

> ASHTALES _

STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE

> CONTRIBUTORS

NIGEL WILLITS

DENIS BELL

RYAN LAW

PHILLIP BERRY

> MONTHLY SERIAL // CHAPTER THREE

THE GREEN PRIEST CONTINUES

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ASH TALES

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INTRODUCTION

This month's magazine contains four short stories and the next chapter of *The Green Priest*.

In **Who Am I?**, by Nigel Willits, men confined to a concrete facility begin asking questions about who they are and why they are there.

Red Dawn, by Denis Bell, follows people fleeing north as the world falls apart, hoping a little more distance will keep them safe.

My story, **Twenty-Seven Minutes**, follows a scientist who has been exposed to a deadly pathogen and must decide what to do with his remaining time.

In **The Last Cherry Orchard**, by Phillip Berry, the keeper of an orchard on a ruined planet faces the end of the work his family has continued for generations.

Our monthly serial continues with **Chapter Three of The Green Priest**. Halvar and Brenna are sent to investigate trouble at Shelter's oyster beds, but decide to travel beyond the settlement's boundaries.

If you'd like to send us a story, you'll find the submission guidelines at the end of the magazine.

Thanks for reading,

Ryan

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ENTRY // 01

WHO AM I?

AUTHOR Nigel Willits

TYPE AI / ROBOTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nigel Willits writes short fiction in various genres and contributes book reviews to the Historical Novels Review.

A weary man shuffles along a corridor, one of a line of weary shuffling men. The corridor is made of rough concrete and it is cold. Harsh light gives the men's skin an unhealthy pallor. They are dressed identically in simple garments of coarse grey fabric. No words are spoken. Like the others, the man stares mindlessly at his bare feet. He is vaguely aware of painful soles caused by the rough concrete floor, but of little else.

The line of weary men files into a room with tables and benches. They sit in an orderly manner. In front of each is a bowl and spoon, and each bowl contains a puddle of gritty brown sludge. The sludge is nutritious but no consideration has been given to its taste or appearance. It matters not as the men do not possess an aesthetic capacity. The food is drugged to maintain their compliance.

Like his fellows, the man raises his spoon and eats methodically. The only sounds are that of spoon on bowl and of perfunctory mastication. When a voice is heard from one of the other tables, the man does not react, apparently unaware of the utterance. It is a question, a hesitant despairing question. The speaker sounds like he has not spoken for a long time and that the answer is of great importance to him.

‘Who ... who ... who am I?’

There is no response. The noise of eating continues unabated.

‘Who am I?’ the speaker asks again, this time a hint of anger in his tone. Still no response. The speaker rises to his feet, breathing heavily. He backs against the nearest wall, clutching his spoon before him like a weapon. His staring eyes dart around as if anticipating danger. ‘Who am I?’ he demands for a third time, chest heaving in the grip of vertiginous panic.

The rest of the men finish their meal with no apparent reaction to their fellow's identity crisis. In unison, they rise and shuffle out of the room. The increasingly hysterical speaker remains where he is. He will face his fate alone, without witnesses. The air beside him shimmers and a vague outline begins to materialize. He does not know who or what the apparition is, but he knows on some instinctive level that there is reason to be afraid.

A man shuffles along a harshly lit concrete corridor, in a line of drably clad men now fewer by one. As before, he stares at his bare feet, vaguely aware of painful abrasion to his soles. A fleeting image of the panic-stricken speaker returns to him, voicing the question again: 'Who am I?' But it sparks no associated thoughts in his mind and is soon replaced by customary blankness.

Along with the rest, the man goes into another concrete room. It contains rows of identical booths. He enters one of the booths and sits on a stool. Before him at head-height is a display screen and at his fingertips a keypad. Through a headset, which he places over his ears, he hears a series of oscillating tones. His fingers move over the keypad in response, his brain translating autonomically, without the need for conscious intervention. The screen comes to life and shows line after line of binary code. For hours, the men remain in their booths, uncomprehending nodes in a network of integrated brains and computers, until one of them is seized by a fit of uncontrollable muscular spasms. His body jerks and twitches. His fingers tap the keys in an unorthodox sequence. On every screen in the room, the words "Who am I?" appear in the midst of ones and zeroes. Another man begins to jerk and twitch like the first. This time each screen displays the words "Why am I here?"

The screens go blank and the aural tones cease. Simultaneously, the men stand up and file out of the room, apart from the two convulsing individuals who remain twitching in their booths. Beside them, the air shimmers and a vague form begins to materialize.

The man shuffles along a cold concrete corridor, his line of weary men now three fewer than before. Two images flash through his mind: the panic-stricken man with the spoon crying ‘Who am I?’ and the words “Why am I here?” printed on a screen. The images are soon dispelled by his awareness of painful abrasion. He looks down at his bare feet and observes that the rough floor of the corridor slopes from either side into a narrow central groove. This runnel holds his attention until they reach another room. Without hesitation, the men fan out and lie on rows of hard pallet beds that fill the space. They lapse into insensibility when the harsh light dims.

Sometime later, the man awakes. One of the others is talking in his sleep. ‘Who am I?’ the sleeper asks. His tone is resigned, as if he does not expect an answer. ‘Why am I here?’ he continues without hope.

Another sleeper takes up the refrain. Like ripples in a swamp, the questions radiate through the dormitory until a dozen men are repeating the same words over and over again, their dawning sense of self demanding answers. In the mind of the man who listens, those fundamental questions become irresistible. He too is about to open his mouth and ask aloud when he notices the air shimmering. A shadowy apparition begins to materialize, but in the dim light he can make out no detail of the overseer. The

spoken questions cease abruptly and the askers' bodies appear to melt, becoming a gelatinous liquid that drips onto the sloping floor and flows towards a central drain-hole down which it disappears. The overseer fades back to invisibility, task accomplished.

