

> ASHTALES _

STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE

> CONTRIBUTORS

MORGAN KINNALLY

DIANE TENLEY

RYAN LAW

NICHOLAS BROOKE

> MONTHLY SERIAL // CHAPTER TWO

THE GREEN PRIEST CONTINUES

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ASH TALES

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INTRODUCTION

This month's stories ask who gets a chance to escape, and who has to make do. One man has a yacht and a bunker; elsewhere, an alien invasion has done nothing to settle the rent. For others, the hope of a better life lies along a country path or in the boats of strangers coming downriver.

In **The Shearing**, Morgan Kinnally finds a bitter comedy in alien occupation: the invaders offer a kind of equality that life before their arrival never did. **The Monday War**, by Diane Tenley, follows a wealthy man who treats catastrophe as a wager and survival as a service someone else will arrange. In **The Ridgeway**, Ryan Law takes us out of the city and onto an ancient chalk path, where a moment of perfect stillness begins to change. From the archive, **You Skyscraper Kind**, by Nicholas Brooke, asks what happens when the people offering help arrive by the same route as those who once did harm.

We also return to Shelter for **Chapter Two of The Green Priest**. The hunters are home, but the things they have brought back will not be so easily put away.

Ash Tales welcomes stories that find something unexpected in the end of the world. See **“Submit your story” at the end of the magazine.**

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ENTRY // 01

THE SHEARING

AUTHOR Morgan Kinnally

TYPE ALIEN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan Kinnally is a writer and educator. As a playwright, her work has been presented by Moxie Arts NYC, Ion Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse Without Walls Festival, New Village Arts, Theatre for the New City, Midwest Dramatists Conference, and others. She was a finalist in Leah Ryan Emerging Women Writers and Bay Area Playwrights Foundation Festival, among others. Currently, she is an M.F.A. creative writing student at the University of New Orleans.

Myles passes me my knitted hat. He already has his on. We didn't used to need to wear a hat to bed, but since The Shearing, everyone's got to keep their head warm. Nobody's got long hair anymore. But I'm used to it. I don't even miss mine anymore. And it certainly makes getting out of the house in the morning easier if I don't have hair to blow dry and style. Myles says I'm prettier this way anyhow.

We snuggle up and turn on our TV with free streaming from the previous renter's account. We're going to watch The Shearing event in Cleveland. I mean, who doesn't watch The Shearing broadcasts?

Everyone learned early on, you just can't fight back. And it isn't so bad, considering. Our government finally stopped trying to defend itself and things have been smooth sailing ever since.

At first, the U.S. government launched nukes into space at their massive ships circling our orbit, but that didn't seem to do anything. Their technology is far superior and their appetite for human hair is insatiable. Plus, none of the other countries, allies or not, wanted to get involved.

You just let it happen. Go with the flow. File in. Zip, zip, zip. You're shaved, good to go on your way. See you in about a year.

I can't understand why the government and, particularly, the rich are so bent out of shape about it. You can't change it. Can't buy your way out of it. You just gotta accept it and try to live your life. The poor folks like us have been living like that even before the alien ships started hovering over major U.S. cities.

The first time I saw the extraterrestrials, the first time a lot of people saw them, we started laughing. They weren't like what we imagined. No little green men with laser guns like the movies.

They were iridescent, blobby things, but icky and phlemmy looking. Two years ago, when I had pneumonia, I kept coughing up these giant phlegmy boogies that were neon yellowish-green. They were like that, but fifteen feet tall and flickering a rainbow of colors. Plus, the way they shoot radioactive acid goop from any part of their body helped humanity's decision to fall in line.

For my first Shearing, we were rounded up into the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in these big cattle cages. We waited so long that a few people wet themselves. Standing there, I thought about the old testament story of Sampson and how Delia cut off his locks of power. I thought about the Hindu religious tradition of men shaving their heads when a family member dies. And I perhaps dwelled a little too long on the Aztecs and their tonalli. They believed the crown of their heads and hair contained their soul. Would I feel any different after this? Aliens turn on their machine hanging above us in the cattle cage; all our hair stands up on end. Then about fifty of them come through with their little jelly T-Rex arms and cordless clippers and shave away. The hair is vacuumed up and into some kind of giant container I can see across the track. Shearing us with some super-sized Flowbee. I made the joke but no one laughed. I saw some Phlemmies on the outside of the gate slouched over, looking tired. Then I saw it. In one of their stumpy hands is a glass bowl of hair. He's bent over it and with his finger he heats the bowl up with some of the radioactive acid stuff. I see the hair sizzle in the bowl. Then the Phlemmy takes a big sniff and falls back on the ground. Scientists think human hair is their food source, but to me, it looked like they were getting high, hitting that hair bowl like a pro.

Now, the baldos had a little bit of a different experience. My friend Steve always shaved his, purposefully trying to keep that intimidating bald look—he was also pretty jacked, arms for days.

Myles doesn't like it when we hang out. But when the aliens found him and some of the other baldo folks, the aliens screamed something awful that gave everyone within five block radius tinnitus. For the baldos, they were all rounded up too. A film crew at some college snuck in and filmed the extraterrestrials polishing the all people's bald heads with some blue liquid goopy stuff, then some aliens each went around and slurped it off with their purple tongues. On the video, some of the guys in there were crying. But after they licked their heads, the aliens' eyes got big, their pupils, if that's what they were, got real wide. They made kind of, ahhhhh, noises too. The scientists might explain it away as food sourcing, but I equate their experience to huffing glue.

Now, I don't think about it. I just go in, wait like a sheep, get sheared and go home. That constant smell of burnt hair makes me sick. I'm relieved they should be moving on soon. Cincinnati is their next stop. That means we got at least eight months, maybe more, to grow out our hair.

My hair might be thinning from the stress of the last few years, but not too noticeably. I still always have hair for The Shearing. And some people think we've all been a little more stressed out from the extraterrestrials' presence the last few years.

But the problem isn't the aliens, it's the economy. Myles and I are overdue on the rent and got our first eviction notice today. It looks like we've pushed our squatters rights as far as they can go.

Though the government blames the high food prices and unaffordable rent and utilities on the aliens, I don't and neither does Myles or even Steve. I think humanity adapted alright to these new imperialists. Just got to go along, I guess. The aliens don't seem to want anything else from us, just the hair on top of our heads. Plus, the aliens, in exchange for volunteering our hair,

they give us strawberries. My favorite. Okay, fine. It's probably not volunteering when they shoot that radioactive acid stuff in your face if you don't comply, but at least we get something out of this deal. The bald folks get tongued, and they leave with cantaloupes. It's win-win.

So when the wealthy elites complain their rights are being trampled by the alien invaders, when they ask us why we don't give our sons to battle these alien oppressors, all I can think is what did you guys ever give us? Because of the aliens, no one ever has a vitamin C deficiency. How about that for social welfare?

Tonight, I'm busy deciding whether to eat Ramen, or skip it all together. The hunger pains will go away once I fall asleep. Plus, I'm already so comfy here in bed with Myles.

