

RELIC - EXCERPT

THE DEATH WAVE CHRONICLES
BOOK 1

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RHYLL REGAINED consciousness and looked around in confusion, still coming to terms with her predicament, the devastation around her, and the loss of the local tribes. She had little idea what to do about it.

Tentatively she felt her cheek, unable to detect any swelling, but it throbbed and was sure to be bruised — maybe a black eye. Her knees were sore from her stumble, and her head had a lump where she struck the cupboard. She felt dampness in her hair, and her fingers came away with a trace of blood. The drumming noise in her head resolved into torrential rain on the tin roof.

She had little idea how long she'd been unconscious, but the realisation of her backpack still being in Lewis' office made her seriously consider escaping. She didn't want anyone rifling through her belongings and finding the other crystals. After she recovered her composure, Rhyll stood to pace the room, thinking of escape.

She stopped in shock.

There was a man lying on the floor in front of the door. She stepped closer. He had blood from cuts on his cheek and above his eyes. From the amount of blood pooled on the concrete floor, he had been there for a while.

Rhyll looked around, but there was nothing to clean the wounds with. She checked for a pulse.

"At least you're breathing," she sighed with relief. He didn't look like one of the mine people. Sunburnt, not tanned; dressed in jeans and a shirt with one of the crapiest designs she had ever seen.

"Hey, mister." She shook him a few times, but when he didn't respond she checked for a pulse again. Satisfied he was only unconscious, Rhyll stood to pace the room, thinking of escape.

The floor area between the shelving was three paces wide and five long. The storeroom had a long narrow window near the ceiling. It was frosted but allowed a small amount of light in. There were some boxes in one corner full of papers, and an empty, metal bookcase below the window.

“Not too bright, any of you,” she chuckled as she tested her weight on the shelves. They bent slightly, but when she moved closer to the sides, she found they gave greater support. As long as she was careful, the shelves shouldn’t topple or buckle.

Placing her feet near a support, Rhyll was able to reach the window when she was a few shelves from the top. The latch moved easily, but the window had been painted over so many times it wouldn’t budge. The window wasn’t frosted as she’d first thought, but covered in built-up grime and dust on the outside. Either way, visibility was still nil, and she had no idea who or what was on the other side. She’d have to break it to escape and considered the best way to do so was to use her boot.

If the man came to, maybe they could both climb out.

“If they didn’t damage him too much,” she considered.

Climbing to the top of the bookcase, she lay on her side to bring her leg up to reach the zipper on the side of her boot. It was precarious, as the shelf wasn’t that deep, but the little bit of extra room with the windowsill helped.

Carefully turning to face the window again, she firmly tapped the glass with her heel. It was enough to make a spider web of cracks. Putting her hand into the boot, she pushed, hoping the glass would gently splinter instead of smashing all over the place. She pressed against it firmly. With a snap that sounded very loud in the confined space,

the glass gave way. Her hand went through, and the boot dropped to the mud outside.

A quick glance outside showed no one in the vicinity. It was wet and overcast, but the longer shadows indicated she'd been unconscious for several hours at the least. She removed her other boot and used it to remove the jagged edges, brushing the shards to the side. Cautiously, she put her head through to check the area fully. She guessed she was on the east side of the building, towards the northern end. It was over a two-metre drop to the ground. The rain lessened as the front of the storm passed.

She heard coughing. A man she recognised from the office stumbled around the corner. He leant heavily on the side of the building, threw up, then staggered off towards the accommodation units. He didn't look back or seem to care about the teeming rain.

Looking up, she found the only thing she could hang onto was the window frame, and that didn't look like it would hold her weight as it was so weathered and buckled.

The other option, besides falling, was to go feet first on her stomach and use the inside edge of the bookcase to hang on to before dropping. Regardless of how she decided to get out, there were still a few shards embedded in the rock-hard putty that would slice her belly to ribbons. Although it would take extra time, she could see no option but to climb back down and retrieve the cardboard from the boxes to use as a lining to slide over the sharp edges.

Back on the floor, Rhyll noticed the man sitting up.

"Nice to see you're awake. You okay?" she asked.

"Which one of you is talking to me?" he asked, tentatively touching his swollen eyes.

"There's just me. I'm Rhyllien, or Rhyll for short."

"Rhyllien?" He looked up. "What's that, Scottish? Or are you clearing your throat?"

"Welsh, I'm told. It has a *hy* in it. Sort of guttural."

"I'm Dan. Anyway, thanks for getting me into this mess."

"What? How did I do it? I only just got here myself."

"You got caught, so they increased their surveillance and found me."

"And that's my fault?"

"Glad you agree."

Rhyll shook her head, failing to understand his logic, and continued with her original plan. This Dan was an idiot and could worry about himself. She quickly strode to the stack of boxes.

"What are you doing?" Dan was standing now, leaning against the wall and looking at the broken window.

"What's it look like I'm doing?" She emptied a box and then flattened it.

"Looks like you're going to get me another beating when they see us scuttling around outside."

