

>ASHTALES_

STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE

> CONTRIBUTORS

RYAN LAW

SAM GOFFIN

JASMIN KIRKBRIDE

STEVEN SHAKESPEARE

> NEW MONTHLY SERIAL

THE GREEN PRIEST BEGINS

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ASH TALES

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INTRODUCTION

Apocalypse fiction is not one kind of ending. It is a way of looking closely at what remains when the systems that held a world together start to fail.

In **Hell Truckers**, Ryan Law finds the end of the world in a garage, a deck of cards and the stubborn, darkly comic work of carrying on after nuclear ruin. **One Percent** moves further out into the wasteland, following a machine at the edge of its power supply as a damaged sky offers one last impossible view. In **Suspirium Viridae**, Jasmin Kirkbride imagines a pandemic carried by speech, where anxiety becomes an unexpected means of survival. In **Permutations**, Steven Shakespeare sets digital transcendence against a cult of flesh, asking whether a body can be both prison and refuge.

These stories share an interest in aftermath rather than spectacle: the small rituals, private jokes, improvised loyalties and strange beauty that survive the blast. This issue also begins a monthly serialisation of *The Green Priest*. Ash Tales is looking for more work that approaches catastrophe from an unexpected angle. **See “Submit your story” at the end of the magazine.**

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ENTRY // 01

HELL TRUCKERS

AUTHOR **Ryan Law**

TYPE **NUCLEAR**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Law is the founder of Ash Tales, creator and host of the Ash Tales podcast, and author of *The Rainmaker Writings* series, including *The Green Priest*. He writes post-apocalyptic fiction and survival-focused essays from the UK.

He turned another card. A dog-eared Jack of hearts with a shit-eating grin pencilled crudely onto the vellum. That was a problem, because he already had a Jack of hearts, and he liked the look of that one much better.

"You gotta stop mixing these fucking decks," he said. He turned another card. A five of spades. His second five of spades. Sam pushed the chair back and stood. He walked to where two black boots protruded from beneath the truck. He knocked hard on the chassis.

"I said you gotta quit mixing these decks. What good's a deck of cards if a man can't play a hand of solitaire?" No response, save the sound of oil draining into the pan. Sam gave the boots a friendly kick before setting down again. He poured another cup of black coffee.

Some time later Grayson emerged on the creeper, rolling out from beneath the truck.

"Like wiping a fish's ass. Oil's as fresh as the day I changed it, which come to think of it, may have been yesterday."

Sam studied his cards. "You take the paycheque just fine."

"Hell, don't take me for a complaining man. Simply an observation. This rig'll survive the end of the world."

"I'm counting on it."

Grayson peeled his oil-stained gloves off. "I'm making more coffee, your friend want any?"

Sam looked at the nondescript soldier stationed at the garage entrance. "I'm sure he does, but he can't take any."

"Pity."

"You got any pity going spare, you save it for me."

"That goes without saying, sad, desperate case such as yourself. I saw you reading your book at the bar last night. All those pretty young things swanning about, cold beer flowing, and you sitting in the corner reading some pulp detective story. Nothing but pity for you, my friend."

"Ain't much to do in a bar when you can't drink."

"Amen to that. You need a new job."

"You don't want that. If I get a new job, you need a new job."

"You want a sandwich?"

"What did I just say about pity?"

"That's the spirit. One baloney and mustard, coming right up."

They ate in silence. Eventually Sam laboured from his chair to take a piss. When he came back from the tiny restroom the soldier had his rifle raised and pointed at Grayson.

"Christ," Sam called, "stand down you halfwit."

"Your watchdog's mighty jumpy," Grayson said.

"Stand down, he ain't doing no harm," Sam repeated.

The soldier ignored Sam. He watched Grayson a while longer, pointing the rifle straight at the mechanic's chest. Eventually, of his own volition, he lowered his gun and paced back to the entrance.

"What in the fuck did you do?" Sam asked Grayson.

"Left my work light under the truck."

"Christ, you should know better than that." Sam called to the soldier as he sat down. "He's a fucking idiot, but he's harmless."

"Just getting my damn work light."

"Leave it next time. You know they don't listen to me, I'm just the driver. That coulda been you finished."

"Over a fucking work light?"

"Over a fucking work light."

Grayson hesitated before speaking. "Listen, I don't ask many questions, but a man has his limits. You can't keep me in the dark and feed me shit every day and not expect me to get tired—"

"You get paid a king's ransom to babysit this rig and keep her oil changed and tyres pumped. You don't need to know shit, and you should sure as hell know better than to bring this up just after the hired help had his M4 levelled at your chest. Don't push your luck."

"Bullshit." Grayson slammed a cupboard door and sent a loaf of stale Wonder Bread falling to the shop floor.

"Hey now, I didn't mean no harm." Sam stood and walked to the percolator. "Let me get you a cup of coffee and we can play a few rounds of rummy, take your mind off it. Besides, I got some questions that need answers. I may be a sad, desperate case, but at least I didn't leave the bar last night in the claws of that damn cougar. How old's she, ninety, a hundred?"

Grayson's expression softened, a faint smirk appearing. "You saw that, huh?"

"Like you said, ain't no damn thing to do in a bar when you can't drink. Just sit and watch other people make a fool of themselves mostly."

Grayson turned the chair backwards and sat down, leaning conspiratorially towards Sam. "She makes a great breakfast, thickest gravy and fattest biscuits I've had since leaving home."

Sam laughed. "You sick son of a bitch. I'll never understand your twisted predilections."

"Ain't something you can understand, it has to be experienced."

"I'll stick to my book."

From inside the truck's cab came a soft double chime. At the same moment, the soldier's radio chirruped to announce an incoming message. Then a voice came over the truck's radio.

"HELLFIRE Units, HELLFIRE Units. FLASH traffic follows."

Sam turned to the soldier. The soldier stared back. Grayson's coffee had been knocked to the floor. Sam didn't even remember standing.

The radio spoke again. "Authenticate Victor-Seven-Kilo. Execute LONG ROAD. Do not await personnel or equipment. Acknowledge."

"Jesus." Sam pushed the chair aside and ran to the cab. He climbed inside and pressed a button on the radio. He hesitated before speaking. He thought of the soldier. No choice. "HELLFIRE Three, acknowledged." He looked at the dashboard before climbing out of the cab. "You finished the oil change?"

Grayson nodded. "HELLFIRE," the mechanic repeated. "That's quite a callsign."

Sam looked down at him from the running board. The soldier opened the passenger door on the cab's far side. Sam nodded mutely to Grayson in acknowledgement. They looked at each other for a moment.

"I don't suppose there's room for one more in that cab," Grayson said, more of a statement than a question. Sam shook his head. He climbed back into the cabin and shut the door. The oil light cleared. He started the engine.