For the rest of the sleep period, the man dares not close his eyes. He knows that once asleep he might talk aloud as the others did and, like them, he will be liquidated. He feels desire, the desire to remain alive.

A familiar sound of shuffling feet approaches the doorway. Several men enter and lie on the vacant beds, restoring the company to its original complement. A nearby cough draws the man's attention. He turns and sees that his neighbour in the adjacent bed is also awake. They look into each other's eyes and silently share their predicament.

The man shuffles along a rough concrete corridor, weary from lack of sleep. Instead of looking at his painful bare feet, he stares at the back of the man in front, his dormitory neighbour. Parts of the other man's body twitch spasmodically, as if struggling against restraints. Before they reach the eating-room, the twitching man is overwhelmed by questions burning in his nascent mind. He turns to face the first man.

'Who am I?' he yearns, emotion writhing across his face. He grabs hold of the first man's clothes and shakes him violently. 'Why am I here?'

Before the first man can react, however, he is knocked to the ground by the men behind, who continue shuffling forward in line. They seem unaware of anything untoward. The twitching man is on his knees now, sobbing, and the overseer begins to materialize beside him. The first man, paralysed with fear, stays lying on the floor, not daring to look up. He hears his neighbour's sobbing cease and then sees viscous liquid trickle past his feet towards the gutter in the centre of the corridor. The overseer's shadow falls across him then and, as he feels his newborn consciousness begin to dissolve along with his body, he raises his eyes to see who or what is doing this to him, feeling the urge to appeal against his fate. And in those final moments of awareness, he now recognises the overseer and a flood of unblocked memory returns, memories that are the stuff of nightmare. 'We allowed it to take control,' he realizes. 'We chose to believe what it told us.'

Weary men shuffle in line along a cold concrete corridor. They stare mindlessly at their bare feet, vaguely aware of pain, but of little else...



ENTRY // 02

RED DAWN

AUTHOR Denis Bell

TYPE SLOW SOCIETAL COLLAPSE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denis Bell is a mathematics professor and writer, born in London, England and now living halfway up a Smoky Mountain in Georgia, USA. His work has been published in many places, including The Maine Review, Literary Orphans, Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine (UK), Prague Revue (Czech Republic) and Lotus-Eater (Italy). A collection of his short and flash fiction, *A Box of Dreams*, was published by Spartan Press, Kansas City in 2022.

Huge great flashes and weird red things and a moon roughly the size of Alaska. They were driving north when the sky finally broke open and poured down its wrath upon humanity. Past burned-out farms with dead sheep and trees strung with schoolteachers and grey-haired country cops bloating in the midnight sun. Past abandoned mission houses adorned with skulls and crossbones. Past a pick-up truck with the windows blown out and bumper stickers touting GUNS FOR JESUS and bed strewn with Rolex watches and gold chains. Frantic young couples with box springs in tow and crates of Apple Jacks and bottles of formula fermenting in cheap foam coolers. Headed for Crapsville, North Dakota. As though another 250 miles of I-65 and ten stinking degrees of cool would save their babies. The self-styled KINGS OF THE ROAD with their cases of Miller Lite and their designer boots and their NRA hats (one has on his tee shirt from a previous life that reads HI I'M LESTER WELCOME TO WALMART) and their barrels of suspicious-looking salt pork and their ragamuffin gaggle of purloined teenage brides with swollen bellies and lifeless eyes. Aunt Fannie and Uncle Joe, looking to add another few to the fifty or so they have shared together. Sinners and saints and State Attorney Carly Sue with her demented husband and her two strung-out kids. Me, I stayed home, like the old coot in that movie about Mount Saint Helens. With a postcard from mom and a book of poems.



ENTRY // 03

TWENTY-SEVEN MINUTES

AUTHOR **Ryan Law**

TYPE **BIOTECH MUTATION**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Law is the founder and editor of Ash Tales, creator and host of the Ash Tales podcast, and author of *The Rainmaker Writings*. He writes post-apocalyptic fiction from the UK, with a particular interest in drowned worlds, nuclear legacies, and the people who endure them.

In this line of work, you think about death every day. You have to. You sign the waivers and the non-disclosures, you take out the insurance policies and attend the procedural briefings. Every day is another opportunity to die. The risk is high. We signed on for this.

You also have to be an asshole. That's my own private theory, but it fits with everything I've seen working here over the past fifteen years. There are a million ways to put our skills to better use. You could work in vaccinology, join an NGO, specialize in regenerative medicine, teach or tutor or test. From a moral and ethical standpoint, anything—anything at all—would be preferable to this line of work. You have to be a risk-seeker, a narcissist and a misanthrope to stomach this job. I don't mean that in a judgmental way. We all exist somewhere on the asshole-to-not-asshole spectrum, and this job attracts people at one particular end. I came to peace with that a long time ago.

I am sealed in the experiment room. A remote alarm has triggered in a monitoring station a hundred miles distant. On the balance of probability, there's a good chance that the exposure is routine, unserious, just another precaution. Only I know different. I take my mask off (no point being uncomfortable now) and thumb the intercom for ten seconds until it's answered. False alarm, I explain. I answer the questions that follow, the same answers I've given a hundred times before, but the first time they've failed to be true.

Twenty-seven minutes.

Assuming that my napkin math about aerosol generation, dispersion and body weight are half decent (they usually are). I could round to a half-hour, but I didn't spend half my life studying to tolerate that kind of imprecision.

Twenty-seven minutes remaining.

It's all relative of course. Twenty-seven minutes could be an eternity. The worst pain you've ever experienced, your body wracked with spasms, your hands balled so tight that the cramp is almost a relief from the agony. The best sex you've ever had, slow and unhurried. The slow, empty moments as you stare down a sterile corridor and wait for the oncologist to come back with the results.