"Us? You're assuming you were invited."

They both heard rapid footsteps approaching in the corridor. Before they could think or do anything, the door swung open.

To her surprise, it was Grant, not Burgess, in the doorway.

He pointed the gun at Rhyll. "You and I are going for a ride. Get a move on," he said earnestly. He was white and shaken, blood dripping from his nose onto his shirt.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Everyone's sick. I'm leaving before I get it. I'm to take you with me."

"Why's everyone sick? Where are we going? You're already bleeding." Rhyll pointed.

“What!” Grant wiped his nose, alarmed at the blood he saw. “We can talk on the way. Let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere, with you or any— Ow!”

Grant had reached in and grabbed her long hair, pulling her roughly into the corridor.

“No time to argue.”

Dan limped forward. Grant waved the gun at him. “Don’t be a hero. You want to die quick or slow?”

“I’d rather die old.”

“Slow it is then.” Grant kicked the door closed and locked it.

“You can’t leave him!” she exclaimed. “Let go of the hair. I’ll be glad to be out of here.”

Grant let her go, shoving her toward the main office.

“I’ll need my backpack.” Rhyll went to the stairs.

“We don’t have time.”

“You go then. I’ll stay, thanks. I’ve never been sick.”

“We’re both going, I said.” Grant pushed her through the door into the main office.

“And I said *not without my backpack!*” Rhyll shrugged his weakening grip off and kicked him in the shins.

Grant grimaced with pain, trying to backhand her, but she easily avoided it. He was slow and too preoccupied with rubbing his leg.

She noticed quite a few of the men were absent from the office. Those remaining were either vomiting into their bins or leaning on the tables with heads in hands. Some were coughing, and others seemed more delirious, muttering to themselves. She guessed the others, like the man she’d seen earlier, had returned to their rooms.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Listen, girl.” Grant made to grab for her, but she

dodged. He started coughing again. "We haven't time to argue," he rasped.

"Exactly." Rhyll ducked his skinny, outstretched arm and took the stairs two at a time. She heard yelling and banging from the back room. Continuing up the stairs, she quickly entered Lewis' office, almost tripping over Burgess; a bullet to the side of the head had made him a gruesome, bloody mess.

The room also smelt of bile. Lewis was slumped in his chair. His desk and the area around him showed evidence of projectile vomiting.

"What's happening to everyone?" she cried, looking at him in bewilderment. His breathing was very shallow, and he was unconscious and covered in reddish spots. *Measles?*

She hated him and what he did, and for his threats, yet she took pity all the same. Rhyll loosened his collar before fetching the water and a glass. She tried to get him to drink, but he didn't respond. The water dribbled down his chin to his soiled shirt.

Rhyll could hear Grant gasping downstairs, and Dan was banging on the door. She collected her pack. Her green crystal was nowhere in sight. A rummage in the drawers proved futile.

"Any idea where my grandmother's heirloom is?" she asked from the top of the stairs.

"It's safe," Grant replied.

"Can I have it? It means a lot to me." Rhyll came down the stairs.

"I don't think so"—he coughed—"It means more to others. Let's go." He bent over with another coughing fit.

"Are you okay?" Rhyll stepped closer.

"Does it sound like it?" he wheezed. "We're going! Or you can damn well stay. Right now, I don't give a shit." Using

the wall as support, Grant lurched to the front door. He stumbled, landing awkwardly on his knee. He went down with a cry of pain, and the gun went off. The bullet hit the floor and ricocheted into a wall.

While he was kneeling and whining, Rhyll took the opportunity to race to the storeroom and unlock the door. She ducked as Dan lurched through, fists first, running into the opposite wall.

"You came back." He sounded surprised when he turned.

"I'll probably regret it." She ran back along the corridor.

Grant was up, sweating heavily, leaning against the door-frame. He waved the gun. "He can't come."

"Can you walk?" she asked him.

Grant hobbled a few feet.

"I'll take that as a no. You're too heavy for me, so you'll need Dan's help."

"Why would I?" Dan asked.

"Cos if you don't, I'm as good as dead." Grant's breath was laboured. "I may as well shoot you both now." He cleared his throat. "And I've got the codes for our flight."

"Sounds fair." Dan grabbed Grant's arm and put it over his shoulder to help take the weight off his bad leg. Outside, they staggered through the light drizzle to the end of the building and the carport where the jeep was parked. Grant stumbled a few times, but the trio finally reached the car. Rhyll opened the back door, and Grant more or less fell into the back seat. "I hope you can drive," she said to Dan.

Dan ran around to the driver's seat.

"I need my boot." Rhyll splashed her way around the building, spying it in the mud below the broken window. Avoiding the broken glass, she shook it in case shards had fallen inside, before putting it on.

The jeep came sliding around the corner and skidded to a halt next to her. Dan flung the door open.

She jumped in. "Where's the landing strip?"

Dan answered by planting his foot and heading to the exit gate of the compound.

Rhyll was thrown back in the chair, her boot half on. She glared at him. "Can you drive?"