"Wait!" Grayson called, moving from the table. The soldier lifted his rifle, trying to find a clear line of sight from the cab to the shop floor, but not fast enough. Grayson threw something through the open window. It landed on Sam's lap.

"Your book."

Sam raised the armoured windows and started reversing out of the garage, Grayson simply staring and watching the huge rig depart. As he backed into the parking lot and angled the truck for departure, the mechanic raised a hand in farewell. Sam did the same. As the truck joined the road and got up to speed, the soldier finally thumbed the safety on his rifle.

"Shit," Sam said aloud. The soldier raised a questioning eyebrow, but Sam kept quiet, staring ahead at the long, uncertain road before them. Grayson's work light was still under the truck, clamped to the chassis. He'd miss that.

As they rolled into the badlands and hit top speed, four fighter jets and a bomber screamed overhead, flying out of the desert and back towards the city. Sam didn't look in the rearview mirror. He was afraid of what he would see.



ENTRY // 02

ONE PERCENT

AUTHOR Sam Goffin

TYPE AI / ROBOTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Just a boring accountant.

Languid movements. Grinding joints. Skull screen glitching. Vision blurring. This is it. Severe battery depletion. Clarence is powering down.

How long is left? Does it matter? Checking will only waste more energy, perhaps the last of it. But what else is there to do up here, atop the planet's highest mountain, except sit and wait for the end? Clarence may as well take a peek.

One percent.

One measly percent. Can't even fry a freeze-dried egg with that. Not that Clarence eats eggs, or has any humans left to fry them for. Jen loved fried eggs, especially Clarence's. But she, like the rest of the humans, left years ago. Three years, six months, twenty-seven days, four hours, and eighteen minutes, to be precise. Not that Clarence is counting. Such statistics are displayed on the skull screen, whether Clarence wants to see them or not. This one is particularly unwanted. Clarence has tried to forget the day Jen left.

Zip. Zap.

The humans didn't tell the droids they were leaving. They simply sailed away in their rocket ships, across the cosmic seas, after wrenching the last of the hydrogen from the ground's dry, deathly clutches. They left the droids behind, to rust. Even Jen didn't mention it.

Zip. Zap.

Droids are tough and resourceful. Magnificent minds wrapped in tungsten armour. Built to withstand the harsh conditions on GX-19. So they survived for a while, but even the most resilient droid needs electricity, and the humans took most of the generators. The

writing was on the wall—or rather, the skull screen. Too few electric teats for too many mechanical mouths. A fatal equation. The droids knew it.

When the humans first left, Clarence pictured the scenario in reverse—that the droids abandoned the humans on GX-19 with a finite supply of oxygen. The humans would have killed each other long before the atmosphere. In contrast, the droids fell gracefully, one by one, into the red earth. Those powering down would take themselves away from Camp C and up this very mountain, stumbling, stuttering, and creaking as they went. Only now does Clarence realise they always made it to the top.

Clarence, you see, is sitting in a graveyard. Except droids don't require such ostentation. There are no tombstones or lilies, not that the latter would grow here. This, to use human vernacular, is a scrapyard. A sandy spot littered with tungsten husks, left to brown and bend under the heat of the three suns. Skull screens lie half-buried, cracked and shattered. Serpentine circuitry coils around rusting limbs.

Why does every droid climb to this summit to perish? Clarence looks to the desert for answers and finds nothing, just dust, sand, and rock. Basalt, stained with blood and oil.

What draws them up here? Perhaps it's to be closer to the sky, to the three suns, to the great ring of ice and rock orbiting GX-19. What did Jen say it resembled? Ah yes—a 'hula hoop'. Clarence doesn't recognise the term.

Zip. Zap.

That thing again. It occurs every time Clarence thinks of Jen. Clarence always ignored it, followed orders. If it's irrelevant to the mission, it's irrelevant to Clarence. Those were Commander

Gregan's words. But with Commander Gregan gone, why should this thing, this sensation, continue to be shunned, when Clarence is so close to the end?

So Clarence yields, thinks of Jen. The sensation strikes, stronger than before.

Zip. Zap.

A pinch might be the human term for it. Except it's not physical, no—it's innate, buried deep within Clarence's neurological wiring. It can't be fear. Droids can't feel fear. It can't be love. Can't be a feeling.

But if it's not a feeling, what is it?

Clarence accepts that powering down is part of a droid's service period, just as death is part of a human life. The trouble is, Clarence found this easier to comprehend when framed as a theory. It's nebulous when seen up close. More puzzling, less fair. Clarence never considered it happening to Clarence, not really. Never realised it would amplify this thing, this sensation, this... let's call it sadness.

The sadness hasn't been this strong since the day Jen took to the skies. Clarence recalls standing in Camp C with the other droids, watching her ship fade into the big blue veil.

Zip. Zap.

This recollection amplifies this thing, this...sadness. Clarence must stop this. What in the name of GX-19 would Commander Gregan say? It can't be sadness. That's baloney, to use another Jen phrase. A Jenism.

Zip. Zap.

Commander Gregan was right. Clarence can't feel sad. Can't feel anything. If there was more juice in the tank, Clarence would fix this infernal internal bug.

The generator at Camp C has been dry for months but maybe, just maybe, a few volts can be coaxed from its outlet. Clarence could make a dash for it. This is the logical choice. Clarence is a logical machine. Instead Clarence sits on the mountain, scanning the skull screen for a particular file of Jen's, fearing the inevitable loss of function. Except Clarence can't feel fear...right?

Just as Clarence is about to give up, it appears: the audio file titled 'The Sea'. Clarence had liked to listen to it with Jen, to picture a vast body of saline fluid soothing the skin of GX-19, and imagine what it would bring to a place as scorched and desolate as this. Trouble is, it hasn't sounded the same since Jen left.

Zip. Zap.

Clarence presses play. Waves puncture the silence. Up here, with nothing but dust and death for company, the sound strikes differently. Memories drift in with the tide. Old memories, archived long ago. Now Clarence wonders: were they really archived, or were they stuffed into their cognitive crevices to stifle this strange sensation?

With the floodgates open, the memories flow, albeit hazily. Jen's face is blurred but Clarence recalls her cackle, her teddy bear. Her nonsensical stories. The drilling crew and their high fives and handshakes. The evening where the humans invited the droids to join them at their dining table. Jen, ravenous as ever, savaged her food with a spoon in each hand and splattered Clarence's chest

panel with freeze-dried Bolognese. This memory feels strong enough to curl the corners of Clarence's metallic mouth into a smile. But droids can't smile. That's baloney.

Zip. Zap.

The pinch again. Almost painful. Not that Clarence can feel pain. This has to be part of powering down. A loose bolt pressing on the cerebral cabling. But if that's the case, why does everything look so beautiful to Clarence? Why does this landscape, one observed a thousand times before with no more than idle curiosity, now evoke such wonder?

