

Orinoco Delta, August 1674

I played naked in the mud with my younger sisters Yessi and Aya. We covered our skin and hair with painted patterns made from the wet earth. As it cracked and dried, we lay on the riverbank and stared overhead. In the variegated green of the jungle cap, monkeys twittered and howled. The enormous trees were crowded with foliage and twisted with ropes of vine.

Mother waved as she walked toward us down a narrow path. We washed away the cracked mud at the edge of the river, somehow making ourselves clean and new and examined the design the sun's burning rays had made on our skin. Aya, little more than a baby, had made random lines on her naked body. She giggled in happiness at her result. Yessi needed almost all her fingers to count her years. She had made a sun with its outstretched rays in the middle of her chest. My mud painting was meant to be complex and meaningful, a portrait of a Zemi, one of our ancestral spirits, but it turned out to be no pattern at all.

Mother smiled as she rinsed away a bit of mud left on Aya's forearm. She handed us flat bread made from yucca flour that we ate as we climbed a tall hill. We looked down over the round huts made of sticks and palm leaves that filled our small clearing at the edge of the jungle. These houses were made strong to withstand high winds and rain by sinking wooden posts into the ground in a circle and weaving canes between them with creeping vines. The roof was thatched with palm leaves. One hole at the top allowed smoke to escape.

The camp was close to a small finger of the Orinoco River, but far enough away to be out of crocodile territory and away from the bog. The tribe stayed on the savanna at this time of year.

From our small mesa, we could also see that there were warriors unknown to us floating down the river in their dugout canoes. The warriors pulled to shore. There were two who I could tell were Carib even from this distance and one man whose skin had no color at all. I had heard stories of these pale men, but had never seen one myself. I glanced at Mother and she looked curious as well.

We hid ourselves from view. We observed that several of our warriors carried bows and arrows. They followed the men to discover their purpose. We knew that the Carib could be unpredictable, sometimes menacing, sometimes deadly.

When our warriors returned to the village, their stories of the Carib were not of a threat, but of traders. Our warriors showed us a spearhead and some fishhooks that they traded for one of their bows. They said the traders had many useful items, many tools made of iron, items the likes of which most of us had never seen before. With excitement in their voices, our warriors told us tales of shiny knives and iron pots. We marveled at the practicality of such things.

My uncle leaned toward me. "I traded for a tool called scissors, two blades that pass each other to cut." He snapped the two small blades apart and together

a couple times. He dramatically lifted a leaf from the ground and held it between the blades and with a smack cut the leaf in half. "They had one scissors that had a pattern of vines and birds on its handle. Very pretty. You would like."

I wanted scissors. They looked useful for cutting yarn or making baskets.

That night, the tribe communed around the fire. Many of the warriors who had traded with the Carib wore paint and feathers. From the knees to the feet, they covered themselves in shells. This marked the ceremony as special.

The shaman, who was our mystical leader, presented a large, carved zemi figure to the cacique who was our tribal leader, our chief. The cacique sat on a wooden stump in a place of honor with the carved representation of the deity on its own pedestal in front of him. Carving the likeness of the Zemi, the God, into the stone infused the spirit of the Zemi God into that zemi object. This kept the protection close at hand.

The shaman was the tribe's eldest and most wise. His back curved like a twig in the wind, bending so far his face was nearly touching the crackling fire. He sang a song that came from deep in his chest. The song was about his animal spirit, the monkey.

The monkey acted as a guide between humans and animals. The monkey was clever and resourceful. The monkey used his hands to imitate rodents and birds in the trees, only the monkey was smarter.

My sister, Yessi, sat next to me and sang along in her beautiful, high, clear voice.

When the song was finished, my uncle started the beating of a drum.

The shaman began to tell one of the old stories we had heard many times before. "Good and wise people lived in the sky place. They never died. There were no clouds, no wind. There was just the yellow light. The grandfather lit everything from the top down to the earth. Because of that light, all his children were happy."

My father listened closely to learn the wisdom of the ancient shaman. When Father was wise with age, he would be the next shaman for the tribe. Father macerated the ceremonial leaves and vines together as the shaman spoke.

"The grandfather wanted to create spirits on the earth. He sent a messenger who brought knowledge and song, but one spirit was born different from the others. The messenger cut the rotted afterbirth and buried it. Worms ate the afterbirth and it infected some creatures with an ugly darkness. Because of them, we suffer hunger, sickness and war."

My youngest sister, Aya, cried out and my mother immediately circled her up and held her in protective arms. Aya fed from Mother's breast until she fell into a deep loose-limbed sleep. Aya was no longer hungry, but the rest of us were. It had been a horribly difficult year and we needed more food for the tribe.

Yessi and I squatted together on the ground. Yessi was fascinated by the progress of a worm toward the cooking fire. I waited for Yessi to save the worm from its fate and soon enough she did.

Yessi's animal guide was the pink river dolphin. The dolphin could change shape into a man to protect fishermen who had fallen into the water. In their changed shape, the dolphin-man would float the fallen on the tide to transport the near-drowned to shore and then would transform back into a dolphin. Yessi, too, swam like a dolphin and she had a beautiful spirit of giving.

I carefully watched as Father combined the leaves and ground them with

a sharp shard. He added the leaves one by one into warm water in a gourd. He sprinkled a bit of sea salt. "For just a touch of flavor," he said with a sly smile and a wink to Yessi.

