker. A bottle of schnapps makes the rounds. They take deep pulls at it, against their shaking.

Anna explains. "Saga was with us all night. She went back with Sofie and the rest of you to Borås. Everyone said goodbye and good night at the bus station." The girls nod. Few of them look up from their singlets and paper napkins. "Say that you thought she went with Sofie." No one answers.

"Sofie?"

Sofie stands up. All the eyes of the flock on her back. Slowly she turns round. "She came with me."

"Good. How's the leg?"

"I can walk. I think." She outstares everyone. Her cheek is swollen from the monster clout. "No I don't need any help." She's the Guardian. The girl who stares down monsters. She walks without help. Otherwise there are others who would like to be Guardians.

"You need some clean clothes", tries Alexandra.

"Don't bloody worry about it." The steely monster-stare. Alexandra backs off.

Together they walk back to the barn. Anna at the front. Sofie last. The girls are silent. It makes Anna suspicious. Worried. Usually they start chatting and giggling as soon as the marsh is out of sight. And

singing. Elin and Lenni can do a mean pentecostal piss-take. "I want to thank God", in breathy voices: "Cause I used to be in the arms of the devil." But not tonight. The girls are waiting for her or Sofie to do something. Anna just doesn't know what. A few times they hear sobbing. The owls call for them. It's cold in the forest. Someone's racing an engine somewhere. One of the village fools. The drunks in their Volvo 240s. The ones you never want to be like. The ones you want to avoid so badly that you end up going to the marsh to feed monsters. It's cold in the forest by the marsh. The monsters may even end up eating you. But at least you don't have to put up with the Volvo. The young of the Goat drive Porsches. And succeed with everything they want. Unless they're torn to pieces.

Halfway to the Barn, Sofie says: "I have to have a bloody smoke." You don't smoke in the forest. Smoke is not appreciated. Sofie couldn't give a damn. Let anyone try to make me stub it out. "Does anyone have a cig?"

She gets seven packs shoved in her face. She says something dumb about "One at a time, said the milkmaid". The girls laugh so loud that it must have carried all the way to the marsh. She pulls out a Prince. Lights it and takes a monster puff.

Her head is spinning from the nicotine shock. She searches for Anna's eyes, in the background, playing the part of leader. Then looks into infinity. Bloody diva.

Kari comes up to her. Her face is still dirty.

"You saved my party. Thanks."

Sofie nods. "Thank Saga."

"I do, the whole time."

Sofie nods again and looks away. We all thank you. Sleep now. With the young of the Goat. You're one of the thousand now. We'll never forget you. Bloody nutter.

The girls go down to the place of feasting in Underryd. Where the roads from three villages meet. They laugh and make a lot of noise. We oooooown the place.