Twenty-seven minutes. It's not an eternity today, not by any means. Today, twenty-seven minutes is a heartbeat, a single breath, a momentary flash of light that barely registers in the eye. Nothing worthwhile is possible within the next twenty-seven minutes. No heart-warming resolution, no starry-eyed reunion. It's obvious, inescapable, a plain fact of reality. After all, there aren't really that many choices in a situation like this, are there?

My parents live hours away, on a good day, and today is not a good day. It's Christmas Eve. The roads are already swollen and congested with revellers, distant relatives and the homesick. My car is a piece of shit, so no heroic fantasies of powering down the motorway in time for a final hug from mum and a firm grasp of the shoulder from dad. Especially not since the dementia. The mum and dad that live in my mind's eye no longer even exist.

I can feel my throat swelling. It's probably psychosomatic, but then again, we weren't likely to document every side effect, were we?

There's Chloe. I still think about her every day, but not in a good way. Her memory is like a lingering taste of bile, edging its way up my throat, an unpleasant by-product of something once enjoyed,

and now regretted. I'm probably still in love with her. It doesn't matter.

I could phone someone, some friend, some distant family member, assuming I made my way back to the locker room. But how would that call go? "Hey, how are the kids that I don't care about? I regret the way our lives diverged and I wish we could go back to a decade ago. By the way, I'm dying. Hope to see you at the funeral."

As for the hospital... well, safe to say there's nothing the hospital can do. I am too good at my job.

Twenty-seven minutes.

This is before I factor in the rigmarole of cleanroom egress, the decontamination procedures, the man traps and safety locks. There are alarms to decommission, failsafes to override. I'm sure I could do it, but it would take time I don't have.

No. Twenty-seven minutes, and they will be spent here.

Five minutes I've been standing here, five minutes at least. Just thinking.

Twenty-two minutes then.

There is one possibility, I realise, and the longer I dwell on it, the more appealing it becomes. I work through the possibilities, mentally revisiting every procedural document I'd ever read, every seminar and safety drill, every TV show and pulp fiction novel and half-baked fantasy I'd ever had while working twelve hour shifts in the lab.

None of them offer any appealing outcome beyond... this.

And it's decided. In an instant. No real deliberation required. Almost pre-meditated, it seems, something my subconscious had been desperate to do all along. That's how decisions always work, a flash of intuition revealing the only possible course of action, and then a series of post hoc justifications designed to make it feel like every decision receives a fair hearing. It doesn't. There are no fair hearings to be found.

Nineteen minutes.

The alarm stops, turned off at some distant control panel. The door unlocks into the staging room. I ignore the decontamination shower and the disposal chute, and walk straight to the specimen cabinet to take out the one remaining vial. It contains a clear fluid, like drops of condensed water. Precious cargo now.

My hands are shaking, but it's not from anxiety, from nerves—those are long gone—but from the exposure, as the pathogen works its way into the myelin sheathes of the nerves scaffolding the hands. Always the hands first, progressing from the peripheral systems inwards.

I walk into the men's bathroom and kick the stall door open. It ricochets on the wall and comes clean off its hinges. It wasn't locked in the first place, but it felt good. I hesitate above the toilet bowl. I only have one chance at this. The deadline weighs heavy on me for a moment, just a moment, and I doubt myself. With good reason.

The water here is heavily treated, I realise, and these little fellas do not survive well in contact with the myriad filters, bleaches and ultraviolet treatments they'd need to navigate. It was a stupid impulse. I was swayed by the idea of death by toilet. Impulse is always to be resisted. Better to let cold, hard logic be my guide.

The air is a different matter, and frankly, always the weak link in a high-grade lab like this. HEPA filters are a big con. With a little extra consideration, the choice is obvious, especially given how I was exposed.

A dimming of lights. The locking mechanism on the centrifuge failing to fully engage. Aerosols generated by the rotation, imperceptible until the motor stops and you see the vial sitting askew, the viscous liquids already tracing a path over the rim of the tube.

Serious, but not existential, as long as you were wearing the full protective get-up. Which, of course, I wasn't. You run the same procedure over and over, you get comfortable with the risk, you relax. It shouldn't have been possible anyway. I could introspect and blame the failure on my complacency, but really, why the fuck was there a power cut in a level four lab?

Fourteen minutes.

Besides, it doesn't matter how it happened. Equipment failure, poor maintenance, simple oversight, deliberate sabotage, act of god, or good old-fashioned complacency, the outcome is the same. And I'm good enough at my job to know that there is no doubt here, no chance that I eked through without harm. Scientists rarely deal in certainty, so it pays to believe them when they do.

I'm sure the tribunal will apportion their share of blame, make me sound like a real drooling idiot. They always do. They're charades, these tribunals, a way for an illegitimate industry to stay legal by routinely throwing the failures under the bus.

I return to the staging room. The door to the central aisle is locked. I walk to the store cupboard and rummage through a pile of tools until I find the flat-bladed screwdriver I know resides

there. I force the flat edge through the door seal and jimmy it open. It is easier than it should be. It isn't the first time.

I walk to the control room. I drag the stool over to console and stand on it, wobbling.

I feel a low-grade cramp in my calf muscle, spreading, growing, the fibers succumbing to the lactic acid build-up one-by-one. I have a few minutes until they stop working.

I try to unscrew the vent cover but my hands are shaking too much. To hell with this. I punch the panel, over and over, until it's a concave mess that I can pull outwards and leave hanging from a single desperate screw. My hands are cut and bloodied, but I can barely feel them. I reach into the vent as far as arm will allow me. Further, my hand feeling for where the vent turns through ninety degrees and begins its snaking journey to the outside.

I withdraw, pull the vial from my pocket and reach back into the vent. I lean as far as I can, stretching my arm to its limit before crushing the delicate glass in my hand. I let the wet splinters fall into the vent's unseen darkness. My legs buckle and I fall heavily from the stool, thudding off the console and hitting the ground.