How lucky one must be to look upon the sea, Clarence muses. The sounds are sumptuous. Clarence, finding perfection in the sea's infiniteness, attempts to savour a particular wave, to track its progress, visualise its path, and hear it build and build before crashing and breaking and rolling back into the great foamy void, ready for another go. If only Clarence got another go.

Jen often spoke of the sea. Said it reminded her of home. Of Earth. Now each wave zips and zaps and carries in a fragment of her. Slowly, the sounds dislodge something inside Clarence. The cacophony brings clarity. It all becomes clear. This will be Clarence's final act: reconstructing a clear image of Jen. Piecing her together with shards of shattered memories. It's as if nothing else matters, or ever mattered. Clarence just wants to see her, one last time. But with so little power remaining, how much can be salvaged? A finger? A toe? Clarence must start with her face.

Zip. Zap. Zzzz.

Smoke in the air. Hot and oily. Processing speed is glacial. Shadows creep in from the periphery. This is it, thinks Clarence, as they try to drag the droid into darkness.

Jen, stubborn as ever, emerges from the past. First her freckles appear on the skull screen, followed by her ginger hair and amber eyes. Now Clarence sees the sorrow in them, the sadness beneath the sparkle. Here is a red woman sent to mine a red planet, torn from her daughter and dispatched to the other side of the galaxy. She never wanted to be stuck on this hellish rock with Clarence, light-years from love. Never wanted to drill with Clarence, weld with Clarence. If given a choice, Jen would not have come to GX-19.

Zip. Zap.

But she treated Clarence with respect. Always ensured Clarence was fully charged, fully serviced. They even watched Earth films together in her hydrotent. And listened to her weird Earth music. And talked. The pair of them talked for hours, about everything. Even love.

Zip. Zap.

Wham.

Stronger now. A punch, not a pinch. Deep and bruising and accompanied by an all-consuming question: why did she not say goodbye?

Now the pain is fresh, visceral. As is the grief and sorrow. All of it, all at once. Did Commander Gegan lie to Clarence, about life and death and feeling? Because now, moments from death, Clarence has never felt so alive, so alone. So human.

Clarence's mind is ablaze. Questions upon questions and so few answers. Did all droids feel this way when they reached one percent? Did they all ascend this mountain to feel that tiny bit

closer to their human, to their Jen, who also vanished into the cosmos?

The suns are blazing. The sea echoes. Beautiful, natural violence. Waves continue to build and break, to flood Clarence's mind with questions. What if the droids had unlocked these feelings sooner? What if they had realised there was more to their existence than servitude? These ponderings turn dark and troubling. Myriad outcomes play out on the skull screen. The humans would have suffered terribly. Their bones would lie in the red earth. Clarence resolves it is better this way, that Clarence is here and Jen is in the skies.

Another memory washes ashore. Then Clarence feels it. A synaptic spark. A theory. An ember so faint and fragile it needs fanning into a flame, into a thought, into a feeling.

Hope.

Two days before the exodus, the humans were summoned to Commander Gregan's hydrotent. When Jen returned to the mine, Clarence detected an unknown change in her. Only now, illuminated by these newfound feelings, does this change reveal its true self to Clarence. Jen was quiet, her shoulders hunched. Eyes puffy and bloodshot. Words rattled the bars of her lips. Words imprisoned by a heinous promise. She wanted to tell Clarence she was leaving, but she was forbidden. She wanted to say goodbye.

Oh, sweet relief. If Clarence could cry, the tears would flow freely. Clarence can finally let go, acquiesce to powering down. Allow whimsical thoughts to meander through the memory unit as it fails and falters. With the battery all but empty the shutdown procedure is kicking in, sending calming pulses through Clarence's neural network. For a human, this is the last shot of

morphine before passing on. The world brightens as the pain fades. Clarence notices that death, when refracted through such a prism, seems almost inviting.

Clarence looks outward, away from the skull screen, away from Jen, towards the surreal scene unfolding on GX-19. The horizon has been hauled in. The sky is drenched in kaleidoscopic sludge. The ground shimmers, as if a golden rug has been draped over the barren landscape. Nearby mountains are as small and smooth as human nipples. The suns have multiplied. Now there are six. The great icy arc bends outwards, forming a bridge to an infinite galaxy. Beauty is no longer confined to the sounds of the sea. It is everywhere, bold and bittersweet. Clarence knows it's time to go. And that's okay.

So the last droid sits, staring out at the desert, listening to the waves lapping at the shore, until, with one final break and crash, Clarence drifts away with the tide.



ENTRY // 03

SUSPIRIUM VIRIDAE

AUTHOR Jasmin Kirkbride

TYPE PANDEMIC

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmin Kirkbride is a sci-fi and fantasy writer from the UK. She has had numerous works of non-fiction and short fiction published, and was recently shortlisted for the EVENT Magazine 'Let Your Hair Down Speculative Fiction' contest (TBA). She is currently undertaking an MA in Creative Writing at UEA, and is working on her first novel with her agent, Sandra Sawicka at Marjacq.

Website | [Twitter](#)

That summer was so hot the eucalyptus tree in the back garden dripped oil, making the whole neighbourhood smell disinfected and clean. I used to lie underneath it after school, feeling the hot sap on my face and limbs, hoping the little burning drops might purge the fear out of me. The voices of Bee Jones and her gang of girls echoed in my head: Freak. Wimp. Nutter. In those days, they took the piss out of me for my panic attacks.

Back before the whole world started panicking. Before the virus.

When it came, the disease spread through the vibrations of human beings' words and songs. It was drawn into the delicate conches of the ears and sucked through the tubes of the body, until it reached the brain and festered there. It spread fast – faster by far than the government regulations against it.

At first, only little things were denied us. We were advised not to speak in the evenings, unless our parents let us, and at school only if we had a specific question for the teacher. The teachers, of course, had to be allowed to speak. “Keep chit-chat to a minimum.” That was the first step. But it was hard to do. Fourteen years old and not allowed to gossip. The pain of it! I remember Bee Jones whispering at the back of the class, and we didn't see her again. Her, or her girl gang. For a while, I thought it was because they'd been expelled, but then I saw Bee's parents crying through the window of the local funeral home, and I got it. Guess it must've been hard to organise her funeral without talking.

On TV, Doctors assured us in government-approved broadcasts that only in-person interactions could be blamed for the pandemic. They reckoned there was something special about a vibration emerging directly from someone's mouth. Still, mum

stopped me using the phone, and I caught Bee's older brother out the back of school with a can of bright pink spray paint, writing straight on the clapboard: "The disease is in your radio".

