



The rainforest was never really quiet. In fact, it was always loud, a boisterous chorus of shrieking monkeys, laughing birds, hissing reptiles, and clattering insects. Somewhere nearby, hidden in the verdant green, a small creek added its own melody to the song. Above it all, surrounding it all, was the thrumming rhythm of curtains of rain on a billion leaves, rain warm as tears, the lifeblood of the rainforest. The thumping, living heartbeat of the jungle.

It couldn't be farther from the horrific silence of the Yucatan. The scars those Azzie *filhos da puta* had lashed out of the land and the spirit world itself. The nourishing rain turned into another enemy, washing the fragile soil down and out in streams and mudslides, leaving the exposed bedrock under the twisted branches of the forest stripped bare by Azzie chemicals. All the animals, all the birds fled. The earth barren. Only humans could stand the blight. Always humans, like a creeping plague, a festering infection...

The *pajé* clenched his fists, turned his scarred face up to the green canopy. The rain fell on his face, soft as silk against his unmarred skin, barely felt against the thick scarred skin on his face, arms, and back. His own private rite, anointing himself in her tears.

His anger fueled him. Deliberately, he recalled the battles of the Yucatan. The scars on his body read like a personal diary, a vivid reminder of each fight where he'd been too slow, too careless... This one, where the planes spraying herbicide swooped low over his unit, and in his haste to protect them, he left himself uncovered. It had left a fine pattern of livid red scars on his back. And this one, where an Azzie soldier had swept napalm across his left arm. The skin had returned, white and puckered, but it never regained sensation, feeling. The delicate tracing of pink knife scars on his face, where an officer had briefly tortured him with a hot blade. His bald skull. The months of fighting against an enemy that relentlessly poisoned the land and people there had taken its toll, the constant exposure to toxins and poisons had made his hair fall out. But that wasn't the worse... When he looked within, when he open his Sight, he saw the deepest wound of all. He saw his own death stalking him, a unrelenting reminder of the *cabrões* poison. His magic could slow that down, but it always remained, slowly growing, a creeping black tide that would someday consume him.

He had no intention of dying that way. He was a warrior, a soldier in a war the world's corporations had yet to even acknowledge. He would die a warrior's death some day. A good death.

But not today. Today he had work to do.

Most of the men and women and creatures of Primeira Vaga were out on a training exercise, and the ones that remained were biding out the afternoon shower in the grand old house of the fazenda. They would not intrude on the grove today.

The *senzala*, the old slave quarters, behind him was empty today as well. While the soldiers of Primeira Vaga used the old coffee fazenda as a barracks, the senzala was the heart of their compound. The terreiro, the sacred ritual ground, occupied the center of the U-shaped senzala building. The grove of gameleira torcida trees grew right up to the edge of the terreiro, making the grove and the ritual ground merge into one single holy ground.

The *pajé* kneeled at the center of the terreiro, in front of the giant gameleira tree that was their totem, their altar. Tempo, the sacred tree, the great orixá of the forest, was the patron of this terreiro. As always before the

orixá he was stripped to the waist and wore only loose white pants. His feet sank slightly into the soaked earth, as at the orixa's feet, he spread his offerings: fragrant scarlet flowers, ripe tropical fruits, vivid blue and green feathers.

A few meters away, the gameliera torcida trees held tightly to their own sacrificial offerings, rotting human corpses entwined in their twisted roots. Some still bore remains of uniforms, Aztlaner patches and rank insignia tarnished by the unrelenting assault of nature, others wore city garb. All enemies. No innocents.

As always he was alone and not alone; he could half-see the spirits, the powerful avatars of the forest, looking on from within the trees, dancing between the twisted branches of the gameleiras. They were still angry and he made their righteous anger his. The smell of burned wood still clung to the humid air.

César began to drum. His anger and hatred fueled him, his hands beat a primal rhythm from the raw skin of the drums. The tempo rose, becoming a savage relentless rhythm, then becoming fluid and changing. His heartbeat rose, became fluid, slowly matching the thrumming tempo of the rain. The *senzala* receded from his senses, as the blood in his ears beat to the rhythm of the drums. He added his voice to the chorus of the forest, his guttural song rising up to the highest branches of the gameliera tree.