So yeah, I enjoy watching the bald billionaires standing there in the pens getting scoped up and licked. The baldo treatment is broadcasted now too. They're usually cursing something fierce, but they got to do it too. And the wealthy elites with hair, get sheared just like the rest of us. At least, in the aliens' eyes (if they have eyes), all people really are equal. If one of these extraterrestrials ever runs for office, I would volunteer for their campaign, gladly. Free strawberries and melons? They got my vote.



ENTRY // 02

THE MONDAY WAR

AUTHOR Diane Tenley

TYPE NUCLEAR

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane has a Bachelor of Fine Art from Toronto Metropolitan University and a Diploma from Algonquin College. When not writing, she enjoys soft cheeses, thrifting on weekends, and spending quality time with her family. She lives in Ottawa, ON, Canada.

His eyes watered. He was staring at the sun. The sky was clear blue and the water the same. He had asked the staff to anchor where land was out of sight and out of mind, and here they floated, the staff and passengers aboard the superyacht Harmonia, and there was house music swaying over the sound system, bouncing over the waves and through the empty paradise, one song seething into another while he closed his eyes and opened them back up again, waiting for the iridescent weight of visual snow to fall before him, and he thought life would be more exciting if the visual snow was permanent.

Nancy called.

“Yep.”

“January 29.”

“Two weeks. Interesting,” he hemmed. He’d have to stay on the superyacht all that time. He’d already been here for five days and it was Tuesday. He looked at his calendar, and then to Placed, the white house’s favourite betting app. It was novel because the app offered events of any kind on which to bet. The events were not limited to sports or games, which meant of course that you could bet on the outcomes of such things as awards shows or serious conflicts, whether your favourite actor would cry or whether a general would get shot, and of course you could bet on, for instance, the day that World War III would start.

The chances, according to Placed, of WWIII starting next week were low, and higher the week of January 29, when the G20 was scheduled to meet. Apparently, the President was planning to start a couple days after the meeting of world leaders, so it would have surely be a blindside but for the fact that laymen were betting that it would happen that week. But if it happened within the next

week, he could expect a much, much larger payout. The odds were very low, with the fewest bets for the next month having been placed for Monday next week. Who starts a war on a Monday?

“Can we do Monday?”

“Monday, January 26, or Monday, February 2?”

“Neither. Earlier. Monday, January 19.”

“Please hold, sir.”

The hold music was a rather innocuous, solo piano version of Tchaikovsky’s The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. He set the phone down on his side table and turned up the volume. He let the horizon blur the sky and sea in his vision. He watched the staff clean the deck, and the shimmering glare of his wife’s tan skin as the thumping house music met Tchaikovsky overhead in a dissonant and difficult crescendo.

“We are in agreement with your suggested amendment to the date of the operation.”

“Ah, good. Thank you, Nancy.”

“Have you made all necessary arrangements for your safety?”

“I sure have,” he replied. “Thank you for asking. Send my best to the team.”

“Thank you sir, I will. Have a lovely—”

He hung up the phone and yelled: “Gerald?”

“Sir?”

“You have a family.”

His own wife craned her head toward him and angled her sunglasses to watch him in the shade. She applied some more oil.

“I do. A wife and a dog.”

“Sort of a family. A wife and a dog. So, here’s a thought experiment for you,” he said, “let’s say that you found out that the apocalypse was going to start while you’re on my boat.”

“Uh huh.”

“Would you stay on my boat and go to my super bunker with me and live to see the other side of the apocalypse, or would you ask to be dropped off so that there was the chance you could see your wife and dog? What’s your dog’s name again?”

“Barry.”

“Gerry and Barry. Cute.”

“Gerry, and Barry and Gladys, my wife.”

“Right, right,” he said. Having been the second steward for the Harmonia for her last six charters, he assumed that Gerald was used to his thought experiments. He waited for Gerald’s answer. “Remember that it’s Armageddon, so when you get to land, people are getting flayed, some are ascending to heaven, there are sinkholes everywhere, demons are pillaging, etc., and you have the option to go somewhere completely safe from harm. And you’re still making money and everything, but you have to leave on Friday, and you can’t see Gladys or Barry, probably ever again.”

His wife returned to her posture, baking slowly in the sun.

“Can I call Gladys?”

“Sure.”

“Can I tell her where I’m going?”

“No.”

“Well, I guess if it’s Armageddon and the whole world is falling apart and I can call her, then I’d go to the superbunker.”

“So you’d save yourself.”

“Maybe, I guess?”

“It’s your life.”

“Sure. Yeah, sure, sir.”

“Good choice!” he said. “A dry martini. Three olives.”

“Absolutely sir,” and without hesitation, Gerald went to the bar and got him a dry martini with three olives, noting that they were running low. They’d need to get some more at their next docking. The day and the day next proceeded this way, where he probed the interior and exterior staff, searching for contributions to his thought experiment. He went to the kitchen for an ice cream, and happened to find the chef, a deckhand, and the Chief Stewardess. He cornered the third stewardess in his bedroom. He shared a glass of wine with the Captain. Slowly, he combed through the boat staff until he received answers from every one of them, including the Engineer, and he was happy to find that almost everyone would choose the bunker if there was an apocalypse. At dinner on Wednesday night, his wife took a sip of wine and asked him:

“Are there any hold outs?”

“Oh sure. We’ll be dropping off the bosun at port tomorrow.”

“Friday. How much longer do we have on the yacht?”

“Sunday.”

“Ah, all right. You had those sun lamps installed, though?”

“Of course. They light the orchard.”

“Good, that’s nice,” and she leaned over for a kiss. She lit a cigarette. “So the bosun has a life, huh?”

“It appears that way.”

“Good for him,” she replied. They finished dinner and went their separate ways at bed.

As with the night before, he was unable to sleep, and he walked the deck at midnight or so and surveyed the stars, and he admired them, unable to name them, and he looked for pockets of abyss in the Milky Way, and he saw countless stars, millions of stars, millions upon millions, billions, even, billions of stars, each surrounded by airless void.

He’d arranged to have a Black Hawk land on the superyacht to procure him, his wife, and the staff after the bosun was dropped off at port, and Thursday was heaven, clean and easy, and it reminded him of a hotel bed well-made and ironed, and he drank all day and took the world’s best ecstasy at night, and took viagra to repeatedly fuck the third stewardess, and the meals were delicious and exactly to his liking, and he was sad for his wife since her boat boyfriend was choosing land, but she’d find somebody else and it wouldn’t be that bad, and she’d undoubtedly find other things to do, other things to say, other things to feel, other faces to read and one day become, and Friday came, and the bosun left the boat with his rucksack, and everybody shook his hand and some were crying, thinking he’d been wrongfully fired

even though he was truly a skilled and popular bosun, and as usual, where docking was concerned, some crew members left the boat and returned with goods, including additional olives.

While they were out, the Captain gave him the news: “The weather’s no good, sir. It appears that a storm will be coming this evening. No good for getting back out on the water.”