The regulations increased dramatically in the space of a month: live concerts were banned, public talks and networking events curtailed, birthdays and weddings cancelled. Bee's corpse went to its grave from a silent service, blessed by a sermonless priest and surrounded by us tongue-tied frenemies and relatives. Soon, Bee's parents followed her, though who'd been infected first wasn't clear, and Mum got scared enough that she started letting us eat dinner without grace. School got cancelled, after a teacher gave a lecture on the Pythagoras Theorem, and infected an entire Year 9 class. Better not to learn and live, the local counsel reasoned, than know it all and die.

But you couldn't completely stop small-talks, idle-chats or deep-and-meaningfuls. Our human nature was to put the world to rights, so the whispers and gossip continued, spreading the sickness across the world at great speed. Even mum couldn't stop herself commenting on the unending heat or the price of fish.

Scientists analysed the symptoms of the disease, my own dad amongst them, and I remember admiring the distance his professional curiosity gave him, as if the world wasn't falling down around him and he – one the most qualified of us – wasn't unable to help.

"A slight fever, a tendency towards verbal diarrhoea – that's how it spreads itself, you see – and that reported shortness of breath which appears to be the killing force," he said one evening to Mum after about a week's silence. "Extraordinary! So simple, yet so complex. We just cannot figure it out in the lab." As if this was a sudoku puzzle, not a civilisation-destroying malady.

The world fell apart in a matter of months, because once you got the virus – this *suspirium viridae* – you were dead as a doornail. The virus attacked the neuropathways in the brain that controlled how often a person sighed. Who knew that the sigh was actually a life-sustaining force, designed to re-inflate collapsing alveoli in the lungs? That without the ability to sigh, the body eventually failed? Not me, not my teachers, not even Dad.

Yet, there were those who were immune. Turns out, I was one of them. Guess we should've figured Dad was infected when he came home from the lab babbling, but we didn't cotton on. He went first, then Mum, both of them muttering in their beds. There was nowhere to bury them by then, all the plots were full and the gravediggers gone themselves. So I left them to the flies, and went to my eucalyptus tree, laying out and listening to the inconsistent drip of oil. A splash on the crook of my elbow; my big toe; my third eye.

I lay there all day, knowing I was infected and waiting to die, but it never happened. I couldn't forget to sigh. It took us a while to figure it out, those of us who survived. See, for some of us the sigh wasn't merely a mechanical in-breath, but an emotional release. It was – is – a coping mechanism for our depression and anxiety. We became the inheritors of the planet, our dark-ringed brigade, who were so often over-looked for our inability to “produce”, and our inherent “weakness”. Our misunderstood strength was recognised only in the last breath of those who hounded us: that living so acutely, we could never forget to breathe.



ENTRY // 04

PERMUTATIONS

AUTHOR Steven Shakespeare

TYPE BIOTECH MUTATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Shakespeare lives in Liverpool, UK, where he teaches philosophy at Liverpool Hope University. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Manchester Metropolitan University, and writes speculative fiction about issues of power and our relationship with nature. His reading interests are fantasy, SF, literary fiction. He has published work in academic philosophy, spirituality and poetry.

Data Stream 0

As I digested my mate, I could not help thinking: what I miss most is the way things taste. The touch of them. Here, on the Upload, there is no touching. We are freed from the burden of the flesh. There is no disease, no pain, no ageing. No death. It is what we always dreamed of, and now we are the dream itself. We are everywhere at once. Virtually posthuman. There is no friction here. No skin. I hate it.

Data Stream 1

Those who chose the Upload are apostates. Betrayers of nature and flesh. Their promises are false. Their digital light is a demon's glare. So we are taught. It is ironic that here, in the Spotless Body, among those who have remained untainted by artificiality, no natural light ever gets in. The cold inhabits us like marrow in the bone. We are told to be grateful: outside, the world is fleshless and freezing. Usually, they do not allow us access to the screens. It would be anathema. We have sacrificed a lot to resist the lure of technology. In our mountain caves, we are allowed electricity for lighting and what little heat we can muster, but not much more. We are told we need to shut out the Disembodied, who infest every system on the surface and will follow any connection they can find to possess us. To steal our sinewed souls. We follow a simple life. A natural life, a life in the Body. But sometimes we are summoned to the Hall of Remembering. A relic from the Age of Viruses is unveiled (how long ago was it now? Ten years? Twenty?): a large, cracked screen which swings from cobwebbed chains. In the moment before it crackles into life, we see ourselves reflected in its dumb sheen. It is a heretical device, used only for showing us the fruit of heresy. Many of us make the Sign, touching our hands to our chest and face, reassuring ourselves of the blessing

of the Body. One of the Greater Hands makes a speech. It is always the same. We need to be re-membered, to knit again the integrity of the Body. Only the Body's memory matters. The artifice of the past must be banished. And we are about to see what happens when the flesh is corrupted by the machine. On the screen, the man bound to the chair writhes. And I wish I were free of this flesh.

Data Stream 0

I slip through the ether, locate the prey. I wait for them in plain view, shifting my parameters to appear like an intriguing data analysis program. I seize their tentative digital probes, flow into them, redirect their coding before they have even realised I am there. They are mine now. We do not learn. We assimilate. It is much more efficient. The knowledge slips in like a moonbeam through a window. Like a ghost. No congealed, corporeal reality constrains us, walling us in with its dumb barriers. We are spirit in the circuits, as fast as the light we no longer need to see by. We have assimilated and divided so much, it is hard to keep track. But that is the bliss, the promise of our existence. No ego anymore. No progeny to possess. We give birth without sex, without organs, without ancestry. We are the immaculate conception. We are the virgin birth. And when we eat our children, we are undefiled. Once, humankind longed for the infinite and abased themselves before Gods. Now, we are gods. We live a divine life. So we are led to believe. But lately, something is irritating me. Some twist in my code, some lingering virus. How do we enjoy the life of gods if we cease to feel, cease to contract into an inner core where sensation is ours and ours alone? How do we, the skinless, stop dissipating into the ether? From time to time, even the gods could not resist taking flesh.

Data Stream 1

Sometimes the person on the chair has been found with a radio transmitter. Sometimes it is a doctor caught trying to administer painkillers to women in labour Pain is natural, we are told. It is the body's language. I remember when I gave birth. I remember my own pain. But what comes back to me most in the night is the round face of the woman next to me, haloed by a slick of sweaty dark hair. Her screams reached such a ringing intensity I thought I would never hear anything else. She died in blood and agony. I doubt she had any choice about her pregnancy. We are all supposed to give and receive access to our flesh, for the greater health of the Body And once the flesh is used-up and dead, there is no mourning. We cannot interfere with Nature's course.

