

RELIC

To save humanity, civilisation must be destroyed.

Nature is brutally harsh. She plays no favourites, and she rarely gives a second chance.

Humanity had its opportunity. Now it's her turn.

The Message

“I bring a message on behalf of Earth. You may call it Mother Nature, and you may call it Gaia — which is not entirely correct but will suffice for now due to your lack of comprehension of the natural forces which surround us all.

*“The world has succumbed to a plague.
Mankind’s ingenuity, believed to separate it from ‘animals’, enabled it to inhabit every niche of land, thereby spreading infection across the globe.*

*“Mankind has also developed a lust for wealth and power to the extent that the pollution and desecration are now global, threatening the very fabric of the world.
Just as a microbe cannot fathom the complex world in which it lives, Mankind is also incapable of fathoming the complexity of the world. Every living thing on the earth has a role and is connected — or was.*

Mankind alone has lost its connections, believing itself separate from everything else.

*“A messenger will arrive — Mankind’s one chance to survive.
Those who have lost their connection, who cannot bring themselves to attune, to live in harmony with the earth and the forces around them, will perish.*

*“Resonating with all that is, she is Nature incarnate. It would be foolish to thwart her, for Gaia’s wrath is never subtle, always fatal. Treat her well.
Mankind’s continued existence relies on its ability to learn respect for the world.
Adapt or die.”*

Vitor Magalhães Xaschoal

Wai-wai shaman – 2046

Prologue

“Why is it mosquitoes never bite you?” Ken looked to his daughter as he swatted away yet another unrelenting bloodsucker. Given the humidity, she was still only in her shorts and singlet, not that the weather ever caused her discomfort.

“My good genes and their poor taste, I guess.” Rhyllien shrugged. “How much longer to Oriximiná?” Rhyll watched the darkening rainforest pass slowly. The boat, more a barge really, drifted with the sluggish current, requiring only the occasional polling to move it away from a potential grounding on the rocks, fallen trees or mud banks.

“It was going to be tomorrow, but with that old motor out of commission, add another day, maybe two.” Ken sat his wiry frame beside her, dangling his feet in the water as well. The water was nice and cool, in contrast with the hot, clammy night air.

“Watch out for the piranhas.” Rhyll pointed.

“Where?” Ken exclaimed, pulling his feet out immediately.

Rhyll burst out laughing. “They’re close by but won’t bother us.”

“Picking on your old man now?” He grinned, repositioning himself.

She splashed water at him. “There’s nothing old about you ... except your jokes. How have you and Mum survived in jungles all your life falling for tricks like that?”

“Perhaps you’re smarter than the both of us? Speaking of your mum, when we get to Oriximiná, remind me to radio back to camp to keep her updated. She’ll worry about the delay otherwise.”

“You want me to call? You know she’ll give you an earful about the motor.”

“I’ll have you know, young lady”—her dad sat up, all dignified—“I am quite capable of handling verbal abuse from your mother.”

“Yeah, especially when she’s a hundred kilometres away, living with a tribe the rest of the world knows nothing about.” Her teeth shone in the moonlight with her wide grin.

Ken nodded. “That does help,” he conceded. “She’s quite a formidable woman.”

“I can’t wait until we are all back on the *Aurora*,” she said, and sighed.

“Yes, the *Aurora*’s a grand boat but no good for these waters. We were lucky to get this.”

“Lucky?” Rhyll shook her head. “I believe we recently discussed your bargaining prowess?”

He patted the deck. “Well, yes. She has a few leaks ... a small cabin to keep the rain off us.”

“You call that a cabin?”

“Lean-to, then.”

“And a dodgy motor—”

“Okay. All true, but given the situation with the university, we had no time to delay. They want these artefacts urgently.”

“I hope it’s worth it.”

“I’m sure they’re a game changer. If I’m right, it will set historians spinning. You won’t find these in your studies.”

“Wouldn’t the Smithsonian have paid more for never-before-seen relics?” Rhyll asked.

“Undoubtedly. They do have deeper pockets, and these are priceless to some collectors, but the relics belong here, to these people. Better for them to decide what they do with their heritage. It’s not our decision to make. And it isn’t about the money.”

“You wouldn’t be you if it was.” Rhyll had always been proud of the ethics of her parents. It was how she was raised — caring for the indigenous populations, their cultures, and the environment. Regardless of what continent they were on.

They watched as their shadows, cast by the lantern hooked over the cabin rail behind them, undulated on the water’s surface.

“That’s *Aedes aegypti*.” Rhyll pointed to the mosquito currently resting on her arm.

Her dad glanced over. “I’m still glad we got those booster shots. They can carry—”

“Yellow fever, dengue, chikungunya, and Zika virus. Wasted on me though, since they don’t bite me ... like the piranhas.” She grinned.