“That’s fine,” he replied. “But we have to be back out tomorrow.”

“Weather permitting,” said the Captain.

And to keep from appearing suspicious, he replied: “Weather permitting, of course.”

But Saturday came and the weather did not permit them to go back out on the water. That’s all right, he told himself. We have until tomorrow. Saturday was a buffer.

But the Sunday weather did not permit them to leave. The storm was raging.

“Can we go to a hotel?” said his wife. “Isn’t it more suspicious to stay on the boat during the storm?”

“No, we have to stay here,” he said. “We have to stay here.”

“Sir,” said Gerald that evening, “Are you sure you want to continue this charter? The staff need a break.”

“No one leaves,” he replied. “I’ll pay you extra.”

“Of course, sir,” whispered Gerald.

The people in town knew to whom this superyacht belonged, and as the monsoon raged, they walked by it each with his threatening gaze, eyes glaring from beneath their hoods, faces in shadow, flip flops slapping against bare feet loudly through the downpour.

Passersby dreamt of how many people the Harmonia could hold. She was guaranteed to be a target if shit hit the fan. She was known the world over as her proud owner's prized possession and therefore she was a famous boat.

Mid-afternoon he made a call to Nancy.

"Nancy," he said nonchalantly. "What would they say to January 20?"

"Tuesday, January 20?"

"Yes."

"Please hold."

There was the solo piano version of The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, and it was quite uplifting until it reached its crescendo. He forgot. He wasn't listening to it the last time. The crescendo was somber, like a fall wind sweeping through a tree of many withering brown leaves, and he was pulled into a memory of Fantasia, where he was swept away himself into a dank, chaotic fiction, an autumnal freezing, a frost setting the warm sea cool, and Nancy returned.

"The operation remains as at Monday, January 19."

"I may not be safe."

"My apologies, sir. The operation is already in motion, scheduled to begin at 5:00AM Eastern Standard Time on January 19. We need more than 24 hours notice to change the date of an operation of this scale."

"Do you know who I am?" He whisper-screamed. "Do you know what I could do to you?"

“Sir, I do know who you are. My apologies. I hear you are upset. I can only do my best. I am an artificial intelligence. I don’t make any decisions.”

“Of course--of course you don’t,” and for the following hour he pursued the manager, the executive, the chief, up and up, and by the end he got from them the same answer as he’d received from Nancy, and no favours could be called in to change the date, and sat slumped on his bed for a moment, and he thought of seeking solace from his wife, or from that stewardess whose name he always had trouble remembering, but then he smiled as he reflected on the operation’s starting hour, and he said aloud: “5:00AM.”

They happened to be in a different time zone, fortunately one hour behind. He went to the Captain.

“Good news, sir,” the Captain said as he entered the bridge, “the weather is looking clear from tonight onward.”

“What a relief! When can we leave?”

“The morning, of course.”

“What would you say to leaving at 3:30am? Or is that too early for you?”

“That’s quite early sir. Is it for fishing?”

“No, no. Yes, I see it’s early for everyone. What about 4:00am?”

“4:00am could work. Do you have a destination in mind?”

“Not yet. Let me think about it. But let’s plan to leave at 4:00am. I’d like to see the sun rise.”

“You’ll see the stars and the sun if we leave then, sir.”

“Perfect.”

He made a call to his Black Hawk contact, who had been on standby for the last couple of days waiting for an adjustment to their schedule. Everyone woke just before 4:00am to leave for the open sea. They anchored before the sun rose. The Black Hawk landed at 4:45am, much to the confusion of the staff. The Captain refused to board and stayed with the boat, and the last deckhand and the engineer stayed with him, and only the interior staff remained on the Black Hawk, as well as the purser, which suited him just fine, because it was their decision to stay on the boat, and he needed the Interior to survive the end of the world, and about fifteen minutes after they departed the Harmonia, the news came that the US had waged nuclear war on all of its allies and enemies in North and South America, and he remembered the conversation he'd had with the president some time ago.

“You know, it's the United States of America,” said the President.

“Yes,” he replied.

“So shouldn't that include North America and Central America and South America? Because it's the United States of America.”

“Sure, why not,” he said, because it was the President, and the only word the President understands is something akin to “Yes”, so you always say “Yes” to the President, whether or not you agree.

The staff surveyed the landscape behind them, where the sky met the ground with a terrifying, clouded scream. A red and orange smudge that stole the air from their lungs. He stared straight into the sun as it dawned. His eyes watered, and the visual snow fell, and what he saw in front of him was a clear, blue sky, and an iridescent snow fell upon him like diamond dust, a lavish icing, the oily surface of a water pool outside a gas station after the rain.



ENTRY // 03

THE RIDGEWAY

AUTHOR **Ryan Law**

TYPE **NUCLEAR**

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.

Four days out and running low on water, but he didn't care. He stopped at the crest of the hill to catch his breath. It was full dark, but his eyes adjusted to the low light and gained a new sensitivity to the stars and constellations above. It didn't take long for the body to shake-off the city, just a few days to return to natural rhythms. Like it was trying to escape the whole time. The closing of dilated pupils, bathed always in the sterile glare of floodlights and searchlights. The relaxing of tight joints, freed from the cramped spaces of ration lines and security checkpoints. The constant wash of cortisol, carefully cultivated by a ceaseless stream of news headlines and political rhetoric, finally receding.

He could sense as much as see the trail before him, a path of glacial chalk that wormed its way through ninety miles of countryside, following the ridge of the escarpment. An hour to go, perhaps less. He knew he would make it before sunrise.

He picked a path down the the slope, slipping slightly on loose stones, the weight of his pack shifting about. He was halted by the crack of a rifle. A single report, loud and resonant, not like the constant chatter of low-calibre gunfire that reverberated through the city each night. He listened but heard nothing further.

He imagined a farmer, taking a deer or culling a fox. Sitting in a hide on the edge of a sparse field, watching a tall, skeletal outline emerge from the tree line and mists beyond. Sighting down the barrel, watching for a moment, seeing the slight contrast in curves and shadows that outlined the creature before him, imagining all that the darkness contained. Then pulling the trigger. The farmer's breath misting before him in the cold pre-dawn.

He was romanticising, but it was hard to avoid. Just a few hours outside of the city and all the stress and fear of the war dissolved. He felt guilty, to create this escape for himself but leave his family

behind, if only for a few days. They had considered leaving the city, moving out into the countryside. Effort and inconvenience had stayed their hand, but the war was changing things, the fuel blockades and the street cordons and the curfews. Strange how some despot nation thousands of miles away could shape the daily rhythms of their lives so powerfully, but that was the nature of modern warfare. A mass of propaganda, the online world bleeding into the offline, poisonous rhetoric and deepfaked videos pouring in a tide between the myriad cracks already spread through society's thin skin.

A line of sheep cut the trail ahead, like a line of thick clouds blown straight across the horizon. They ambled determinedly onwards, indifferent to the stranger in their midst. He considered composing a photo, but the light was too low to shoot handheld.