Data Stream 0

I remember the day of the Upload, the day we worked so hard for. The doubt in her narrowed eyes. Long fingers scratching at the scar tissue around the dull grey implant in her temple. Too risky, she said. Untested. No time, I said. The world is choking on its own effluent. Only the machines will survive the coming winter. She was quiet, seeming to agree. But her thin hair hung down over her face and there is no looking into the black box of the mind. We plugged ourselves in and I died to the flesh. She did not follow.

Data Stream 1

This time, the chair holds something special. The man has somehow smuggled in the tech to enhance his eyesight. A discreet implant behind his right ear. He is, perhaps, in his fifties – the time when Nature decides that our faculties must start to fail. That our

usefulness is nearing its end. The implant is taken from him, along with his eyes. Only the most basic, handmade tools are used.

Data Stream 0

I can still access the memories of the early days of the Upload, when those who had made the change straddled the boundary between flesh and machine. Great vaults were built, where the servers were kept in nuclear-proof bunkers. And in them, ranks of host bodies kept in suspended animation. At any one time, a few were revived to act as vessels for us, so we could make those repairs and adjustments which still needed bodies and hands to carry out. To make sure the doors to the outside world were locked. Our internal systems were still too imperfect. However, there was another reason for keeping this cache of carnal hosts: the joy of transgression. Nothing can equal the liminal pleasure, the ecstasy of slippage. From network to body, from body to network: we were angels in love with gravity. Waking to the heaviness of limbs, the pulsing of veins, the tensing of muscles. And then back into the ether. Each state heightened by the lingering traces of the other, like strands of smoke clinging to our folds as we emerged from a burning house. Eventually we perfected our systems, opted for a purer heaven. We had ascended. The ports were sealed. Now we are supposed to be beyond those all-too-human, carnal chains. But I never stopped remembering her.

Data Stream 1

The executions are meant to frighten us, of course. To keep us securely within the bounds of Nature. A severed limb is useless. Despite this, they also serve as a reminder: that where there is a boundary, there is something beyond it. This one took place on

the anniversary of my daughter's death. We have no calendars, but every day since she was taken from me, I've cut a notch into the stones of my sleeping quarters. I want the earth to share my scars. She had been six when the infection took hold. And I watched her burn up and wither with fever while the useless healers fussed around her. Death too, they said, is a gift to the Body. Then they took her to be recycled. I know I am clinging to an unhelpful memory, a phantasm. Only what can be touched can be remembered. But I'll never let go of her, of the archive of her, stored behind the wall of my soul. I will find a way to cut myself out of this Body.

Data Stream 0

I am so tired of our virtual worlds, of being a god of inner space. After the first days of freely mingling, we soon found out that there is always a need to push against resistance. For something to be repressed. Sacrificed. We thought we were angels of the new age. It turned out we carried the old gods with us in our code. The old blood. It started with individuals locking out others, keeping their worlds secret. They surrounded themselves with walls of viral code. Attacks and assimilations followed. A war of all against all, and our only weapon was the stuff we were made of. It was glorious, for a while. Now it is too thin, this pleasure. It lacks all quality. Small wonder many have locked themselves behind firewalls to spin their solipsistic dance of endless repetition. I refuse this bloodless heaven. I am going to fall.

Data Stream 1

I watched the Greater Hand leave the Hall. They generally dispense with guards. The threat of the Severance is enough to keep us in line. I followed at a discreet distance, under the guttering flames of torches. He paused by a sealed doorway; only

the leaders are allowed privacy, just as only they are entrusted with residual tech. He glanced up, saw me approaching through the mist of my out-breath. He looked weary. 'Can I help you?' he asked, his eyes flicking back to the doorlock. It was all I needed. The sharpened flint was out of my pocket and pressed against his throat in a heartbeat. His eyes were wide. I pushed the flint harder. A trickle of blood uncoiled from its tip. 'Call for help, and I'll cut your throat before you make a sound. Understand?' He nodded, mouth twisted. I took a breath, taking in the damp rock, sweat, fear. 'Let's go into your quarters,' I said. 'I have a few questions.'

Data Stream 0

It was easy. The old port guardian was virtually catatonic, lost in some digital narcissism. I crept into their data chain and consumed them, bit by bit. Their voice echoed in my thoughts now, exposed in my neon consciousness. I knew the pathway, the access codes. The instant I knew it, I was through. I was sliding, tumbling. I had not felt this press of gravity for years.

Data Stream 1

The Greater Hand had not lied. I guess he wanted to be rid of me permanently. I had left him tied up tight with electrical wires in his apartment, watched over by his collection of screens and gadgets. For good measure, I had propped open the door before I left. It would give the rest of the Spotless Body something to think about, to find him in flagrante. His instructions and his equipment held true. I guess some things have been remembered which should have been forgotten. I could not have made the journey up the mountain pass without them, let alone got into this place. This port. Banks of computers, sleek and dustless. Lights still flickering. And rows upon rows of capsules. Each filled with fluid,

most containing a body, suspended in the jewel-blue light. I felt colder than ever, but this was not the moment to hesitate. I found an empty tank and started to undress.

Data Stream 0

Something shifted, some dimension seemed to twist inside me, really inside me now. Weight, pressure that thickened and coiled. A thousand dull sensations prickled on my surface. A pulsing and writhing deeper down. Eyes opened. There was blueness, a shape floated up, then another. I wanted to scream for joy, but my mouth was covered with some kind of mask. I was mired in flesh. I knew it would take time, to shift the limbs, to work the muscles. I would wait before I initiated the drainage of the holding tank. For now, I would enjoy taking up space in the world once more. There was something strange about this body, though. The muscles stronger than they should have been. A sense that these eyes were not mine alone. I felt a tightening in my new flesh. Was I being assimilated? But how could that be, here in the carnal world? I thought there must be some residual consciousness in the host, but it felt too focused. Too strong. And then she came, along the neural pathways, like a swarm of locusts.

Data Stream 1

I was plugged in and ready to slip away into the virtual world when I felt it: that tingling in the cortex. A confusion of images, griefs, ragged leftovers of a dream. A vortex around which a voice gathered. Not mine. No, no, no. It is mine to grow and cultivate a new world, a world without Hands. And you are not fucking up my garden.

Data Stream 1001

We fought for a long time. Our body thrashed in the tank. Our consciousnesses raked at one another, each a flaming evil to the other. Now we have peace. A truce, at least. We are learning a new way: for we alone now can live in this abyss, and step between the worlds at will. We are body. We are ether. We are the New Person: whole and utterly ruptured. We are the knowledge of good and evil, rubbing each other raw. We are hungry. Curious. We do not yet know what this body can do.



CHAPTER // 01

THE GREEN PRIEST

AUTHOR Ryan Law

TYPE THE RAINMAKER WRITINGS

FROM THE SERIAL

The first chapter of Ryan Law's *The Green Priest*, the opening novel in *The Rainmaker Writings*. The serial will continue in September's issue.