Twenty minutes elapsed, maybe? I could have timed it, could have been more precise. But my intuition feels good. The progression seems correct. This is not my first rodeo.

I pull myself up, slowly, painfully. My joints feel like they're seizing in place, my nerves feel aflame, a dozen vivid sensations that the calculating part of my brain dreams distantly of noting down and submitting to a journal. I slump onto the console. I log in with a palsied hand, relying on muscle memory more than sight. I work through the menus and sub-menus, ever deeper, until I find the systems responsible for ventilation and, more

importantly, purging. I override half a dozen warnings. No hesitation. Hesitation is for amateurs. There is a roaring sound from somewhere distant and muffled, and it's done. I have vented the lab, fully, completely.

I scroll back through the menus until I find the weather interface. It wouldn't have changed my decision, but it's gratifying to see the strong northeast wind.

I am a lucky man. I vomit blood onto my hands. Four minutes.

Small red lights flicker on, one by one, in a row across the dashboard. The alarms are sounding now, the warning lights illuminating the room. The red feels almost festive. I watch the progress on the dashboard. It's just numbers on a screen, but in my mind's eye I can see the wind blowing across the fields and through the wooded bank that surrounds the lab, I can trace the billowing pathogen as its miasmic form spreads through the streets and housing estates, into the city. I trace the projection in front of my face with a shaking finger.

I try to breathe but I can't. Paralysis combined with pleural effusion, the most common cause of death. Right on schedule.

Twenty-seven minutes. Just enough time to take you all with me.



ENTRY // 04

THE LAST CHERRY ORCHARD

AUTHOR Phillip Berry TYPE CLIMATE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phillip Berry is the author of *The Last Cherry Orchard*, published on Ash Tales in August 2019.

Bastian sat heavily in the angle formed by tree trunk and crust. He pushed a hand through the topsoil, and cried at the unnatural chemical balance revealed in the narrow, pigmented furrows. His index finger curled around a root and lifted it to the surface; it glistened, its dominant element unused to light and immune to oxidation. Bastian pressed his head against the solid pillar at his back. There was no give. These trees, planted by a nameless ancestor on the whim of a romantic emperor, were now hardened to nature.

Bastian watched the sun's leading edge appear on a cloudless horizon. The first rays rippled over the wasted meadows and quiet seas that surrounded the last cherry orchard. Their energy curled the meagre covering of grass (un-watered for several days now), as they would soon curl the hairs on Bastian's bare legs. Nearby, in the tool hut, hung the ungainly suit and suffocating helmet that he had worn without fail for thirty years. Not today. He wanted this.

The romantic emperor's descendants had not shared the founder's vision, but for a millennium they ensured the orchard's survival with allowances and exemptions. These policies maintained a bustling paradise of fragrant aromas, hovering cargo ships and healthy trade. With the onset of political decline and a change in tastes, the fruit was no longer collected.

Bastian's great-great-grandfather had no choice but to plough it back into the land. This unnatural cycle resulted in unusual concentrations of trace titanium, such that the xylem developed a metal lining and the wood beneath the bark became permanently altered.

When the garden planet's orbital shield was finally removed by a bankrupt minor emperor desperate for resources, atmospheric conditions forced further adaptation: copper half-shells began to

grow from buds adjacent to each succulent cherry, protecting them from the sun's unfiltered power.

The rising sun touched Bastian's dirty feet. For a minute, the heat was pleasant. A light breeze passed through the orchard. Bastian held the root between finger and thumb. He sensed a trembling. They knew. Eyeless and nerveless, the trees knew that their keeper and carer had omitted to activate the wall on the windward hill.

A century ago the victors of the last war returned with deliberate vengeance to destroy the romantic line's cultural legacy. The land, razed of great temples, forests and cities, offered no impediment to the winds that built naturally over the continental plain. The effects of the resulting sirocco began to be felt in the surviving orchard (which the soldiers had overlooked, so insignificant had it become). In late afternoon, without fail, a tight column of air leapt from the mainland to the fruiterers' archipelago. The trees on the perimeter bowed to its force, and their bark was peeled away.

Bastian's father successfully reduced the wind's peak intensity by building a wall of many sections mounted on hydraulic pivots which turned to face the blast when the hour came. Come the evening, each section would rotate to admit the trailing winds that carried essential moisture.

Today the sirocco would skim the sea, hop the isthmus, hug the hills and pass between the wall's oblivious sections without pause. It would hit the orchard and carry away the bark and leaves desiccated blanched by a day under the sun. Only the gleaming, metallic skeletons, suddenly revealed, would remain.

The root stopped trembling. Bastian felt sure the trees shared his vision. It was time to stop pretending. Gnarled and grey, their fruit had become tough of late. Flashes of titanium showed where birds had pecked at weak spots.

His thighs burned now. Bastian knew his own dehydrated mass would join the detritus. When the orchard of wire was discovered hundreds or thousands of years from now, they would not know his name.

He lifted his face to the strengthening rays and let them sink in.



CHAPTER // 03

THE GREEN PRIEST

AUTHOR **Ryan Law**

TYPE **THE RAINMAKER WRITINGS**

FROM THE SERIAL

Halvar and Brenna venture beyond Shelter's boundaries in Chapter Three of Ryan Law's *The Green Priest*. The serial began in August; Chapter Two appeared in September.

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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“If their maps are to be believed, the Elders scoured the physical world of its secrets, exploring every rugged inch of coastline, every shadowed recess of forest, scaling the tallest peaks of every mountain-range and spanning the broadest reaches of ocean.

In response to this violation, it seems the world has retreated back, cowering itself beneath thick banks of cloud, churning rivers, and impenetrable stands of thicket and oak.

It’s a humbling experience to compare our crude charcoal renderings of game trails and trade routes to these pictures of cities and countries, even continents entire. The world has reclaimed its secrets. I hope we’ll never again have the hubris to claim mastery over them.”