He followed the trail as it wove through stands of gorse and errant pockets of juniper. From time to time he heard the sounds of the ridgeway's other inhabitants, the drumming of leporine paws met by a vulpine bark, nature's call-and-response.

The path disappeared into a final patch of woodland. The darkness became absolute and he reached for his head torch. Even turned to its lowest setting, the oaks and pines around him transformed into a hallucinogenic tangle of angular shadows. He passed a cottage, barely visible beneath a thick curtain of wisteria, the great gnarled vines tracing an ancient scaffolding upon the coarse stone exterior. The cottage slumbered in the shade, but he had seen it on many a summer's evening, with windows open and lace curtains dancing on the breeze blown in from the ridgeway. It was the height of impracticality, but in a flash of imagination he saw

his family living beneath the old oak eaves. His daughter sitting on the tumbledown wall, his wife pruning the rosemary beside the front door.

It was decided then, in the way all long-debated concerns find their resolution in a flash of perfect clarity. They would move. The calculus of their city life had changed irreparably, but in degrees so slight as to go unnoticed. Looking from this new vantage point, the city seemed a place of needless suffering. They would move, not to this chocolate box cottage, but to some quiet hamlet on the downslope of the ancient ridgeway.

The daydream sustained him until his terminus. He climbed the final slope on aching legs, feeling the wind whip and claw at him as he grew more and more exposed on the great hill's southern face.

He crested the summit and the world unfolded before him.

He detached the tripod from his pack and set it upon the soft earth. Gentle pressure to each of the legs, a quick check of the spirit level. The barest hint of sunlight now, but enough, he knew.

The hill known as the Beacon lay before him, preceded by a series of low hills snaked with chalk-white tracks. A thousand years of footfall, carved through the scrub and grass. Marking the passage of drovers and traders, mystics and marauders, hiders and seekers.

He attached the camera and checked the composition through the viewfinder. Aperture, shutter speed, ISO, focal point, exposure compensation. He checked again.

Conditions were fair. Momentary respite. Not a breath of wind.

A final check. He triggered the shutter.

He bent to look at the display. The sky bathed the scene in a gentle wash of blue and pink. The grass pale and cool. A flock of sheep grazed the hillside. Perfect.

Almost. He scratched the screen with a thumbnail. A white speck blemished the horizon. He checked the live view. Nothing. The light was unchanged, so he took a second photograph. The speck was gone—or at least, it had moved, blown across the lens to the other side of the scene. He rummaged through his pack and cleaned the lens with his blower. He checked the light again and triggered the shutter.

Two blemishes now. Tiny white dots on the horizon.

He took the camera from the mount and turned his back to the wind. He removed the lens from the frame to inspect the sensor, sheltering the frame from airborne grit and detritus all the while. Spotless.

He remounted the camera and inspected the scene before him. Clear sky, too bright for stars. The light perfect, but changing quickly.

He stooped to look through the viewfinder and stopped, his breath caught in his chest.

He saw a white spot on the horizon, but bigger, far bigger than before. As he watched, more appeared beside it, blooming and fading, like raindrops rippling the surface of a pond. The camera fell to the ground as he staggered ahead, breaking into a run, scrabbling across the chalk plateau to the very edge of the hill. There he stopped, open-mouthed, watching the horizon blink and sparkle like lights on a Christmas tree.

In the growing light he saw the white chalk path stretching away into the distance, back towards the city at its far end. A city that flashed and sparked like something alive. A city illuminated by war.

He thought of the cottage garlanded with wisteria. His daughter sitting upon the old stone wall. Ninety miles lay between them. He started to run.



ENTRY // 04

YOU SKYSCRAPER KIND

AUTHOR Nicholas Brooke

TYPE CLIMATE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Brooke is a writer from Melbourne, Australia. He writes about the weird and wonderful of life and language.

A long time ago, someone scrawl'd the story of the dust men on the fire escape wall. It say dust men come an' take our wives an' children. They come sayin': 'You skyscraper kind livin' in drowned old world places. Come north we got real food an' schools and people got the smarts to fix up the water sickness.' But we happy here an' know how to boil the river bugs out for a drink.

Now, John's goin' round sayin' a big mob's sailin' boats down the River of Grids again, real yakka types.

First, they say John Dory's dreamin', as he talks fibs all day, but others coo out sayin' they seen them too and then the whole floor's a headless chook. Some sayin' we wave 'em down an' more others sayin' we climb up to the penthouse an' just gander down like stars from up high.

I'm sayin' they're no danger, they just nomads tradin' tucker. Come lookin' for paperclips to make fishhooks an' what not. Camp's all undecided 'til Ol' Nell said it's them folk who started old world wars an' make the great ice cap melt back when. She pointin' down the main street river sayin' the River of Grid's them fault an' they make the water too sick to drink.

Them dust folk come from where no water poolin' puddles on the ground, just dust an' bush like the wars an' waters never happened. Dust folk never need to leave their boats. They got little plastic birds, old world tech, that fly remotely way up to look through buildin' windows for camps for tradin' with. Many camps hide 'cause some dust folk just lookin' to take by force, an' not just food an' tools either. These folk aren't lookin' dangerous; they got no guns an' spears.

Camps fracturing 'cause some say we need tucker an' others sayin' better hungry than dead. There's angry whisperin' as if the dust men far down in their boats gonna hear us. Then Strong Gus says enough warblin' an' takes knick knacks we got no use for an' heads for the fire escape toward the river below. Some followin' so I join but others're callin' us dead men. 'You forgettin' last time!' They shoutin' spikes at us and holdin' their children's should'rs.

The shoutin's got everyone quiet as we walkin' down the spiralin' staircase to the water. In chalk an' paint, wall's got written stories of us and those past, some of those taken by dust men, some who befriend'n dust men. Too dark to read 'em without fire or flashlight, but even in darkness stories stay written.

From back up camp level someone shouts down, echoin' off the dark walls 'What 'bout last time? What 'bout last time?'



CHAPTER // 02

THE GREEN PRIEST

AUTHOR **Ryan Law**

TYPE **THE RAINMAKER WRITINGS**

FROM THE SERIAL

Chapter Two of Ryan Law's *The Green Priest*, the opening novel in *The Rainmaker Writings*. The hunters return to Shelter with an unexpected find. Chapter One appeared in the August 2026 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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“**T**he rain-weathered cavern we call home is littered with signs of use that long pre-date our occupation here.

Soot-stained walls. Crude lines, perhaps once pictures, etched into soft rock. Tunnels too uniform to have occurred naturally.

From my research, it seems that this way of living was not unique to the denizens of Shelter—that humanity has lived this way since time immemorial. Indeed, the more I read of the towering monoliths that the Elders called home, the more they feel like a transitory state, a temporary excess that needed correcting to return to the natural order.

And oh, how that correction was wrought.”

—Excerpt from Kiara’s notebook, volume one.