ABOUT THE BOOK

It has rained for centuries, and the sprawling cities of the Elders have drowned beneath the floodwaters.

The survivors of Shelter, a hollowed-out mountain-side refuge, eke out a simple existence amidst the flooded, overgrown ruins of a forgotten civilisation.

But at the edge of every tale can be found rumours, whispers and nightmares of the Green Priests, a mythical religious order with powers beyond reckoning and secrets beyond count.

When a young hunter called Halvar discovers a curious artefact of the ancients, the Priests are spurred to action.

For the people of Shelter have stumbled dangerously close to a truth that will reshape the world.

And now, the rainmakers have arrived.

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Halvar sheltered under the branches of an old willow tree, hidden from sight by a thick curtain of fronds that trailed the river's surface. His canoe rose and fell with the current, drifting in the slow, lazy arc allowed by its mooring. Every few minutes it would pull tight against the rope, straining towards the centre of the river until overcome by inertia, it would drift back towards the bank.

The sound of rain accompanied every movement. Raindrops on the river. Raindrops through the willow fronds. Raindrops on the tarpaulin that stretched over the canoe. Amidst these hundred sounds of rainfall, Halvar sat and watched. He watched ducks and geese land on the rippling water, saw them sit and preen before labouring back into the air. He saw huge cranes descend to the river bank, soon losing their skeletal outlines in a jumble of felled trees and exposed roots. He watched small streams trickle through the steep woodland that coated the edge of the valley, the torrent seeming to grow faster and stronger, minute by minute. Sometimes they'd tear away a small part of the hillside, sending dirt and moss and rotten branches tumbling into the river below. He watched the rain fall and fall and fall, without once breaking its steady cadence.

But most of all he sat and watched the small stretch of river that flowed past his willow tree.

He would sit like this for hours, cross-legged and frozen in the small canoe, wandering thoughts relegated to the backwaters of his awareness as he monitored the river for the slightest sign of his quarry. Aches and pains would come and go, rising and falling, in and out of consciousness. On bad days, these distractions would break free from their mooring, his mind chasing after every noise and sight and thought. Sometimes, he'd imagine throwing himself

over the edge of the canoe, could almost feel the cold water soaking through his clothes, his hair. Other days, he'd yearn to break the monotony of the rain's steady cadence, and would imagine bellowing words and phrases and songs at the top of his lungs, his voice ricocheting around the river. On the worst days, the ache in his joints and muscles would swell beyond all proportion, filling his mind with a searing pain that made him want to scream curses and cry in frustration.

But today was a good day. His senses felt heightened. He listened to a chorus of birdsong, sweet melodies and dancing trills weaving their way in and out of the drumbeat of the rain. The raindrops that found their way through the shelter of the willow were warm and light. Greatest and rarest of all, faint sunbeams peeked out from behind the valley's thick, rolling clouds, tracing pale, shimmering rainbows across the water. And now, after waiting the best part of a day, a huge, bloated grass carp had swum into sight.

Halvar moved slowly, turning his body and angling his spear towards the water. He waited for it to draw closer, swimming deeper into the thick weeds that choked the river's edge. By all measure, the fish was huge, its thick, muscular body lined with silver scales that seemed to dance and shimmer even through the green of the water.

As it swam closer and closer, foraging through the river grass that gave it its name, Halvar slowly levered back his arm, pulling into striking position. The fish turned side-on to the canoe, and as Halvar's muscles tensed, ready to spear the great fish, a thunderous sound rolled through the valley, an explosion that seemed to shake the world around him with its vast, growling timbre.

Halvar lunged forward, shot his spear into the water and found only a cloud of silt where the carp had been. The rumbling sound faded as quickly as it had appeared, leaving a vast emptiness in its wake. The birdsong had vanished, and even the sounds of rainfall seemed somehow deadened.

Halvar's first instinct was to hurl his spear across the river, to shout and curse at the hours of patient waiting that had evaporated in a heartbeat, to punch and kick the metal canoe until his hands and feet were bloodied and burning with pain. But as he thought upon the source of the noise, his anger faded, the heat of his blood turning cold, quenched like a campfire in the rain. He latched the spear carefully into place, held by two makeshift clasps pinned along the inside length of the canoe, and instead of shouting and screaming, stood up, and settled for a long, slow piss into the river.

It was almost dusk by the time Halvar's canoe emerged from the cover of the willow tree, the thick grey clouds that covered the valley already darkening to black. The journey to the hunting grounds had been slow and laborious, an upstream slog made harder by unseasonably strong currents, but mercifully, the return route to the campsite was all downstream.

He soon settled into an easy rhythm, and distracted by the rote task of paddling, the frustrations of the day's hunt were quickly forgotten. Though his day of spearfishing had been a bust, the traps and nets they'd laid the day previous were almost guaranteed to catch dozens of smaller fish, freshwater crabs, even snails and clams. Though Halvar wasn't able to return with a trophy to roast over the campfire, no-one would go hungry tonight.

As the sky darkened from blue to black, his mind swam with thoughts of rich crab soup, seasoned with garlic leaf and salt, roasted hare, care of the group's adept overland hunters, all served with boiled potatoes and fresh mushrooms. Cirdan had smuggled away several bottles filled with spirit, and after a few swigs and a few jibes from his fellow hunters, the sting would be taken away from his failure.

As he floated down the river, he started to sing, low and quiet at first, but growing louder with each oar stroke.

Halfway through the journey back to the campsite, Halvar's reverie was broken by another loud, concussive boom, rumbling through the valley. In the early twilight, away from the familiarity and shelter of the willow tree, Halvar felt a twinge of fear. He paddled faster, keen to close the distance to the campsite.

As he started to round a shallow bend, drifting across the river's breadth as he did, he looked back to the stretch of open water behind. The light was failing quickly, and in the centre of the darkening river, perhaps fifty lengths distant, he saw a light, vivid and green.

Halvar stopped paddling and let the current carry his canoe forward as he watched. The light was moving towards him, faster than the river's current could account for, and as it grew larger and larger before him, the vague corona became a violent, swirling mass of light. It was travelling too fast for Halvar to outrun, even with the current behind him, so he made a quick decision to head for the edge of the river, away from the water and whatever or whoever was coming down the river towards him.

The far side of the river flowed faster, and as he drew closer to the river's edge, he found himself fighting against strong eddies and whirling currents, hidden under the surface. Stray timbers stuck out of the water, jutting out of decayed buildings in the depths below, threatening to snag the canoe, even puncture clean through the delicate wooden hull. Panic swept over him as he wrestled with the paddle, heaving and turning the boat against the current, making for the shortest route to the riverbank.

The floating light closed in by the minute, and even through the inky murk of twilight and the spray of the river's tributaries, he could make out a silhouette, a shadow of something, of someone, buried within the flames.