As he chanted, the air grew dense, the light dimmed. The forest canopy thickened, impossibly long green branches stretching out to form a verdant ceiling. Fey lights shimmered and flickered into view among the trees. Fluid, organic shapes with limbs like branches moved among the foliage. The avatars danced among the curled branches of the gameleiras. The smell of wet earth and moist wood flooded the terreiro. The sounds of the forest grew louder as the creatures flocked to the grove, settling on branches and bushes and hanging vines to watch the solitary man. The trees themselves sang, adding their rumbling voices to the chant, adding to the roaring chorus.

The pajé, Primeira Vaga's shaman, smiled, closed his eyes, and cast himself out into the energy of the forest. For an instant it almost consumed him. The sheer lifeforce that he had tapped reverberated in his soul; amplified it tested his limits, his worthiness. It pried the scars and wounds, the memories and the pain. It did not find him wanting.

Buoyed by the life and power of the great forest, and guided by the avatars, he took flight through the verdant canopy into the spirit worlds beyond.

She was waiting for him. She always was. As she was for all her children, even those who had forsaken her.

For an instant, humbled, he basked in her acceptance, in her love, in her silent approval. She alone knew him. She alone understood him. He dared not look at her for fear of being consumed. He knelt at her feet, his head bowed, his anger and hatred, his fear and his passion laid out before her like a sacrifice.

"It is done," he whispered reverently as he knelt. "The dream seeds have been sown. They have no idea but there is no corner of the earth where they have not found purchase. It is only fitting that their own darkness, the cancer their world has engendered, will be their downfall."

Silence met his announcement. That was always the same. It had troubled him the first times. He had expected the boisterous song

of the jungle, the roar of the Amazon, something. With time he had learned that the silence had meaning, that waves of power and emotion were her voice in this realm. Like a child, he craved her attention, he sought some sign that he had been heard. But this time he could feel her attention upon him, some minimal part of her focused on him.

For an instant he was overwhelmed a flash of primal pleasure, of pure savage bliss. A lover's embrace, a mother's love, and something else, something that transcended any earthly description. It was all that he could do to remain aware, to not lose himself in her. He grasped for something, some measure of control, an anchor. The message he had to deliver.

"We proceed with the work, but the dream seeds are sown. We have produced the elixir and those who tasted it were immediately entranced, as we knew they would be. We chose the Olaya to sell. Greedy fools, blinded by their own avarice. They underestimate us, and they know almost nothing. Nothing that could harm us. Nothing that could harm you."

The rush of emotion returned, skewering him, it flooded him. And this time he felt it questioning, asking... something. It was always the same, nothing so simple or crude as human words, just raw primal emotion.

"Yes, there was violence and blood, stirred up by the unwitting dream peddlers and the tools they chose to use. A sacrifice if you will. But that has worked for us, as well. The fools have sent it to every sprawl on the planet, spread the drug out so quickly and thoroughly, determined to squeeze every ounce of profit from it, that they practically destroyed themselves. Too much, too fast, and now... now we send no more. It does not matter. There will be withdrawal, there will be more blood, it is inevitable, but it is a stream compared to the river that is to come. It is also good. They will think it over and they will all soon forget. Few suspect, fewer still will remember. Meanwhile the dream seeds have found purchase.

"Yes, the Olaya were betrayed, broken. And, yes, we were betrayed as well. Yagé was weak, far weaker than we thought. She betrayed us, deserted us. And for that she will pay.

"But it doesn't matter!" he stammered out, feeling a tinge of disapproval in her. "It matters not. The seedlings are in place. They await only the Dreamtime. Forget Yagé. Her desertion has harmed nothing. She has a small sapling, and the scientist, Riveros. If she decides to make more tempo, sell it by the hands of those Azzie *sacos de merda*... what irony! They are greedier still than the Olaya, for their profits, they won't see what they do, no more than those Olaya fools ever did. They will poison themselves, just as they poisoned us.

"Yagé doesn't know of our plans. She cannot betray what she does not know and she cannot speak of what she cannot put in human terms. Forget Yagé."

The shaman ventured to look up, to look in her face. "If you wish it, give me a sign; I will hunt her down and kill her with my own hands. But I believe Yagé can continue to serve our purpose."

He waited, waited for the decision. When it came, it was barely a caress, a fluttering in his mind. He again bowed down, so low his forehead rested on the ground at her feet.

"As you wish, Mother," said César da Silva before he was cast out of heaven.