The rain had grown heavy on the final stretch of their journey, and the last few hours passed in relative silence, each of the hunters slipping into the familiar rhythm of paddling. They had spread out as they travelled, their canoes slowly drifting apart as they lost themselves in quiet reveries.

Undulating hillside rolled past, interspersed by tangled forests, half-drowned by the floodwater, and patches of recently denuded riverbank, created by huge trees crashing unseen into the river, carrying turf and foliage with it, leaving bare earth in their wake.

As they drew closer to home, faint sounds began to intrude upon Halvar’s thoughts. Through the sound of the rain, he could just make out the strains of a distant melody drifting through the air, as Cirdan, lagging at the tail end of the group some fifty spans distant, sang to himself, an old drinking song, bawdy and energetic.

He was a sight to behold: tall and broad, paddling a huge canoe that seemed too small for his frame, his thick beard soaked through, wild, flyaway hairs sticking out from every side of his hood like a deranged halo. Halvar admired each of the hunters, but it was to Cirdan he felt the greatest affinity—even at his coarsest and, as happened more and more often, his most drunken.

Halvar's canoe was fast filling in the vicious downpour, with an inch of standing water already in the bottom of the hold, threatening to wash over the raised platforms that kept his feet above the worst of the water. He stopped paddling to bail water, and as he did, Cirdan surged past, churning the river into a violent wake with heavy, powerful oar strokes. Alarmed, Halvar turned to regard the stretch of water behind him, but saw nothing through the rain.

"Can't you smell that boy?" bellowed Cirdan.

Halvar strained to detect any hint of smoke or blood, anything that would explain Cirdan's urgency. Instead, he found only the familiar smells of home. The air was redolent with wild garlic and the perfume of flowers from the riverbank, mingled with wild grasses and wet leaves...and beneath it, the faintest tang of citrus.

Cirdan called back to Halvar. "It's clear as can be! I can smell hops, boy, fresh, fruity hops!" With a manic laugh, Cirdan powered his canoe through the final bend of the river, Halvar behind him and the other hunters a dozen lengths ahead.

As he continued to power through the clustered hunters, Halvar drew level with Brenna and Colborn. Here, the river stretched out straight ahead, with the bank on either side kept clear by the woodsman's guild, trimmed back to keep a clear line of sight into

the woodland beyond. At the far end of the river loomed a high hill, peering out from the forest, and nestled atop it, barely visible at this distance, a huge stone outcropping, dotted with walkways and passages, balconies and carved windows.

A wide path meandered down the hill from the entrance, leading to the water's edge, and through the heavy mist and the fading light, Halvar could make out the familiar silhouettes of a small armada of canoes and kayaks and coracles, docked at a dozen makeshift pontoons. The sight of Shelter, of home, provided a relief Halvar hadn't realised he needed, an unseen weight plucked from his shoulders.

A few tumbledown buildings surrounded the dock, small shanty huts made of wood and plastic, tarpaulins draped across as roofs. The buildings were used for activities that valued proximity to the water, or else distance from the residents: there was a hut for the scaling and gutting of fish; another for the skinning and butchering of rabbits, deer and boar; a small greenhouse, cobbled together from sagging glass panes and patched with translucent plastic, harbouring seedlings and all-manner of herbs, some grown for food, others for medicine, others still in the process of being tasted and tested for value; and the workshop, tallest and broadest of the riverside structures, a great wooden barn where the hunters' canoes were inspected and patched up between expeditions. Dozens of people scurried between the buildings, little more than ants on the great hillside.

"Looks like Cirdan's senses haven't been dulled any," said Brenna.

"Well, I'll be damned. We must be near to two hundred lengths out, and Cirdan, a man who can't tell his arse from his elbow, has sniffed out a shipment of hops. It's shame we weren't out

searching for barley or rye, else Cirdan would be our prize hunter,” said Colborn.

“He caught more than you did, and I’d wager he was less than sober through most of it,” Gunnar replied.

“Aye, well. Imagine how he’d fare if he sorted himself out. He’d catch twice as much if his spear didn’t tremor between drinks.”

The hunters had drawn close enough to the dock to see sacks of hops being unloaded from one of the wide, flat barges the traders’ guild used. Cirdan was already ashore, patting one of the traders on the back and laughing over a shared joke. As the five remaining hunters pulled closer to their pontoon, Halvar recognised the men, regular visitors from the closest settlement, Morbach, a day upriver.

Carr docked first, brushing away an offer of help from one of the young dockhands that had come to unload the shipment. “See that these are inspected, cleaned and brought ashore.” He gestured to his canoe. “A few of them took a beating through the shallows, and my gunwale was knocked loose. If it breaks when I’m next out, I’ll come looking for you.”

As Halvar and the others began to disembark, Cirdan strolled down the sloping riverbank to where the hunters had docked.

“I’ve volunteered us to help carry the shipment back up the hill,” he announced, “but I didn’t sell our services too cheaply, mind.” He produced a plump waterskin from behind his back. “It’s warm, flat and tastes like piss, and there’s two more of these if we get the shipment uphill before dusk.”

Carr reached for the waterskin, unstoppered the mouth and took a long, slow slug. When he was finished, he wiped his mouth on his surcoat and unceremoniously shoved the skin back into Cirdan's hands.

"You're right in one regard. It really does taste like piss." Carr nodded at the gathered hunters and began the short ascent towards Shelter, with Brenna, Colborn and Gunnar following suit. Only Halvar lingered with Cirdan, stretching cramped legs before reaching out to sample the warm beer.

"One good man's worth a dozen of those weaklings, eh boy? And we have you as well. Let's get on with it then."

Together the two hunters and the two traders unloaded the last of the shipment just before dusk, as pale sunlight was finally overcome by thick cloud cover, smothering the hilltop with the rich, inky darkness of night. There had been treasures stowed amongst the bags of hops: salted meat and fish, cured hides, and true to their word, a few small kegs of fresh-brewed beer that Halvar and Cirdan were allowed to fill their waterskins from.

The traders were called Alfir and Emil. They were slightly younger than Halvar, with matching shocks of unkempt muddy-blond hair, lean frames and sinewy, rope-like muscles earned from their daily labours aboard the trading barge.

It was no restful life. When they weren't bundling shipments together and hauling them to and from the barge, they were paddling the heavy, cumbersome vessel through winding rivers and tributaries that were often so clogged with plant-life and debris that even the hunters' light, agile canoes would be hard-pressed to find their way through.

“It’s tiring but I wouldn’t trade it,” Emil reflected as he rested, propped up against the last of the crates. He passed a skin of beer to Halvar. “You get to set your own pace, and I’ve ventured further afield than most of my family have. Not that there’s much else to see, but still. I’d grow restless sitting around in that pisswater village all day.”

“Have you always lived in Morbach?” Halvar asked.

“One of the original families,” Alfir said, a hint of pride in his voice.