—Excerpt from Kiara’s notebook, volume two.

The following days were days of rest for Halvar. With Cirdan sent to patrol the riverways surrounding Shelter for any sign of encroaching bandits, or more mundane cases of unapproved fishing and hunting, Halvar spent his mornings in the lazy solitude of his cabin, drinking tea and rifling through the assignments Kiara had provided. They were rote chores, copying faded diagrams and maps onto clear parchment, and despite the novelty of a few days away from the river, he soon found himself eager to embark on his next hunt.

Kiara would call upon him for formal scribe training every afternoon, and though the usual nagging pains in his shoulders and back had disappeared with a few days of inactivity, it was now his hand—and his mind—that felt in need of rest.

Still, he enjoyed his lessons with Kiara. Her chamber was beautifully light and airy, a welcome contrast to the hot, stuffy atmosphere that permeated the rest of Shelter, and he enjoyed staring out over the rain-drenched lowlands, cloud-wrapped peaks and swollen rivers that made up the landscape surrounding Shelter. Kiara's interest in him was also the closest thing to maternal affection Halvar had known, and though he could barely remember either of his parents—he was an orphan, like so many in Shelter—he felt something he had begun to recognise as love towards the scribe. Kiara had never had children, nor, as far as Halvar could tell, felt any desire to do so. He supposed Shelter was all the richer for it, as Kiara's quiet guidance and vast wealth of knowledge had helped turn the settlement into a place of safety and relative plenty.

Memories of the earliest days of his life were scarce, but they still conjured powerful, unwanted feelings, fragments of a story that he took no pleasure in reliving. Strange figures wading endlessly through a mire of brackish water and blood. Sleeping amidst a tangle of arms and legs in a small hollow shaped in the wet earth. Coldness, darkness, and crying, more crying than he could bear. Kiara's chamber was an antidote to those suffocating memories, like cool, clear water that rinsed the darkness from his soul.

Despite his relationship with Kiara, Halvar's tuition was progressing slowly. He enjoyed the deliberate, mindful practice of copying individual characters, a simple action he could master by sheer repetition. Reading he found far harder. Though he could write most of the alphabet after only a few sessions of tuition, and dismantle words into their component symbols after a dozen or so more, he was still unable to translate written words into coherent spoken sentences. Thankfully, his duties as hunting scribe were limited largely to sketching, and his teacher didn't seem overly

troubled by his rate of progression. If anything, Halvar suspected that Kiara enjoyed his company. Certainly, she'd kept him close at hand in the days after the two traders had departed the settlement.

Three days passed in this way, with Halvar relaxing, reflecting and writing, with the fourth morning demanding a different ritual altogether—it was time for another hunt.

Halvar's day began with the preparations expected of every hunter, from scribe to hunt master. Immediately after waking, he laboured up the ladder and sat, cross-legged, on the roof of his house, with long spear, short spear and axe placed before him. He worked rapeseed oil into the shaft of each spear, using an old rag to massage the fluid into the grain. He rubbed more and more oil into the thirsty wood, until it had darkened to a deep burnished brown, glistening even under the cavern's faint light. Next, he lubricated the metal spearhead of each weapon with a coat of thick, black grease. After he'd cleaned the last of the oil and grease from his hands with a basin of warm water and a small bar of soap, he tended to his pack, rolling and unrolling his sleeping bag to check for any hint of moisture or mildew, and testing each seam of his rucksack for water-tightness. Satisfied, he stacked his supplies into a tidy pile by the front door and set out to visit Carr in the small room across the cavern that served the hunters for a guildhall.

The wind blew a gale outside, forcing smoke from the great chimney back into the cavern, filling the air with smog and the scent of burning wood. Still, Halvar could smell Carr's wizened dog from halfway across the cavern, and as he rounded the corner to enter the guildhall, he was met by the grizzled creature. It leapt

up with all the agility arthritic limbs could muster, and nuzzled its head into the fabric of Halvar's poncho, letting out a friendly, wheezing rumble as it did.

"When you're done fussing over that old thing, I'd like to talk to you." Carr was standing in the doorway of the guildhall. He turned and disappeared back into the room, leaving Halvar to give the ancient dog a final scratch under the chin, before following Carr inside.

The two largest of the room's irregular walls were lined with wooden boards, and pinned to them were dozens of sketches of the rivers and hillsides surrounding Shelter. Most were simple maps, marking safe routes of passage for each of the guilds that relied on the river for transport, highlighting the broadest and deepest of the waterways for the huge, lumbering trade barges to use, shallow winding passages for the hunters to travel fast and unhindered in their nimble canoes, and calling attention to those routes most in need of maintenance and clearing by the woodsmen's guild. A small corner of one of the boards was dedicated to Halvar's amateur sketches, while the others were given over to the practised artistry of his predecessors, hunting scribes long forgotten.

Ordinarily, on the morning of a hunt, the entirety of the hunting guild would be crammed into the confines of the guildhall, perhaps draining the last dregs of their tea and listening to Carr talk through the itinerary for their trip. Today, the chairs sat empty.

"Different plan today," Carr began. "I'm sending Colborn and Gunnar out to join Cirdan in the Western reaches. There was a landslide on the main route through to the coastal villages," he gestured to one of the charcoal drawings, "and the woodsmen

won't open it until we've scouted and secured the surrounding area. In short, we're sticking to the overground. No-one knows that stretch of land better than Cirdan, much as it pains me to say it, and we don't need everyone trekking up that way. I'm staying here to meet with a delegation from Morbach. We're to petition them to open the Southern fishing grounds to us. They've fewer people than us, and it makes no sense for them to keep such fertile water to themselves."

"I can't imagine they'll be happy with the idea. They've never been open to it before."