The car crashed through the boom gate as they whizzed past the guard shelter.

"There's a landing field just down here."

"How did you know?"

"I passed it when they brought me in."

She looked at the dead landscape: dirt and rock, with only weeds now replacing the once magnificent forests, water torrenting along the ditches on the sides of the road.

Dan swerved, turning towards the airstrip, crashing through the gate. It flung open, one side springing back and clipping the tail. The car lurched as the road dipped suddenly. The airstrip was in a long depression between mounds of overburden.

"Where's the plane?" he asked as he slowed the jeep.

"Hoverpod on way," Grant wheezed, leaning against the window, leaving mist and red flecks of spittle.

"Is that it?" Rhyll pointed.

A sleek, white hoverpod approached from the north.

Grant nodded, pulling the door handle. He half fell, half staggered out.

"I've never seen one before." She marvelled at it.

"No?" Dan wondered. "Even down here they're fairly common — generally AI-controlled." As he walked around the car, he noticed the flat tyre, and a piece of metal poking out of the grill; water dripped underneath.

"AI?" Rhyll asked.

"Where have you been, girl?" Dan looked at her. "Artificial Intelligence. It's fully programmed and automatic. Voice recognition mostly." Dan pointed to Grant. "Must be something important to send one. This model's fairly upmarket. Or it could be the cheaper version with a remote pilot only."

The hoverpod gracefully descended, squelching on the hardpacked surface.

Rhyll noticed an oval-shaped icon depicting Earth on the side.

"Let's move!" Grant hobbled closer and touched a panel on its sleek side with his palm. A door swung up and as the steps folded out he staggered inside.

Rhyll and Dan walked closer, looking in as Grant collapsed into a chair. He fumbled with a water bottle, dropping a tube to the floor, tablets tumbling out.

Climbing in and wiping the rain off her face, Rhyll was amazed at the interior with its smooth, cushioned panels. It looked nothing like the interior of any aircraft she'd seen before. After she placed her backpack on the carpeted floor, she sat in the soft seat, noting there were only two. "Where's Dan sitting?"

"He's not coming." Grant shuffled through the contents of a first-aid box.

"What do you mean? He helped you."

"The boss only wants you and the diamo—"

"Why me?"

Grant didn't answer. "Door close," he commanded.

"Hey!" Dan jumped on the top step, the stair servos whining in protest at the sudden weight increase.

Grant pointed the gun, his hand shaking, and fired.

Dan lost his grip, falling hard onto the landing strip.

"No!" Rhyll shrieked. She reached down, grabbing the closest thing. The hard case of the first-aid kit smashed

against Grant's face, bloodying his nose more. He yelped in pain, dropping the pistol.

Releasing the case so she could pull herself out of the chair, Rhyll scampered outside to assist Dan.

"Dan?" she cried. Seeing him lying there, eyes closed, she checked his pulse. His shoulder was bleeding, but he was alive. Kneeling in the mud, Rhyll started to tear open the shirt.

"Hey, this is an expensive shirt," he complained, coming to.

"You actually paid money for it?" Rhyll resorted to undoing the buttons. "Roll onto your side. I need to see if it went through." She peeled the shirt over his shoulder and upper arm. "Good. It's just a graze. You were lucky." She heard a whimper of pain from the pod.

"Stay there." Spurred into action, Rhyll went back to grab the first-aid kit and her backpack. On a whim, she went through Grant's pockets, quickly finding what she was looking for. Grabbing her crystal and the medkit, she kicked the gun out the door and raced down the steps after it.

"What's that asshole doing?" Dan gasped.

"Bleeding like you." Opening the medkit and shielding it from the rain with her body, she rummaged through its contents. One of the things her parents had taught her was basic first-aid. They had spent their lives in the jungle or some other exotic location, miles away from civilisation. Among the sundry packets of bandages, there was a spray bottle of antiseptic.

"This'll probably sting."

From the face-pulling he made, it did. After liberally spraying the area, she wrapped the wound with a firm bandage. "Hurt anywhere else?"

"Only if you prod it." He winced. "I think I banged my head, too."

She felt the bump. Her fingers were damp with rain-water and blood.

"Yeah. You'll live. Take these," she said, handing him a couple of tablets.

"Any water?"

"Nope. Just chew and stop being a sook." Rhyll used one of the larger bandages to make a sling. "As for Grant, I hit him with this case," she added to his previous question. "I think I knocked him out."

"Way to go, girl." As he spoke, they saw the roof of a speeding car on the other side of the embankment separating the landing strip from the road. The vehicle drove straight towards the compound.

"Lewis said the authorities would be here in a few hours. I guess it's about that time."

"The jeep's cactus, but we can lie low out of this rain and wait for them to leave. I doubt they'll come down here; no reason to." He sat up, trying to stand. "Want to help?"

She pulled Dan to his feet and supported him as they staggered to the car.

He half fell, half slumped into the back seat. "At least we're out of the rain." Dan winced as he reclined.

"Actually, I like it."



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