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Ix-canan: Leaves of this shrub are boiled and applied to sores, rashes, cuts and insect bites; the name, in Mayan, means guardian of the forest

The late morning light shot through the dense canopy of trees, tumbling down through rare gaps in the lower branches, thinning as it flowed to the forest floor far below. By the time the sunlight fell on Kelly Montgomery, who was hiking on a narrow footpath, it was a soft, white vapor, barely illuminating the plants that crowded one another in the deep shadows of the tubroos trees. Kelly moved as nimbly as a native Mayan in the dim light, her long, silent strides barely leaving an imprint on the soft earth. But she struggled, as always, to identify each passing plant and tree. There were thousands of species, maybe more. Despite her training, Kelly couldn't be sure. Cayo contained one of the densest ecosystems in the world, and decades of research had identified only a fraction of what was believed to exist.

Kelly treasured these morning research hikes, being alone in the

vast emerald underworld, liking even the faint scent of decay that oozed from the mud and wet plants. There was a fluid, hypnotic stillness here, like being underwater. The weight of managing a research facility fell away. She could be herself in the forest, pursuing what she loved most, what had attracted her to Cayo from the beginning. C'ox Ca'ax, the Mayans called it. Into the mountains.

A burst of tropical rain rattled the leaves of the canopy high overhead. Kelly glanced up only to feel her right boot suddenly sink into the black mud. She knew what it could mean, but she ignored the danger because a flower growing off a strangler vine, dangling from a doomed tree, captivated her. The small, star-shaped petals were both butter yellow and snow white, blossoming on bamboo-like reddish stems. The doctrine of signatures—which dictated that the color of medicinal plants offered clues to its application—was difficult to decipher in this case. Bright yellow flowering plants often indicated use for liver and urinary tract problems. But white flowering plants were usually a sign of danger or toxicity. Red often had an indication for blood-related illness. This unusual understory plant combined all of them.

At first, she noticed surface similarities to the *Lindahermosa* flower, but those grew on thorny vines that could rip a person's skin off. This reddish vine was smooth and the petals were delicately spiked like *Dracaena*. It was an unusual combination, which suggested that the flower could be some new, uncharted plant that even Tato did not know. She hurried toward it, excited at the prospect of discovery. She remembered one of the first instructions the curandero had given about hunting for medicinal plants. "You will not find the plant," he had said with an uncharacteristically somber, serious expression. "The plant will find you."

But as she moved closer to examine the provocative flower, a gray, black-speckled smoke rose from the mud patch behind her, swirling even though there was no breeze. The odd, smoky cloud drifted toward her, and before she had even risen on her toes to examine the white flower, the cloud descended and the mosquitoes were biting her bare forearms.

Kelly was stunned by the sudden attack. The bugs whirred outside her ears, their stridency building quickly to a high-pitched whine. Squinting through the speckled smoke, she turned and ran down the path toward her research camp. Only a few mosquitoes bit into her neck and face. The rest, however, continued to prick her arms as she ran, some bursting into blood as Kelly slapped at them, desperate to stop the harsh stings. But there were too many to kill, too many swirling wildly as she charged out of the dank, morning shade. It wasn't until she reached the grass clearing and stumbled into the blaze of the hot, tropical sun that the biting finally stopped. Like Dracula, these monsters scattered in the face of sunlight.

Kelly bent over to catch her breath. She felt a nauseating chill run through her, and she was afraid for a moment that she was going to get sick. But as her breathing slowed, she became furious, not at the mosquitoes but at her own stupidity. For some unknown, indefensible reason, she had not coated herself in repellent as she had been urging everyone else to do ever since the WHO had issued the surprise warnings weeks ago about a possible new malarial strain in the hills of neighboring Guatemala. A father and his two sons in a small village—an otherwise lucky all-male household not conscripted by the Guatemalan army—had died from what researchers believed was a severe malaria spread by mosquitoes, impervious to any antiviral.

The WHO bulletin had reminded her of the curandero's belief that the rain forest was occupied by both healing spirits and evil spirits, each endlessly vying for supremacy. It had seemed like a simplistic folk tale until she considered the fact that viruses were as unseen to the human eye as spirits and the deadly H1 strains like HIV were traced to remote jungles—Uganda in the case of HIV. Now in medicinal research centers around the world, including her own here in little Cayo, ethnobotanists were combing the rain forests for a plant or a piece of bark that might hold an unseen cure to cancer, AIDS and whatever deadly viruses were yet to emerge. Good and Evil in their secular forms.

Kelly brushed a wisp of damp, tawny hair from her face and ex-

amined her thin, aging forearms. They were covered with red bumps. There were speckles of blood as though she'd been pricked by hundreds of sharp pins. She felt the need to scratch. It swept over her suddenly, inexorably. She fought the urge to tear into her arms with her fingers, to rip away the terrible itching. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. But she knew that scratching would make the bites worse, could even end up scarring her arms. Instead of scratching, Kelly cursed loud enough to startle a spider monkey out of a nearby tree, and she hurried toward a prefab shack in the middle of the clearing. Inside was her lab, where she experimented with different herbal recipes to cure both common ailments like bites and rashes and the more serious illnesses like malaria. But she had no defense against a new virus. No one did.