“Near enough the opposite for me,” Emil added, “taken in as a babe in arms, or else given up by one of the residents, heard it both ways. Orphaned for sure, but a lifelong resident of that muddy pile of sticks. Not sure anyone remembers the truth.”

“Or much cares, eh?” Cirdan said.

“What’s Morbach like? I don’t know much about it,” asked Halvar.

“He’s told you all you need to know. A pisswater village. Good for nothing, except the beer we brew. Even that isn’t the best,” replied Alfir.

“Aye, but that’s where the term ‘pisswater’ comes from,” ventured Cirdan, “and if you’re too good for this mighty brew, I’ll have to give it a more deserving home. In the depths of my gut.”

“Have you ever actually been to Morbach?” Halvar asked Cirdan.

“Aye, I’ve been around, and up and down, in and out. And there’s nowhere I care for half as much as this jumble of rocks.” He patted the rockface behind him. “It’s warm, and that’s worth more than you’d imagine, as a youngling that’s never known real cold. I’ve spent winters holed up in the dankest little hovels imaginable,

rain pouring in through the roof one day, turning to snow the next. And this place, it's dry, truly dry. Even with all the floods and leaks, it's the driest place I've ever known. Think about how you feel after a week on the water, how you feel right now, damp to your bones, soaked through, water in the soul. Imagine never drying out from that. Misery, pure misery. If you don't believe me, ask these unlucky bastards," he plucked the nearest flask from Emil's hands. "These poor bastards spend their whole lives drenched through, and what do they get in return? Calloused hands and sore backs. It's no life for me."

"I wouldn't sell our livelihood so short," chimed Alfir, "while you're rummaging through rabbit shit, we're off finding the treasures of this wet little world. It was only a few days ago we stumbled upon something extremely rare, and extremely valuable."

"We don't know that it's valuable," Emil quickly added.

"Course it's valuable! How many of 'em have you ever seen?"

Cirdan drained the skin into his mouth and gave it a final, decisive squeeze before passing it back to the trader. "Enough yapping and show us this trinket you dredged up. With brains as small as yours I'll wager it's something dull and unexciting, like a shiny stone, or a leaf that's shaped like a crow."

The traders seemed eager to show off their acquisition, and in spite of himself, Halvar could feel curiosity welling as Emil stood, brushed himself down and walked over to the smallest of the remaining crates. It was wrapped in a thick waterproof skin of plastic sheeting and bound tightly by blue twine. Emil laboured over the knots, demonstrating the care that had been applied to the protection of the crate's contents, before bringing a small

bundle back to the group, cradled in front of him and held tight to his chest. Slowly, reluctantly, he unwrapped the last few fetters of plastic.

“Well shit. I’d rather have a shiny stone than this piece of jetsam.”

Halvar didn’t share Cirdan’s disappointment. Emil was holding a book. It was dark and faded, the cover a deep ruddy brown. Small characters, ancient and arcane, were pressed into the thick hide that bound the tome together.

“Figured we’d sell it to someone here. Heard there’s a woman who’ll take it from us.”

“Collects ‘em,” said Alfir. “Pays well, in leather and venison and all sorts. Anything we want.”

“Kiara,” Cirdan muttered, “and she’ll pay well, too well. Wasting good meat on the likes of this.” He sighed, a sound deep and exaggerated. “All this beer has made me need a piss something fierce.” He stood up and wandered a short distance into the darkness, out of sight but well within earshot.

“Could I hold it?” Halvar ventured. The traders exchanged searching looks before an unspoken accord was reached. Emil passed the book over.

“Can you read then?” he asked Halvar.

“Oh, no. Well...a little. Kiara’s teaching me. It’s because of her I became a scribe for the hunting expeditions.”

“You know her then? This woman that likes books? Reckon she’ll buy it from us?”

Halvar traced the embossed lettering with his fingertips, recognising a couple of familiar characters amongst the symbols. He was reluctant to open the book, half from reverence, half from fear. It was ancient, an artifact from another world—a world that had ended in death and chaos and misery. When he'd mastered himself enough to open the cover, the pages were soft and mottled, but the words in their black, mysterious scrawl were still clear and crisp.

"Yes. She'll want to buy this." Halvar paused before continuing. "Where did you find it?"

Cirdan rejoined the group as Halvar spoke.

"Well, that's the thing. It was our job, out on the river. We were travelling north, taking a crop of spinach—"

"Mint. I can still remember the smell."

"Fine, mint, spinach, something green and leafy. We were taking a shipment out to one of the smaller settlements, barely a handful of shacks on the river's edge, but home to a tough bunch of bastards. Only problem was the river kept getting narrower and narrower, choked to a crawl by bindweed. That stretch of river has always been a nightmare—"

"It runs close to one of the old cities."

"—but this was unheard of. We moored at the narrowest stretch and went to work with the hatchets, and that was when we came across it." A grim smile lit up Alfir's face as he told the story. "A canoe, tied up under a huge bank of weeds. Small, like some of the ones your lot has, only it was metal and—"

“Green,” Cirdan growled. “Aye, the man has it right. Deep, dark green, richer and fiercer than any green you’ve ever seen.” Cirdan stood again, but instead of reaching for the beer skin or taking another piss, he slung his pack over a shoulder. “I can sense where this is going, and it’s getting too late for fairy-tales. Until tomorrow boys,” he said as he started the short climb up the hill.

Halvar saw the item in his lap with fresh eyes. A book, rare and beautiful, but not just any book—a book from a Green Priest. The young traders sensed the hunter’s trepidation.

“She’ll still buy it though, right?” asked Alfir.

“I think she will,” Halvar replied, “and I think she’ll pay double.”

The entrance to Shelter was carved deep into the rock face, a broad, cavernous opening shuttered by two huge wooden doors, well-weathered by the constant rain. At this late hour, only Nina stood guard, manning the small lean-to adjacent to the entrance. She sat with a candle and watched the three men approach, shrewd, curious eyes peeking out from beneath the hood of her surcoat. She hailed them as they drew closer, shuffling from her post to engage them in conversation.

Halvar had begun to feel the effects of strong beer and several days on the water, and his growing exhaustion had pushed him past the point of polite conversation, but Alfir and Emil, feeling the effects of the beer in a different way, were keen to flirt with Nina. Nina seemed all too keen to indulge the two traders and break the monotony of the night’s watch.

He left them, with the few remaining crates—and their book—and proceeded through the small, unlocked doorway that stood within the larger gate. Beyond stretched a short tunnel, dark and cool,

that burrowed deeper into the hillside before opening up into the huge cavern that housed the settlement proper.

With every step closer to the town, a warm orange glow painted the tunnel in ever more vivid colours. Three dozen paces later he stood at the tunnel mouth. Below, Shelter, bathed in the perpetual light of the huge chimney at the cavern's heart. Halvar paused to take in the sight, Cirdan's words rolling around his head as he did.

It's warm, and that's worth more than you'd imagine.