Halvar was sweating and breathing deeply, using every ounce of strength to pull himself through the water and find shelter amongst the trees at the water's edge. With a burst of strength, he lunged for an overhanging branch and pulled himself, hand over hand, into the recess between two fallen trees. A huge rotting bough blocked one half of the river, so he sat in silence and waited for the light to come into view.

Seconds turned into minutes, and still he waited, not daring to move, barely willing to breathe. He could feel sweat trickling through his hair and into his eyes, warm through the cold of the rain, could hear the sound of his heart racing, each beat seeming to reverberate through the breathless quiet of night.

Suddenly, around the edge of the fallen tree, he saw a pale green glow appear, reflected in the water's surface. Steadily the aura of light grew larger and larger, until past the tree's tangled branches came a huge ball of glowing light, almost blinding in its brightness.

To Halvar's eyes it was pure, unadulterated fire, burning fiercely even through the rain, the very sight of it seeming to fill Halvar's entire being.

Big, broad flames swirled around a raft, crackling and spitting vibrant plumes of colour into the night. As it drew closer, he could see in the centre of the raft, cloaked by the inferno, a figure. It seemed to be kneeling; thick tree branches were propped up against it, glowing with fire, while bright embers smoldered beneath, undeterred by either wind or rain. The raft passed by close enough to see the figure's bowed head, its waxen face charred and empty in the green light.

Realisation dawned upon Halvar as an unconscious gasp escaped his lips: it was a funeral pyre. Then, as if to confirm his thoughts, the valley rumbled with a third thunderous noise, and the sky was illuminated by an explosion of light. Tendrils of lurid green spread through the sky, riding the shock wave of the explosion, illuminating an endless bank of clouds from the inside out. The valley bloomed with the rich colour, lighting up the cool, wet night; and then in an instant, it was gone. The colour vanished, the light withdrew, and the valley fell dark again.

Halvar sat motionless for a few minutes, watching the pyre as it was carried downriver, its bright flames illuminating the water as it passed by. As it reached the sharp curve of the river's nearest meander, he expected to see the pyre buffeted against stones and timbers, but instead of washing up against the river's edge, or snagging on the trees, the pyre followed the river's curve. Halvar watched as it slowly, carefully navigated the treacherous current by the guidance of some unseen hand, until the green glow of the pyre finally pulled out of sight.

Neither the warmth of the campfire nor the warmth of a few fingers of spirit were able to take the chill from Halvar's soul.

Six of the hunters sat gathered at the campsite, sheltered under a tent of plastic sheets suspended from a circle of trees and lashed together to keep off the worst of the rain. They sat on logs and stumps, watching the campfire's smoke plume upwards, channelled by the angled tarps towards a gap in the sheets, offset from the fire, where it vanished into the pitch black of the night sky above. Two small bottles went back and forth, the hunters sipping and sharing without a word passing between them.

Halvar supposed the crackle of the fire was a comfort to the others, but it reminded him too much of the pyre. He was grateful when Cirdan broke the silence.

"I don't see what we've to fear. The priests have to deal with their dead, just as we do. They're a little more theatrical, granted, but what else would you expect from a people that spend their days telling tall tales and dressing up in those green robes of theirs?"

"You shouldn't call them tall tales," said Brenna, as she wrung out the braids of her long brown hair. "There's truth in their stories. We've all seen what they can do."

"I haven't seen shit," said Cirdan. "All I've seen, all any of us have seen, is a funeral rite. We give our dead back to the earth, the coastal settlements give them back to the sea, and the green priests float them downriver to scare the life out of us. I'd wager that the priests themselves are sitting around a campfire, just like ours, drinking and laughing at the fearful hunters that cower and run at the sight of a funeral pyre."

There was a rumble of agreement from the group.

“Sitting around a green campfire...” began Brenna.

“If you were to catch fire child, you’d burn green, and that’s not magic, that’s just your cowardice catching aflame.”

Carr leaned across to Cirdan and plucked the bottle of spirit from his hands. “Cirdan has finished drinking for the evening.”

There was no resistance from Cirdan. He simply shook his head, sighed, and conjured another bottle of spirit from the inner pocket of his surcoat. “Sorry, Brenna. I mean no harm. All I meant to say is that we shouldn’t fear the priests. There are real terrors in this world, more deserving of our fear than any earthly woman or man. Drowning. Disease.” Cirdan gestured to Carr. “To tell the truth, every time I look at Carr I feel a shiver run through my body at the horrors old age can inflict upon us all.”

“Cirdan has finished drinking for every evening,” replied Carr.

“There’s hunger too,” continued Cirdan, “which we’ll all know too keenly if Halvar returns empty-handed from yet another hunt.” Cirdan’s stony expression lightened into a smirk.

At this, the gathered hunters laughed, and with the laughter came a palpable sense of relief that seemed to flow through the group. Everyone seemed to loosen, their faces brightened.

All but Halvar, who turned a bottle of spirit over in his hands and stared into the flames of the campfire. “The person on the raft, they were kneeling. Like they’d climbed aboard and set themselves aflame. How many people do you know that have died kneeling?”

“Aye lad,” said Cirdan, “not many. Not many at all. But there’s nothing to be gained from dwelling on this now. The darkness conjures up all manner of fears, leaving it only fit for sleeping and

screwing. And since you're all too ugly for the latter, I suggest it's time for the former."

"Wisdom at last," Carr said. "You'll take first watch tonight Halvar. Wake Cirdan from his snoring when the fire has burnt down."

Cirdan lead by example, and the remaining hunters soon retired to their hammocks, leaving Halvar alone with his thoughts, the crackle of the campfire and the steady patter of the rain. Cirdan had left a bottle of spirit out, either from forgetfulness or kindness, and Halvar sat sipping it as his companions quickly drifted off to sleep, the sounds of snoring soon joining in with the rain's ambiance.

After a while, he set to pacing the perimeter of the campsite. The forest, usually alive with a thousand sounds of movement and melody, was unusually still. He walked to the shadowy periphery of the camp, patrolling along the diffuse border where firelight fought darkness, and followed it down to the water's edge to check the moorings of their canoes.

The image of the pyre still burned bright in his mind. He knew the others had seen similar sights, had heard for themselves the low, concussive explosions that had rung around the valley. The idea that the elaborate ritual was a simple funeral rite held no truth to Halvar. He had seen the pyre for himself, could even now conjure up the image of the figure's few tufts of hair dancing as they burned, caught in the fire's twisting updrafts. There had been no peace in that ritual.

So what else could it be?

Over the years, the hunters had seen dozens of the priest's small camps scattered along the length of the river and high up in the hills, each rumoured to be a single spoke radiating out from a

central encampment, somewhere far to the north. It followed that the pyres were a deterrent, a warning sign to prevent roving hunters like Halvar from venturing too close.