As Kelly hurried to the shack, she heard Frank's voice calling to her from the hill. She waved without turning around, unwilling to stop. The itching consumed her attention. Nothing mattered but getting inside the lab and mixing the medicine. With each step, she could picture where each plant was stored—the red-tinted Ix-canan on the second shelf, the yellow flowers of the wild sage in a glass jar, the fresh kayabim wrapped in paper.

"Kel," Frank called again, "there's a telephone call for you."

"Take a message," Kelly yelled and ran inside the lab. Couldn't the fool see she was in a hurry, in pain, in danger of having contracted a disease? Was he blind?

Kelly grabbed a handful of Ix-canan leaves from the shelf and quickly crushed the red-veined leaves over her opposite arm. A faint, almost invisible oil dripped onto the swollen mosquito bites, cooling their feverish burn instantly. Kelly sighed. Ix-canan. The joy of Ix-canan. In Maya, the name of the plant translated as guardian of the forest. It was a sacred herb among the people in Cayo because it could treat a wide variety of ailments.

As Kelly took another handful of the plant leaves to use on her other arm, she heard Frank's pickup roar to life, the driver's door slam shut and the tired truck lurch into gear. She was annoyed that

he had left without even checking to understand why she had been running. He was focused on his own agenda, and his self-absorption suddenly enraged her. He seemed to always be running off to another one of his endless meetings in the name of social justice and Mayan rights, oblivious to how it made her feel. No wonder their marriage was in the state it was in. You can't expect anything to grow if you don't cultivate it, give it regular, careful attention.

When the itching subsided, however, Kelly forgot her anger. She wondered about the telephone call. There were no telephones in San Antonio so it would have to be someone from San Ignacio or another working town. She guessed it was either one of her colleagues from Belize City or, possibly, another call from the TV crew who were expected later in the afternoon.

Kelly poured rainwater from an old ceramic jug into a pot and lit her propane stove. While she went to answer the telephone, the water would have time to boil and she could soak the wild sage and the tres puntas and the fiddlewood together to create a lotion to treat her mosquito bites further. She would also make a tea of the kayabin, a preventative for malaria, at least.

Kelly clambered up the hill to the house, a prefab rancher trucked and floated in all the way from Belize City. Inside, she felt a sudden chill run through her as she picked up the telephone receiver.

"Dr. Montgomery? Ma'am?"

A boyish but resonant voice laced with education and privilege. Every word carefully enunciated without a trace of regional accent. She'd grown up surrounded by voices like this, and hearing it made her think briefly and vaguely of Philadelphia and the world she had long left behind.

"We're boating our way up to you," the voice continued. It was the documentary producer from New York. Michael Burns. He sounded vibrant, excited, in a way he never did when they had first discussed the details of his shoot.

"Anything you might need from civilization before we climb in these canoes?"

Kelly wanted to remind him of the history of “civilization” in this part of the world. Before the Spanish conquistadors tore through the forest in search of gold, neither the Mayan nor any other Indians knew diseases. It took civilization to supply that.

But Kelly knew her history lesson would sound like ranting, and she didn’t want to come across as a reactionary. She needed these TV journalists on her side. There was no question in her mind that a little publicity about her research would make it more difficult for the new regime at corporate to pull the plug despite the very real dangers of new viruses and other microbes. The new bean counters were impatient for results. Her operation had not contributed anything to the bottom line since it was created over a decade ago. They wanted a miracle cure, like the one found by an ethnobotanist team in the Fiji rain forest that had struck upon the Pacific yew tree and the ability of its bark to fight cervical cancer. Only two years on the market and it was already saving lives and making profits. The best thing Kelly had come up with was an anti-itch ointment that smelled like cat piss, a deficiency no industrial perfumer could figure out how to mask.

“We’re pretty self-sufficient, here,” Kelly answered, finally. “But a six-pack of Belikan might be nice. It’s a favorite of my husband’s. Have a safe trip.”

As Kelly strolled down the hill to the medicinal lab, she began to feel like herself again. The itching had stopped, Frank was away and she would be left alone with her research. This time the subject of her experiments in medicine was her own arms, her own body. Kelly, not someone in an antiseptic laboratory, would be the guinea pig for the antimalarial tea and the new, scentless anti-itching bath she was concocting. This fact only made Kelly more enthusiastic about her work. There would be no guessing about the eventual findings. She would know immediately if they worked and under what circumstances. There would be no guessing about unknown variables. She would control the process from beginning to end.

The water was boiling by the time she reached the lab. She collected the plants and dropped their assorted leaves into the bubbling

water. As each leaf slipped underneath, Kelly pressed her right hand against the flowering crosses embroidered on the neck and chest of her huipile blouse and chanted a benediction the curandero had taught her. Her *enselmo*. It was a simple call to the healing spirits of the Maya—the good spirits. Pedro Meza had been emphatic about the importance of praying when preparing any medicines. He believed the spirits activated the healing power of the plants. Kelly assumed chemical alkaloids and enzymes were equally responsible, but she chanted nonetheless. One could never be too sure.