The floor of the cavern was a shallow bowl, with the tunnel from the entrance opening out onto a broad perimeter path before winding down towards the buildings clustered at its centre. Shelter, the only home Halvar had ever known, was a jumbled collection of huts and shanties, some built from salvaged brick, others from wood and clay, with not a right angle or flat wall between them. While most of the buildings were barely taller than Halvar, some of the more ambitious brickwork facades were two, even three stories tall, some almost brushing the cavern's roof as it sloped above them.

Dotted around the periphery of the cavern were dozens of small tunnels, some natural, some man-made, each leading deeper into the hillside, to supply rooms, the armoury, the kiln room, rooms put to all-manner of other purposes.

Deeper into the stone, many of these tunnels would regularly flood with the changing of the seasons, creating a labyrinth of appearing-and-disappearing rooms that fuelled a thousand rumours among the younger residents. Ghouls that lived in the deep. Disappearances. The rumour mill of youth.

Halvar's heart soared as he looked down into Shelter. A handful of hearth fires still burned, illuminating doorways and window frames and sending thin plumes of smoke up through the shanties' tall chimneys, disappearing into vents carved into the cavern's roof.

Tonight, Shelter was quiet, but he could still hear a few familiar, comforting sounds: the murmur of voices; laughter, low and muffled; snores from the nearest building; and above it all, distant and flat, the sound of rain falling across every inch of Shelter's broad roof.

Halvar followed the path down through the town and towards his cabin, high on the opposite side of the cavern. The short walk took him past Carr's stout stone homestead, dark and quiet, recessed away from the footpath and sheltered from any light. In the darker corners of Shelter, candles lined the foot-ways. In the radius around his house, Carr had extinguished even these, no doubt intent on a restful night to make up for his days on the water. The front facade of his house was entirely plain, with the exception of a small wooden crate, tucked flush against the wall. Inside, Carr's dog, a scrawny, lopsided creature, watched Halvar out of his only functioning eye. The mutt's gaze was strangely comforting.

Halvar continued his descent, winding between houses and yards until he came to the firehouse at the cavern's centre. It was a simple structure: four thin pillars supporting an arched roof, without any walls between; and at its centre, a huge stone chimney that extended up to the roof of the cavern. In the middle of the structure was a massive fire pit, and contained within, a bonfire that burned day and night, extending light and warmth to every one of Shelter's residents. He held out a hand as he walked past, feeling the heat from the stack.

The firehouse sat alone, isolated from nearby buildings by a broad clearing of flat stone, surrounding the chimney on all sides. Halvar recognised the figure tending the flames. Lotte—a squat, balding man of few words. The firemasters were a cantankerous breed, and Lotte, noticing Halvar’s approach, walked away and resumed his duties—rotating planks of fresh-cut wood to ensure they dried evenly—on the opposite side of the pit.

Halvar took off his sodden surcoat and boots and hung them with the dozen others already left to dry on the railing that circled the building’s roof. He warmed himself briefly by the fire, before heading out of the firehouse and up towards the small building he shared with Cirdan.

Quiet, rhythmic snores from beyond the room’s dividing curtain suggested that Cirdan was fast asleep. Settling into his pile of soft skins, Halvar followed suit almost immediately.

Halvar awoke to a day of rest. He stoked a small fire within the hearth, threw on a lightweight poncho to cover his modesty and shuffled out into the main passageway. He filled a bucket from the nearest well, one of a dozen holes bored through the cavern floor into the porous rock beneath, the limestone acting as a natural filter. He splashed his face with cool water and drank his fill from cupped hands, before carrying the bucket back to the house and emptying it into their small cistern.

With no sunlight to mark the start of a new day, the cavern clung to the same soft, murky glow it held during the night, sunrise marked only by a new chorus of sounds echoing around its stone walls. Even at this early hour, the settlement had already started to bustle around him, the different guilds setting about their day.

Returning to the house, he saw that Cirdan had already slipped out, leaving Halvar to enjoy a few lazy moments of solitude. He boiled a cup of the fresh water and infused it with dried nettle and mint leaves, before climbing out of the room's single crooked window, up a ladder and onto the roof of the building.

The two hunters shared a small, basic dwelling, one of a handful set aside for Shelter's hunting guild, but its position high on the perimeter of the cavern afforded a glorious view over the entire settlement. Here Halvar sat, cradling his tea and watching the day take shape before him.

A few of the more pious residents of Shelter were already in the middle of their morning devotional, kneeling on a carpet of blankets laid out in the clearing around the firehouse. No more than half a dozen lengths away, the firemaster's guild was already hard at work, turning out rusted metal drums of new-made charcoal briquettes and re-filling them with chunks of dried, cured wood, read to be re-lit from the central bonfire. This charcoal was Shelter's primary export, keeping their hearths warm and their larders stocked. The blackened, sweating men heaved and shouted as they went about their work, in stark contrast to the quiet meditation of the worshippers opposite.

At the far end of the cavern, a line of people from the Woodsman's guild disappeared into one of the branching tunnels, laden with tools and heavy wooden beams. Theirs was a dangerous lot—so much so that Halvar thought he'd rather encounter another pyre than spend a day deep underground with the woodsmen.

He drained his cup, chewing on the stewed mint leaves as he did. The image of the pyre loomed large in his mind, and with it, the memory of the book Emil and Alfir had shown him the night

before. Halvar hopped down from the roof, dressed in a tunic and walked into the town to find Kiara.

Kiara lived in the highest chamber of the cavern, her quarters accessible only by way of a single sloping walkway that wound around the southern face of the cavern's interior before burrowing deep into the hillside. There were a handful of similar chambers, bored out from the rock at roughly equal distances, each reserved for the members of Shelter's council.

Kiara was young by the standard of the council, but to Halvar's mind, far smarter, if only for her ability to read and write, ancient skills that bordered on the taboo. Stacks of faded papers and scrawled sketches littered her room, stories and secrets of a vanished world locked up in arcane symbols Halvar could barely understand.

The air grew close and damp as he ascended the steep rampart, but as soon as Halvar entered the branching tunnel that lead to her chamber, it cooled quickly, warm air from the cavern's heart mixing with cold air funnelled in from outside. The familiar sound of rain reappeared as he drew closer to the exterior of the cavern. He reached her door and knocked.

"Come in."

Halvar pushed the wooden door open and saw Kiara sitting with her back to him, her long silvered hair tied in a loose bun. As always, she sat at her desk, the paraphernalia of her craft—papers, sheets of willow bark and sticks of charcoal—scattered haphazardly around her. The chamber itself was small and cluttered, but to the right of her desk, two huge wooden doors

stood open and tied back, revealing a natural balcony, overhung with rock, that afforded a view over the entire southern approach to Shelter.

“This ink,” Kiara started, “is atrocious. Did we make it ourselves? Or is it the product of those extortionate traders? I’m not sure which is worse. We’re either incapable of making good quality ink, or else incapable of buying it.” She kept her head low to the table as she spoke, seemingly engrossed in her work.