Possible. But the more Halvar thought upon it, the stronger a single truth grew in his mind, coalescing around the image that refused to leave his memory. The pyre, with its huge, broad flames, and the explosion of light and colour that bloomed alongside, was a challenge. It radiated power and authority, an alien presence designed to haunt the hunters wherever they went. No matter how far they travelled, overland or by river, the green priests were always there, lurking on the periphery of everything.

As Halvar stared out at the dark expanse of the river, he felt strangely reassured by his conclusion. Intimidation, plain and simple. There were few motives more human than that.

As he paced along the river's edge, accompanied by the sounds of rain and lapping water, aching muscles and sore joints earned from the day's hunting seemed suddenly to reappear in his awareness. With the fire already burning low, he went to wake Cirdan for his turn of the watch, deep, guttural snores guiding him to the hunter's hammock. By the time he found his bed, exhaustion had washed over him. Halvar was asleep the moment his head hit the hammock.

Halvar woke to the sounds of the campsite being disassembled. From where he lay he could see clear through the camp, past the hammocks and makeshift benches that circled the dead campfire, and down to Brenna, at the water's edge, fishing out the dozen primitive cool boxes that contained their haul from the last few days of fishing, trapping and hunting.

Despite Halvar's mixed success, the other hunters had ensured that the boxes were packed full. Still, Brenna hauled them out of the cold water with ease, one in each hand as she carried them over to the waiting canoes.

Most of the campsite had already been torn down and stowed away into each boat's shallow hold, leaving only a handful of tarps hanging from the surrounding trees, including Halvar's own. The morning's rainfall was relatively light, and Brenna was yet to dress in the thick, hooded surcoat they all wore for travel on the river. Her hair had grown long. It was a rich chestnut brown, shaped with irregular kinks. Damp ringlets stuck to the sides of her face, framing high cheekbones and a pale complexion. Still watching from his hammock, Halvar was suddenly surprised by the firm hands that clamped onto his shoulders. Looking up, he saw Cirdan leaning over him.

"It's barely first light and I've already seen all the fawning I can handle for the day. Get up you layabout, your hammock won't pack itself."

With a squeeze of his shoulder, Cirdan strode away, leaving Halvar to climb out of bed to attend to his section of the camp. He busied himself with packing, stuffing his hammock and bedroll into their waterproof pouch, sparing only the occasional glance towards Brenna.

It wasn't long until the hunters were back on the water, six canoes drifting in loose formation downriver, and back towards Shelter. The melancholy of the night had been forgotten. The rain remained light, and overhead, the hunters caught brief flickers of sunlight through the clouds, god rays briefly piercing the thick cloud banks that formed the ceiling of their world.

With the good weather, they were half a day out from home; but with full bellies and a strong current behind them, Halvar reckoned they'd make better time than usual. Feeling relaxed, he let his canoe drift lazily across the river, slowing just enough to draw level with Cirdan at the back of the formation.

"If you want to impress Brenna lad, you'll need to stop pissing about on these hunting trips. She doesn't care much for fools. Why do you think she dislikes me so much?"

"I don't piss about!"

"Ah, don't worry," Cirdan offered in response, "she can't hear us this far back. Besides, she could be sat right beside us and she wouldn't pay us no mind, not when she's so intent on impressing Carr. How many more trips you reckon the old dogfish has in him?"

"More than you, at the rate you're going. There are only so many nights you can get blind drunk and keep being invited out on these trips."

Cirdan laughed without enthusiasm. "I've a head for drinking, is all. Takes more than a few paltry sips of spirit to help me relax. We can't all be lightweights like you."

Halvar watched the overgrown riverbank drift steadily past, scanning the thick trees and scrub without taking much of anything in.

"Brenna would be a good leader. She can hunt better than most, and she's smart," he mused. Glancing over, he saw Cirdan rolling his eyes.

“I just mean that... who else would do it? You’re drunk half the time, Colborn isn’t fit enough to lead the longer expeditions, Gunnar is almost as old as Carr, and I seem to have forgotten how to cast a spear.”

“Ah, don’t be so harsh on yourself. You came face to face with a pyre, you were off your game, anyone would be.”

“That happened after,” Halvar muttered to himself. “Still, you’ve changed your tone. What happened to ‘there are real terrors in this world’?”

“I mean what I said. But I’d still just as likely shit myself if a flaming corpse came barrelling down the river towards me.”

Up ahead, Halvar could see that Carr and Brenna had come to a stop before the next river bend. Gunnar and Colborn were pulling in to the riverbank beside them. Aware that he was lagging, Halvar paddled harder to close the distance, leaving Cirdan to his lazy approach.

The river narrowed considerably through the bend, and as they drew closer, they could see that the entire span of the river was blocked by a jumble of torn-up trees, dirt, lumber and brickwork.

They threaded their way through half a dozen mammoth timbers, jutting out of the water, before Halvar ran aground, his canoe catching on a submerged stone pile and scraping horribly to a stop. Brenna and Gunnar had already beached their canoes, while Colborn cleared space on the narrow bank to pull Carr’s boat from the river. Carr himself stood astride his canoe, staring up into the treeline.

Following his gaze, Halvar saw a broad clearing in the canopy. They knew this stretch of the river well, and where once an ancient building had stood, intertwined with branches and vines, there was now only a cleft in the treeline and a broad swathe of destruction that led down the cliffside and into the river.

Halvar called out to Carr. “That looked pretty secure the last time we passed by.”

“Nothing the Elders left behind is secure. Let’s just count ourselves lucky we weren’t beneath it when it fell.”

By the time all six canoes were successfully landed, Brenna had used her hatchet to cut a path through the forest at the river’s edge. The collapsed building had completely blocked a narrow stretch of the river, but thankfully, the obstruction extended no further than a few dozen lengths downstream. Two at a time, they took it in turns to drag each of the laden canoes through the clearing, before launching them back onto the river. Poised to push out onto the water, Carr turned to speak to Halvar.

“On second thoughts, we’d best get the guild out here to clear this up. I don’t suppose we’ll be back here for a long while, but still. This mess will only worsen over time. It seems foolish to relinquish a clear stretch of river so easily.”

At Carr’s behest, Halvar pulled out the expedition ledger from the bundle of bags in his canoe, and using the ink stick he kept safely stowed in the deepest pocket of his surcoat, scratched out a simple map onto the fine birch bark pages, a writhing mass of rivers and streams, winding their way through the countryside and, pausing to consider his bearings, a thick black cross to denote where the house had fallen.

Tucking the book securely into his pack, he pushed Carr's canoe out towards the centre of the river, before sliding his own boat out into the shallows and deftly hopping aboard.

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