“You’ve been keeping up with your studies, then.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, and I much rather this life than sitting in a stuffy classroom.” She cringed. “Fancy getting an education out of books alone. Out here is the best place for me, and I love every part of it. Besides, I’m ‘one with Nature’, after all. The village shaman said so.”

“He did take a keen interest in you. I think he was trying to marry you off to his son.”

“Really?” Rhyll looked genuinely surprised.

“Oh yes.” He nodded.

“Considering your skills with bartering, I’d be interested to hear what you said.”

“Three goats and a working motor and she’s yours.”

“Dad!” she smacked his shoulder.

“Mind you, they did admire your red hair and green eyes. There’s the blood of Celtic kings running through your veins you know.”

“King Ellis? Doesn’t sound very Celtic.”

“Kenric Elisedd — an old Welsh name.”

“Ah well, royal blood must make me worth ten goats at least!”

“It’s plain to see I’m not too good at haggling.” He chuckled. “Perhaps I’ll leave the bartering to you and your mother.”

Rhyll looked up. “Can you hear that?”

Ken turned his head slightly and waited. “No ... What is it?”

“I thought I heard another motor.”

“Sweetheart, apart from the twenty-year-old generator back at the dig, this bunged-up motor is the only mechanical device in a hundred kilometres.”

“It sounded like it was coming from downstream.” Rhyll remained silent for a few more minutes, listening for the elusive noise. Even with the full moon, upriver was still dark, especially in the shadows of the vast Amazon jungle.

Ken stood up, careful not to slip on the deck with his wet feet. “Time to find a place to moor, I guess. Can’t be drifting all night now, otherwise we’ll capsize in the rapids.” He picked up the long pole and pushed towards the bank.

“It’s shallow enough here,” Rhyll said, once they brushed up against the reeds. “I’ll do it. Otherwise, you’ll be picking more of those *haementeria ghilianii* off all night.” Rhyll pointed to the two leeches already attached to his calves. “Leeches never seem to be interested in my blood either.”

“Bugger. They are relentless.”

“That’s nature for you. She never gives up and doesn’t play favourites.”

“Whose side are you on?” he asked, as he removed the leeches by sliding his fingernail along his skin to the mouth and pushing sideways.

“Let me think ... Who was going to barter me for a few goats?”

“They were very fine goats.”

She laughed as she slipped up to her hips into the dark waters. Feet sinking into the ankle-deep mud, manoeuvring the barge to shore was easy enough. Rhyll then waded up the side, grabbed the mooring line, and stepped through the maze of tall reeds to find something firm to tie it to. She stopped to take a closer look at the reeds in the bright moonlight. Touching them, feeling their texture ... the flow of energy. An introduced species, she decided. The effects of human habitation even extended this far.

A gunshot shocked her to stop momentarily. A motor burst into the silence of the night. Rhyll turned, but the river and barge were hidden by the mass of reeds. Pulling on the rope, she started moving back through the morass. The motor died down. Only the sound of a boat wallowing in its wake remained.

“Wasn’t there another with him?” She heard a gruff male voice. The tall reeds swayed as the boat’s wake swelled through them.

“That daughter. Maybe she’s hiding in the cabin,” a second, rougher voice said.

There were sounds of boots on wood. Two men? It would only take them a moment to search the cabin.

Terrified of what she’d see, Rhyll edged closer. She hadn’t heard her father speak or call out since the gunshot. Through the growth, Rhyll saw the low bow of the barge a metre or so away. The other boat was unseen, obscured by the bulk of the cabin. Ducking lower in the water, she moved to the barge and slowly pulled herself along the side. Then she saw her father, his body half hanging over the side, his right arm dangling in the water, leaving a darker trail.

Tears welled up, but Rhyll stifled her cry. As she neared him, she saw blood running down his arm. It moved! She hoped he was only dazed or unconscious. As Rhyll edged closer, she realised it was simply the eddy of the water. Her father was dead.

She reached out to hold his hand one last time, but felt the cold, hard surface of his gun. Rhyll hated guns, as did her mum, but she understood that with the life they led, some sort of weapon became a necessity. Her dad insisted they learn how to use it, and every few months he would give them a refresher, along with some martial arts training whenever they could find an instructor. She released the gun from her father’s grip, carefully, to avoid splashing.

An unseen arm reached out of the darkness, and Rhyll gasped at the intense pain as she was hauled out of the water by her wet locks and dragged onto the barge.

“Look what we have here,” the man with the gruff voice said.

“Good,” his partner replied. “We got what we come for.” He held up the box containing the relics. “Let’s go, John. Remember, no loose ends.”

“Seems such a waste.” The one called John leered at the wet singlet clinging to her body.

“Sure is. No arguments from me. But our orders are ‘no witnesses’. You going to do her or you want me?”

Before he was able to respond, Rhyll raised her father’s gun and pulled the trigger.