An unfamiliar frustration creased Carr's face. "No. But this time we're not asking. I won't leave us dependent on an over-fished stretch of the river, especially with growing reports of banditry and...sorcery." Carr paused, seeming unsure of himself.

Halvar couldn't recall a single occasion when the man had willingly broached the topic of sorcery—the word simply wasn't in the man's lexicon. He was a fiercely smart man, but his was a simple, practical intelligence. He believed in the truth of his eyes and the labours of his hands. Speculation—least of all about magic—was not in his nature.

"Trade tariffs," he said simply. "They depend on us for charcoal, to keep their hearths warm and their stew pots bubbling. If they don't share their stretch of river, we'll price it out of their reach. It's a cruel thing to do, perhaps—but no. We'll share custody of that river by nightfall, or they'll be in trouble when the weather turns."

Halvar sat silent, listening to Carr.

"And that leaves you," he continued. "You're to travel with Brenna to the oyster beds. We've had broodstock dying, and it looks like the water quality has turned. You're to find the problem and put a

stop to it. If you've time left over, you're to turn a hand to dredging with the others."

Disbelief reared in Halvar's mind. Dredging? He was a hunter, and a scribe to boot. "I'm not wasting my time—"

"You'll waste nothing boy." Carr's tone brokered no disagreement. "I have enough worries without your bellyaching. Find Brenna and leave through the Northern tunnels by second bell. I'll talk to you when you're back."

Halvar trudged slowly back towards his house, Carr's dog trotting behind him. Like Kiara's out-of-character interaction with the two traders, Alfir and Emil, his meeting with Carr represented a wild deviation from the man's normal temperament, so much so that he wasn't sure how to begin dissecting the conversation. Halvar had never seen the pragmatic and level-headed hunt master so flustered before. He seemed ready to risk their relationship with Morbach, their closest neighbour and arguably their closest ally, over a decades' old argument that had all but been forgotten. Their reluctance to share fishing rights was something of a sore spot, particularly for Shelter's older residents, but was it worth levying such heavy costs on them? Worst of all was the kick-in-the-gut that came with his oyster bed demotion. That was busywork, pure and simple, and Halvar couldn't shake the feeling of being punished. But if he was being punished, then what of Brenna? The star of their hunting troupe, near enough Carr's own daughter. Had she somehow fallen afoul of the man too? Unlikely.

When he reached his house, Halvar shooed the dog away and slipped inside. He saw the pile of hunting supplies stowed by the door and felt suddenly purposeless, and slighted.

The oyster beds?

He stood in the darkness for a while, his mood growing more foul by the moment, until frustration spurred him towards an impetuous, self-destructive course of action. He retrieved one of Cirdan's many bottles of spirit, this one tucked behind the water cistern, and took a long, deliberate swig.

Alcohol worsened matters. Instead of re-packing for the shorter journey to the oyster beds and heading out to meet Brenna, he sat in the cool dark of the room and wallowed in self pity, positing and refuting as many explanations as he could muster, growing steadily drunker all the while.

Carr was punishing him for spending so much time practising his scribing, and so little on his hunting.

Unlikely—it was Carr that had suggested he take on the extra responsibility.

He was spending too much time with Cirdan, and Carr wanted to separate the two, to prevent Cirdan's bad habits from rubbing off on Halvar.

A possibility, but a few days apart would make no difference if the two still shared a room together. Besides, Halvar hadn't picked up any of Cirdan's bad habits. He looked at the empty bottle in his hands and barked a humourless laugh into the empty room. He tossed the bottle onto his bed.

Most appealing, but least likely of all: Brenna had confided in Carr her love for Halvar. Carr was playing the role of matchmaker.

Halvar laughed again at this last idea. He levered himself upright and wobbled as he climbed up the ladder to the roof, his drunken mind still racing with elaborate justifications. As he climbed the handful of rungs, a sense of shame nagged at the back of his mind,

shame for having taken the news so badly, like a small child, shame at having been demoted at all, for not living up to Carr's ideal, shame for feeling so drunk from such a small amount of spirit. Cirdan made drinking look far easier than it actually was.

Despite the early hour, Halvar already felt tired to his bones, and after laying down to rest, it was only a matter of minutes until he was asleep on the warm clay of his roof.

"They say roommates grow to look alike. Cirdan, you look the spitting image of our young Halvar."

The voice stirred Halvar from a troubled sleep. He'd fallen asleep still wearing his thick woollen poncho. He felt drenched with sweat, and his mouth was dry as limestone and tasted just as chalky. Opening his eyes, he saw a woman standing over him. "What time is it?"

"Just past second bell. Not even lunch yet, which makes this—" she gestured to Halvar, sprawled out on his back, "—all the more puzzling. I hadn't taken you for a drinker."

"I'm not. Well, not normally, but granted, I—why are you here?"

"I came calling on you. An adventure of intrigue, drama and dredging through sludge awaits us at the oyster beds. I didn't know why Carr wanted me to go, but then I found you. It seems he wants me to babysit you."

Halvar squinted up at Brenna. He recognised the expression that greeted him, quiet, self-assured satisfaction at finding her guild mate so dishevelled. There was nothing malicious in her reaction, he suspected. She simply couldn't contain her happiness at finding

a reasonable explanation for being sent to the oyster beds. She wasn't being punished, her expression suggested, she was looking after poor Halvar.

Frustration boiled beneath Halvar's clammy skin. "Babysitting or not, a punishment is a punishment, all the same," he said. He regretted the outburst as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

Brenna's face fell instantly. "We've been ordered to go. I follow orders. I'm leaving now." She turned and climbed back down the ladder, leaving Halvar alone on the rooftop.

Exasperated, he closed his eyes again. He'd worsened the situation. What happened next? Did he swallow his pride and take on the thankless task he'd been given? Should he hole up here, and refuse to help until he'd been given an explanation for the slight?

As he fought to control a confusing tangle of emotions, he realised that beneath the maelstrom of feelings, a rock-hard resolve had formed, unbidden and unexpected.

