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**Zubin: Bark of this small tree is
chewed to treat snake bites**

Pedro Meza crouched in the damp shade of his cement hut, studying the morning light as it flickered through needle-sized holes in the tin roof. He had intended to plug those leaks for months but never seemed to find the time or the energy. There were almost always patients waiting to see him, always healing work to be done. But today, he had to admit to himself, today was different. No one waited outside his open door. Only the sun greeted him this morning, dancing on the floor of his home like Dreams and Spirits of the Ancestors.

Many of his fellow Mayans had begun to distrust his ideas about healing, preferring the synthetic medicines imported from Belize City or Miami, like the powerful, cocoon-shaped pills that cooled the lethal fever of malaria. The young, especially, thought his ideas about healing spirits were quaint. He was a relic of an older, less-educated time when the village had no contact with the outside world. Some, like the two boys who carried their boom box everywhere they went

in the village, openly ridiculed him about his *sastun* and his chanting, calling him a witch doctor or, worse, just a crazy old man.

Although Pedro Meza often surprised himself with his youthful energy, he admitted he was an old man. Every morning, his arthritis seemed more severe, his breathing more difficult. At eighty-three, he was one of the last surviving *curanderos* in the Maya Mountains of Belize. Despite the ridicule of the younger residents of the town, many patients—some not even Mayan—traveled miles to be treated by him. Payment was food or articles of clothing. Pedro Meza was content to live simply, focused on his work, and there were days when he did not eat at all.

On those nights when he went hungry, Pedro Meza would remember the warm, caring smiles of his second wife, Rosita. She cooked fresh, steaming tortillas and hot bowls of beans, always concerned for his health and well-being. He remembered cool mornings, like this one, when they would lie together in the soothing, happy light and make love, massaged by the sounds of the awakening forest. She had died nine years ago, but a day never went by when Pedro Meza didn't think of her or remember the joy inspired by her broad, loving smile.

A lone, painful shriek shot through the morning, echoing through the village. Pedro Meza heard the slap of feet on the wet ground. The strides were light, young and frightened, and they grew louder, approaching his hut. The *curandero* pushed himself off the coarse mat, an effort that seemed to require more strength than ever, and stepped out into the angry sun. He squinted at the skinny boy running down the path toward him. For once, Pedro Meza ruefully noted, the boy was not carrying his annoying music box.

Tumil was terrified. His bare chest heaved, ribs pressing through his taut skin. He told his story quickly, his eyes darting in every direction. His cousin Mazdara was hurt and rolling on the ground. Not a snake. Something else. Something inside him.

The *curandero* remembered the ridicule the boys had given him. They had been merciless, laughing as he trudged by their home on

his way to fetch water from the rain collection tubs. But curanderos took a vow of healing, and Pedro Meza knew that he could not allow his own pride to get in the way of a sacred vow.

Tumil pointed into the forest, angry now and impatient. He expected immediate action. Pedro Meza motioned for the boy to wait with a slow, calming wave of his hand. The healing could begin only with the cessation of panic. The curandero found panic to be especially tiring and unnecessary. Tumil's dark, obsidian eyes bulged from his gaunt face, and he nodded, struggling to catch his breath.

The curandero stepped back inside his hut and walked to the far corner, where loose plants and herbs were set in clean, even piles. He carefully selected three and wrapped them inside a large plantain leaf, tying the bundle with his sacred string. It came from the same ball of string that tethered his kite, both treasured gifts from Kelly. He had accepted them reluctantly, out of politeness, until he had seen the wind dance of the paper diamond, rattling high above the trees like an anxious spirit, struggling to be set free. The image had been as striking and immediate as any of his dreams, and he accepted it as an omen of progress, of the living force of his medicine given new life by this pale blanc. What was life worth, he wondered, without a woman to share it with?

The curandero stooped out of the entrance to his hut, wincing at the sharp pain in his lower back, and motioned for the boy to lead him to his friend. As they hurried into the forest, the curandero became annoyed at the boy's brisk pace. He hated that the boy was so consumed with fear and his own needs that he did not have consideration for the limitations of an older man. The young were oblivious of the old. But the curandero let go of his petty irritation, knowing that he would need every ounce of his strength.

They arrived next to the body sooner than the curandero expected. Mazdara, chubby from the candy lavished on him by his grandmother, was curled up, fetus-like, foam gurgling from his mouth. The rancid smell made the curandero flinch reflexively. He searched the boy's body for snake or spider bites, but there were only a few minor

scratches on his ankles and calves. Yet the boy's symptoms were uncannily similar to the havoc wreaked by the venom of the fer-de-lance snake.

"Tommy-gutt?" the curandero asked, using the Mayan nickname for the deadly snake.

His friend Tumil shook his head slowly. The curandero grunted with dissatisfaction. He placed both hands on the boy's heaving chest. There was no doubt the boy was reacting to a powerful poison. The curandero unwrapped the makeshift pack of herbs he had brought with him. He took a long stem of brown Zubin—Kelly called it Cockspur—and measured it against the boy's forearm. He murmured a brief prayer, calling on the medicine's spirit for help and guidance before cutting the bark to match the exact length of the boy's forearm.

"Mazdara," he said, holding the bark in front of the boy's frightened eyes. "Chew this. Like candy."

The boy stared up at him, past the long, skinny stem, as if it didn't exist, and moaned.

"Chew," the curandero repeated. "Now."

The boy's round, dark eyes welled with tears. The curandero laid his frail, weathered hand on the boy's forehead and was alarmed that it was already burning with fever. He had absorbed a great deal of poison. But chewing the root delayed the action of most poisons and would buy the boy time. Without it, whatever was inside him would spread quickly, and he could die in a matter of minutes.

"Tumil," the curandero ordered. "Mazdara must chew the bark."

Tumil jumped alongside his friend and took the bark from the curandero. He chewed on the end, trying not to make a face from the bitterness, and passed it to Mazdara. The boy grabbed the bark and bit down on the end as his friend had done.

"Good," the curandero said. "Swallow the juice."

The curandero quickly scraped the leftover bark with his knife until there was a small pile of fiber shavings at his knees. He added the other herbs to the mound, mixed them together and lightly pressed the makeshift poultice onto the boy's damp forehead. He worked

slowly and methodically, chanting a prayer to the healing spirits each time he pressed the poultice. After covering the herb paste with the plantain leaves, the curandero wiped the bubbling foam from his patient's chin and rubbed it between his palms until the moisture evaporated. He blew across his open hands in a gesture meant to whisk away the deadly spirit.

"Swallow the juice from the root," the curandero said sternly. "Pretend it is candy."

Mazdara's body began to tremble. Tumil cried out but fell silent when Pedro Meza raised his hand as he had outside his hut. The curandero took the *sastun* from his pants pocket and clenched the clouded blue marble as though it were a nut he was trying to break. The *sastun* was his link with the healing spirits, a special diviner given to him by his Mayan ancestors by way of a dream. He then sat in the mud, closed his eyes and prepared himself. He would join the forces of his *sastun* with Mazdara's will to live. He hoped the boy's youth would prove decisive. The curandero feared his own spirit, like his aging body, was losing strength. Contrary to the hopes of many who came to see him, the curandero believed everyone and everything entered this physical world for a predetermined time and that this life could not be prolonged beyond its limit. Healing was a matter of the spirit, not medicine alone.