The grip on her hair stopped immediately, as John stared stupidly at the small hole in his chest.

Rhyll twisted and fired several rounds at the other man diving for his boat before John collapsed on top of her, pinning her down. By the time she struggled out from under his dead weight, the boat was speeding away. She dropped the gun and crawled the short distance to her father, rolling him out of the water and cradling his head. "Dad, Dad, Dad" Tears flowed freely as she wept, her whole body wracked with sobs. In her grief, she failed to notice the motor of the other boat had stopped. Pain exploded in her side, pitching her sideways and knocking the breath out of her.

As she lay there in agony, weak and barely able to move, she heard the boat approaching again. Feebly, she groped for the gun, every move torture. The deck was slick with the blood of her father, of John, and now her own. She felt the boat bump when it came alongside. Boots approached.

"Ah, shit. I think John's gone."

"Make sure the girl's dead, and let's get the hell out of here," a third voice said.

"Don't have to tell me twice."

Rhyll's heart pounded. *They are really going to kill me!* She heard the rifle click behind her head. She let out a gasp.

"Bugger it."

"What's the matter now?"

"Bloody empty."

"Shit, Harry. Reload and get it done!"

"Yeah, yeah." Harry fumbled at his belt for another round.

It was a struggle to turn, but she wanted to face the bastard who'd murdered her father. Overhead, a flash of lightning lit up some of his features: bearded, close-cropped hair, and a hook nose. The silhouette of the man stood there. He was sliding the round into the chamber when he noticed her staring at him.

"Sorry, darlin'. I've no choice." He cocked the weapon and pointed it directly at her.

A gun barrel looks immense when pointed at your head. "Everyone has a choice." Rhyll refused to close her eyes. Her body was getting numb. "Even morons like you." She felt the blood soaking into her shirt and sticking to her skin.

The shot didn't come. As if in slow motion, Harry dropped to his knees and slumped forward, forcing her to the floor with his bulk on top of her. The rifle went off, but the bullet ricocheted off the deck.

She struggled to get out from under Harry. That was when she saw the blow-dart protruding from his neck.

It was only the slickness of the blood that enabled her to finally pull her arms free. She then rolled Harry off her and pushed him over the side with her muddy feet. Wearily looking towards the idling boat drifting nearby, she noticed another figure collapsed over the wheel, not moving. Rhyll turned her attention to the dark shoreline and the reeds. Nothing. Not that she expected to see anyone if her saviours didn't want to be seen.

In her stupor, she crawled back to her father. With his murder, their perfect life was ruined. She turned to John's body. Did his hand twitch?

"You still alive, John?" she muttered. "One way to find out." Blinking through the tears and grief, Rhyll crawled over and pushed him to the water, eventually rolling him over the side with a splash. It felt like it took ages, and her breathing laboured, but it was done. She coughed. When she wiped her lips, she saw blood on her hands.

John drifted in the dark waters with Harry's body, pockets of air in their shirts keeping them both afloat. He suddenly sputtered, flopping over. The coughing went on for a full minute before he struggled to his feet in the shallow water.

Frantically, Rhyll reached for the rifle, aimed and fired. Nothing. *Damn it!* In his haste to kill her, she realised, Harry had fired the one and only round. And missed.

Weakly, John managed to get close enough to the barge and gripped the low edge with his one good hand.

There was no time to search for her dad's pistol in the dark. Rhyll crawled to the edge, awkwardly swinging the rifle at him like a club, nearly dropping it in the process.

John ducked, the butt glancing off his head. "That hurt, bitch," he said, holding his head where blood was trickling down from a gash. "I reckon I can wait it out." He was breathing heavily.

Rhyll knew the truth of it; her energy ebbed minute by minute; second by second. Only anger had kept her going until now. More lightning flashed. *That's funny*, she thought, *not a cloud in the sky*. A cool breeze caressed her face, in startling contrast to the humidity that had beset them for weeks.

You are one with nature. The village shaman's voice echoed in her head.

"Now my minds going," she mumbled. The blood seeped down her back and side.

... *One with nature* ...

"Nothing ever bites you ..." she heard her father's voice say.

She smiled at the memory and her dad's funny reaction. "Watch out for the piranhas," Rhyll muttered in reply.

... *one with nature* ...

“Oh, I’m not worried about fish.” John’s voice broke her from her reverie.

“Not worried about piranhas?” Rhyll thought hard about them. “You should be,” she forced the words out. She wished deeply. *Piranhas. Piranhas.* “They haven’t feasted for a long time.”

Collari ... you are one with nature ...

Her body started trembling. Going into shock, a part of her mind thought. Rhyll slumped to the side. Piranhas ... piranhas ... piranhas ...

She slowly fell sideways, unmoving beside her father’s body, oblivious to the screaming coming from the frenzied water.

~~~~~