He wasn't going to the oyster beds. He was going to do his job, his real job. He was going to scout out new hunting grounds, discover rich, untapped waters, and come back to Carr with a solution to his problem: there would be no need for conflict with Morbach. He would persuade Brenna to go with him, and he would make it up to her with actions, not words.

The idea took root in his mind so firmly that he suspected he was still drunk, but the realisation did nothing to diminish the appeal of the idea. It was perfect. Wiping the sweat from his brow he clambered to his feet, refastened his poncho around him, and raced down the ladder to catch up to Brenna.

The settlement had slowly busied as the hours ticked closer to midday. As he walked past the great fire pit at the centre of the cavern, the air became filled with the sounds of the bawdy charcoal makers, shouting and cursing as they went about their hot, heavy work. He walked past the fletcher chastising her young apprentice, a slight girl called Charice with a shock of messy blond hair, her smock plastered in white goose feathers. At the entrance to the Northern tunnel, he passed the woodsmen's guild, returning from one of the far reaches of the tunnel system, smiling and laughing, seemingly immune to the risks of their work. He caught a glimpse of Brenna disappearing into the tunnel and raced to catch her.

Brenna proved surprisingly easy to persuade. Pride had always been the cornerstone of her emotions, and despite an unwavering loyalty to Carr, her desire to impress the other hunters quickly won out. She would never shower herself with praise babysitting her errant friend and raking through feet of silted riverbeds—but striking out, unbidden, and securing rich new hunting grounds, bolstering the settlement's supplies and solving a potential diplomatic disaster? That was a story Brenna was keen to be part of, even if it meant disobeying—at least, technically disobeying—Carr.

“I’ll be in charge of the trip. I’m a better hunter, and you’ll need to focus on mapping out the route once we’ve found somewhere worthwhile.”

“I can live with that,” said Halvar.

“I even have an idea of where we can start looking—assuming you have no objections to that either? We’ll need some time to get everything together,” she continued, “and for you to sober up. But

we don't want to linger around and rouse Carr's suspicions. Pack your gear and meet me here by next bell."

Halvar returned to the tunnel entrance with time to spare, even in spite of his growing hangover. If Brenna harboured any pity for him, she didn't show it, instead bundling him up with half of her gear, and striking out into the wetlands at a pace that had Halvar sweating under his raincoat in a matter of minutes.

Force of habit encouraged Halvar to keep his hood up and his coat buckled. It wasn't raining very heavily, but the air was drenched in moisture, fat, swollen raindrops punctuating a thick, heavy mist that clung to everything around. He'd be soaked through in a few hours, in spite of his attire, but with the potential for several days of travel ahead, he had no desire to accelerate the process.

The carefully maintained fields and orchards of Shelter's Northern face soon gave way to wilder terrain, untouched by the hand of the settlement's farmers and arborists. Just as quickly, the few rundown shacks and shelters that were scattered around, used to store non-valuable tools and potting supplies, soon disappeared entirely, leaving the two hunters alone amidst towering trees and wild, overgrown ferns and grasses. The path they followed was well worn, running parallel to one of the bigger tributaries that meandered away from Shelter, leading—it suddenly occurred to Halvar—down towards the oyster beds. He tightened the straps on his pack and began a slow, lumbering run to catch up with Brenna.

"Why are we heading to the oyster beds? I thought we agreed!"

"You can be unbelievably slow sometimes," Brenna said, continuing her brisk pace. "We do agree, but we can't let a dozen people see us heading merrily into the wilds and away from the

oyster beds. The best lies always have a kernel of truth in them.”

“But only a kernel, right? There’s no way I’m actually dredging for oysters, even if it is only for cover.” Halvar stopped in the middle of the track. “God, you’re messing with me. I should have known you’d never be on board with this. You’d never go behind Carr’s back. I knew that. You don’t have a defiant bone in your body, you’re far too—”

Brenna stopped and turned to face Halvar, an expression halfway between anger and curiosity on her face. “Go on.”

“You’re too self-righteous.” The anger collapsed from Halvar’s voice as he spoke.

Brenna turned and kept walking.

“I don’t mean in a bad way. You have a strong moral compass. You follow it flawlessly. It’s just that compasses don’t always work. And if you find yourself lost somewhere without one, well, it’s no good rummaging around in your pack hoping it’ll appear—you have to strike out without one to guide the way.”

“What on earth is a compass?”

“Oh, it’s a thing for showing the way. It points where you need to go. Kiara has one.”

“That sounds like the perfect thing to follow, you stubborn jackass. And for what it’s worth, we’re heading this way because there are a handful of boats stowed by the oyster beds. We’re taking those, instead of declaring our intentions to the entirety of Shelter by taking our canoes on a journey that’s easiest by foot.”

They arrived at the oyster beds with a good spell of daylight still ahead of them—enough time to load the canoes, paddle clear of anyone that could recognise them, and find a safe spot to bed down for the night. Halvar had regretted his choice of words for the remainder of the short journey, adding guilt to the confusing mixture of feelings that brewed inside him.

As they'd neared the oyster beds, the forest had thickened around them, all-manner of conifers and broad-leaved trees reclaiming the land at the periphery of Shelter's estate. An old border wall, falling slowly into disrepair, marked the intersection of farmland and woodland. It was still patrolled, but rarely. The threat of bandits lingered, but with each year, the number of incursions into their land grew fewer.