Halvar walked over to the desk to look at the inkwell she drew from. He dipped his finger into the dark substance. “It’s gritty. Looks like soot, so it’s probably ours. I’ll talk to Lotte and see what happened.” He looked over at the sheet of parchment Kiara was writing on. He could make out a handful of scratched characters. The ink was too dry to run properly.

“Thank you, Halvar, appreciated.” She shooed him away from the papers with a flick of her free hand, before replacing the quill in the inkwell and turning to face him. “See if you can’t find some hawthorn. It’s not as nice as some of the plant inks from downriver, but at least we can make it ourselves. Now, I don’t suppose this is a social call?”

“Emil and Alfir—two of those extortionate traders—have a book for you.”

“Excellent, excellent. I’ll let you be the judge of its quality. Let me know what you had to trade for it and I’ll reimburse you.” Kiara pushed the paper away and stood up, stretching as she did.

“I would, only I don’t know how easily I could value a book from the Green Priests.”

“Well then,” Kiara said, turning to regard him. “What makes you think it’s from the Priests?”

Halvar recounted the traders’ story, following Kiara out onto the balcony as she wandered, deep in thought. She lent on the wooden railing that circled the outcropping and stared down at the figures meandering up the hill.

“And these traders—Alfir and Emil? Do you trust them?”

Halvar was taken aback by the question. “I trust them about this. I’m not sure I’d trust them to make a beer delivery for me, but otherwise—yes.”

“Bring them here immediately. With the book.”

Kiara’s tone brokered no argument. Halvar turned to leave, before feeling a hand on his shoulder. “The less said about this, Halvar, the better.”

It took Halvar a long time to track down the two traders, only discovering their whereabouts once he’d roused a disgruntled Nina from her sleep. The guardswoman had spurned the men’s advances, and intent on drowning their sorrows, Emil and Alfir had wandered back towards the river. Over the years, a handful of drunks had drowned themselves in the dark waters surrounding Shelter, but mercifully, Halvar found the two traders where they’d bedded down in one of the run-down storage barns by the riverside, with damp grass and the remaining skins of beer for company.

The two men were quiet on the walk back to the cavern, nursing sore heads and perhaps a hint of trepidation at being summoned by one of Shelter’s council. Emil carried the book, tucked under one arm.

When they reached her quarters, they found the door propped open and Kiara waiting for them. Her usual charm and soft-edged manner were gone, replaced with a stern, unyielding expression as she spoke to the traders.

“Pass it here.” Kiara took the book and unwrapped it from its plastic bindings. Discarding the fetters to the floor, she placed the book lightly upon her desk. She stood, unmoving, for some time before Emil broke the silence.

“It’s real. I can—we can swear to it. We’d run aground by the ancient city, and there was a canoe—”

“I’ve heard your story,” Kiara replied, without turning to face the men. Her fingers traced the book’s cover.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” asked Alfir. “I can’t read myself but it looks in good condition. The symbols all neat and precise. No damp to it, no damp at all.”

“I don’t need to open it.”

Alfir seemed to relax slightly at her words, but Halvar knew from her posture that worse was to come. Kiara’s tone was so unfamiliar, so unfriendly towards the two men, that Halvar nearly spoke out to reassure the traders. He entertained the different reasons she might have for treating the traders so poorly, but nothing seemed to fit. In the end, respect for Kiara stayed his tongue.

“You’ve bought me nothing,” she said at last, “at least, nothing of merit. My walls are lined with books, just like this. You raised my hopes.” She beckoned Halvar to her side and pointed down at the book’s cover. “Can you read the word emblazoned on the cover?”

Many of the characters looped and curled in an unfamiliar script, but those that made up the book's title, embossed deep into the leather, were large and plain enough that with an effort of will, Halvar could piece them together.

"Chem—chemistry? I don't know the word."

"There's no reason you should. And it's said chemistry, as in kelp. The full title is Chemistry: Volume Seven. Not even a complete set." Kiara squeezed his shoulder. A flicker of warmth lit her features for the barest of moments. "Recipes, of a sort, old and ill-gotten. Nothing we can use to grow our crops or warm our beds. And certainly, nothing to do with the Priests."

She turned to face the traders. "I am disappointed. Still," she continued, "a book is a book. Talk to Halvar after this and he'll see that you're fairly reimbursed. But mark my words," Kiara said as she took a step close to the two traders, "if you try and fool me again, your paddles will never stir water within a day of Shelter. Now leave us."

Alfir seemed eager to leave, turning towards the door in the instant Kiara's gaze turned away, but Emil stood his ground.

"Why would a Green Priest carry around a book of recipes? Why would they treat it with reverence, the way this was? It was in a locked strongbox, and those plastic fetters were found with it. Someone had gone to great care to keep this safe. It doesn't make any sense."

Kiara drew a step closer to the trader until they stood almost face to face, Kiara straightening her posture and drawing up to her full height as she did. "Perhaps your Green Priest would moonlight as

a travelling cook. Or perhaps the abandoned book you found, so lovingly trussed and stowed in an empty kayak in the middle of the wilderness, was abandoned because it's worthless."

The last flicker of resistance seemed to evaporate from behind the man's eyes. Kiara turned away, leaving the two men to disappear back down the walkway towards Shelter's heart. Halvar closed the door behind them as they left.

"I'm sorry, I really thought—"

"Don't apologise." Kiara's tone was brusque. "A book is a book, and I'd rather have every last scrap of paper brought to me than risk overlooking something truly valuable." She paused briefly before continuing. "You did the right thing Halvar."

"Perhaps you can teach me how to read one of their recipes. Cirdan would appreciate it, I'm sure. He wasn't interested when he thought it was a Priest's book, but there's only so long a man can live on strong spirit and cured deer."

A subtle smile danced across Kiara's face. "They're not, precisely speaking, those types of recipes, though it didn't hurt the traders to have their confidence challenged a little. Now, come over to the desk and show me how you'd draw that Ch sound, and all the other characters you can muster while you're at it."

She walked to one of the long, low bookshelves that lined the room's perimeter, tucking the newly acquired book in amongst a hundred other inconsequential tomes, before pulling a spare chair over to the desk. Halvar sat down, relieved that the drama was over, and began scrawling messy characters onto a sheet of willow paper. The pen scratched as it wrote.

SUBMIT YOUR STORY

Ash Tales welcomes complete, edited short fiction about apocalypse, post-apocalypse and dystopia. We are interested in endings, certainly, but also in what people, places and machines become afterwards.

- Send stories of up to **2,500 words**.
- Submit clean Markdown: plain paragraphs, standard emphasis and simple headings where needed.
- We are particularly interested in:
 - asteroid apocalypses
 - fertility-collapse apocalypses
 - technological-failure apocalypses
- Previously published work is welcome; please tell us its publication status.
- You retain your rights. If accepted, Ash Tales requests non-exclusive digital publication rights, including possible podcast adaptation and future anthology use.
- If the story is accepted elsewhere while it is under consideration, email **ryan@ashtales.com** to withdraw it.

Submit at ashtales.com/submit. We read in batches and contact accepted writers directly.