Standing on a rocky outcrop, jutting from the side of a basin that circled the beds, Halvar could see back over the entire farmstead, all the way clear to Shelter, blurred and mist-shrouded though it was. The trees continued down almost to the waterline, with the exception of a few indentations where the Woodsman's guild had cut clearings for buildings and storehouses. In the largest of these clearings stood a central farmhouse, home to half a dozen of Shelter's residents, working the beds on a rotating schedule, their crop too precious to leave unattended. They each stayed in the building for a few months at a time, keeping the broodstock healthy and harvesting the oysters when the season turned. A smaller clearing housed a watchtower, just tall enough to see over the trees and watch the approach to the small inlet that housed row upon row of oysters. Cutting off the inlet from the river was a wooden palisade, lined with a walkway, stretching out into the water, with only a small gated entrance in the middle to allow for a single canoe to pass through. At the farthest end of the inlet was a third clearing, opening up directly onto the river itself, with a

ramshackle wooden jetty and a half dozen small canoes moored alongside. The wind had started to pick up, whipping a spray of rain around the two hunters.

Brenna turned to face Halvar. “This next part of our misadventure requires stealth. So that means you hanging back at least a dozen lengths from me at all times. Maybe two dozen.”

The two boats were liberated easily. The beds were relatively understaffed for the time of year, and as the drizzle turned into a fierce downpour, those few tending to the oysters had decided that an early night was in order.

The canoes they took were smaller and lighter than their hunting rigs, designed for propelling the workers through even the narrowest of streams. Treated carefully, their fragile but compact frames would be perfect for venturing unseen into new waters. The faintest inkling of consternation flickered through Halvar’s mind, but it was quickly disregarded. The boats were a shared commodity, and at any rate, they would be returned quickly. He briefly considered dipping into his precious stock of paper to leave a note behind, before realising that neither his writing skills nor the reading skills of the illiterate farmhands were up to the task. With no amends to be made, the hunters were soon on the water, bundled up in their coats and paddling for forbidden terrain.

Halvar watched the clouds overhead thicken and darken to black. Small ripples on the surface of the water quickly became craters, the rain seeming to draw strength from the fading daylight. The few animals he’d seen as they’d departed the oyster beds, a handful of birds and otters, had vanished, taking their cue from the building storm and vanishing into the warmth and safety of their nests and burrows.

Though they weren't far from the Northernmost tip of Shelter's territory, Halvar was starting to feel uneasy. He paddled hard to catch up to Brenna. "When do you want to stop? At the risk of stating the obvious, it's getting very dark, very quickly."

"That was obvious. We're almost there," Brenna replied. She picked up her pace in response. They rounded a bend in the river, but instead of following the current, Brenna cut straight across the water's breadth, aiming her canoe into a clump of tall reeds. In another second, the canoe had vanished into the mass of plant life.

Conscious of the fragility of their canoes but unwilling to lose face, Halvar picked a similar trajectory and paddled hard for the reeds. Sharp-edged leaves ripped at his face, but he was soon through, emerging into a shallow pool of water at the edge of the riverbank.

It was immediately apparent that the clearing was man-made, the slope too smooth and even, the ground too free from overgrowth to be otherwise. As Halvar's canoe ground gently to a halt, he noticed two logs had been dragged into position around a central fire pit at the slope's summit, a handful of black, slushy ash still visible within. Two great oaks towered overhead, providing shelter from the worst of the storm.

Brenna hopped out of her canoe and dragged it onto the bank.

"You've been here before," Halvar said.

"Again with the obvious statements. Yes, I have."

"I didn't realise you'd ever come this far North before. I didn't think we were allowed."

"You aren't. But I'm a better hunter."

“Carr brought you here?”

Brenna lent her pack against the base of one of the great oaks. “No, why would you think that? I come here with all my lovers.” Brenna locked eyes with Halvar as his heart seemed to spasm, his voice catching in his throat. A thousand feelings warred loud in his mind—before Brenna laughed, a warm, soft laugh. “Too easy. Carr did bring me here. He was planning on making a trip, much like we’re planning, but for whatever reason, he lost interest before the expedition proper was arranged.”

The mention of Carr’s name—burly, stern, father-like Carr—was like cold water poured onto a raging fire. Halvar was relieved at the revelation, if a little peeved. Brenna had always worked harder than her fellow hunters and seemed to care more for her training and development, but to hear that Carr had favoured her over the others, over Halvar himself, was still bitter news.

“We came here two or three times,” she continued, “even got as far as discussing a possible route.”

“Well, that makes sense. It’s hard to feel like you’re disobeying Carr when you’re taking a journey he planned out himself.”

They made camp beneath the shelter of the oak trees. Once they’d struck up a small fire, sheltered in the crook of a long, wizened root and insulated from the wind by the wall of reeds that surrounded them, Halvar decided the time was right to make a peace offering to Brenna. “I wanted to thank you. I know it wasn’t easy, disobeying Carr, even like this. And having to babysit me—well, that’s my fault too. I brought this with me.” He handed her a small glass bottle, sealed with a plug of wax. Inside was a clear liquid, with a few sprigs of lavender. “Go ahead. Try it.”

“This is a poor present for someone that doesn’t drink.”

“You do drink. I saw you at Cirdan’s name-day celebration. Although the state you were in, you’d be forgiven for forgetting that anyone saw you—”

To his surprise, Brenna lent over the campfire and punched him on the arm. A hint of a smile danced over her face, just visible in the firelight. She cut the wax from the bottle and took a small slug.

Halvar expected her to grimace or cough, but she did neither, instead passing the bottle back to him to do the same. The lavender spirit was sweet and perfumed but left a trail of fire down the gullet as he drank. It sat in his stomach, warm and comforting.

“This is good spirit,” Brenna said.

“It really is. Hopefully, Cirdan won’t miss it too much.”

Brenna laughed. “I don’t suppose he will. He’s never lacking for alcohol. And he’s always generous with it. I imagine he’d feel rather proud of us, sitting here like this, drinking spirit in the heart of a rainstorm.”

As he lent to take the bottle from Brenna’s outstretched hand, he watched the light wash over her again, the way it cast shadows around the angles of her nose, her chin, her ears. No, he thought to himself, Cirdan wouldn’t mind at all.

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