"We can't see the real sky anymore," the shaman said. "Now the earth has a new sky. The earth has a new sun and a new moon. We live the same as animals. The grandfather sends messengers, animal spirits who warn us of danger and show us our path, but we must be watchful for them."

The shaman had silver hair streaked with black that hung to his waist. And he had deep, ebony eyes. He was frail and bent, but he was the most powerful man I knew. He spoke to the animal spirits and interpreted their messages. He had vast knowledge of the value of plants for healing. He understood their use as a gateway from the natural world to the spirit world. That knowledge gave him his importance.

"One being wanted to be master of all the earth's creatures. He haunted the jungle, enticing the souls of both the living and the dead with an eerie whistling sound. The kenaimas is hairy and knobby kneed, half man and half wolf with red eyes and teeth as sharp as knives."

The shaman raised his fingers like talons to Aya as if he was a fighting bird and she looked frightened, but then he laughed. She giggled in return.

The most mystical of creatures were the birds that flew high over the canopy of the trees. Birds were the guardians of the place before existence. They were not bound by space or time. Birds carried messages from the grandfather to humans.

"All creatures are what they are," the shaman said, "based on their nature. None have dominion over another and each has a purpose. Animal spirits are our allies. They warn of danger, for each creature has adversaries. Animal spirits guide our journey."

My mother's spirit guide was the yellow bird. Many people in the tribe listened to her. She served bread first to the carved zemi and then to the cacique and then to the shaman before serving all the people.

"The dark man is not eternal. He'll die when we respect all creatures on the earth," the shaman concluded.

"The traders have an iron pot big enough to hold food for the whole tribe," my mother explained to the shaman.

"We must trade so the children do not wake with pains of hunger," they all said.

"A big pot does not make food," the shaman said.

"We saw only three men," my uncle said to the cacique. "We have many more warriors."

"The Carib shaman has sent them to us by an evil spell," our shaman said. He picked up a bit of bark and handed it to Father.

Father held it over the fire until it dripped sap. He followed the interest in my eyes. "The plant's own spirit will tell me how to prepare it," he said.

Only the shaman or his apprentice may mix the leaves, prepare the infusion, and brew the potion to the best result. Prepared correctly, the brew will open the shaman's mind to truth and meaning.

The shaman drank and they all waited for him to speak.

"How does it feel?" I whispered to my father.

To my surprise, he answered me. "Warmness comes and the top of my

head throbs." He patted his crown. "Vision blurs and dizziness takes me. But then I am overwhelmed by a sense of belonging. I am one with all. A great peace settles over me and the visions come."

The ancient shaman swayed in his trance.

"The kenaimas stalks the people of our village." The shaman sat in silence for a moment. "Our adversary wears many clothes: shirt, pants, boots, and a hat. What does he hide?"

The shaman handed the drink to my father who took a sip.

Mother tightly clutched in one fist the carved zemi in the center of the feather necklace she always wore.

We waited.

"Tituba morphs from a jaguar into a cricket," Father said, "and runs into an empty corner. Tituba stays very still and does not rub her legs. She hides behind the iron pot so the kenaimas cannot find her."

"What does it mean?" I asked. I had never before been called out in the visions.

One of the other women spoke. "Iron pot offers protection."

"No," the shaman said sharply. "Tituba must not hide behind the iron pot. Tituba is born to be different, but she tries to be the same. She is a flower with each petal special and unique. She is not meant to be a speck of color on the savanna."

"The trader has a knife, sharp. It cut a twig in half in one stroke." My uncle did not need to say that he wanted to have the knife. "They want baskets and shells, not our food supply."

"Tituba must be strong and brave like her spirit animal, the jaguar."

The cacique nodded his head sorrowfully. He rubbed his jaw. "Dangerous men have invaded our homeland with terrifying weapons and man-eating dogs." Only a few of the tribe had had dealings with the white men, the cacique and the shaman among them. "They chase us sitting abreast enormous beasts that respond to their will. And when caught, they force us to dig inside the ground and pull out rocks. If we had not fled and hid, we would work until we died of sickness or starvation." He paused to ensure that he had their full attention. "You can see that an evil spirit has sucked all the color from their skins leaving them as pale as death."

"The knife is useful and can help us hunt. The iron pot is good and can help us cook," my uncle said.

"The iron pot does not offer protection. The sharp edge of the knife is two-sided."

"What do you think?" the shaman asked my father and Uncle shook his head in agreement. The shaman did this often by way of preparation of my father for his future duties.

My uncle looked to Father. He did not want a shaman. He wanted a supporter.

Father swayed. He sat in silence for a long time. He looked at Mother, me, Yessi and Aya, each of us in our turn. "The tribe is half the size it was a year ago. We must protect the women. If we risk the baby-makers, there will be no tribe soon enough."

The cacique stood and placed his hands on his hips. He looked strong, massive as a mountain. "We have no need of the white man's property. The price

is too high." And so it was decided that we would not go.

But I wanted scissors. Uncle wanted a knife. Mother wanted a large cooking pot. We did not want to want these things, but wanting them bothered our thinking in the day and our dreams at night. We talked together in hushed tones of the things we wanted.

"If I dream of the knife, doesn't that mean I should have the knife?" Uncle asked. "Maybe if we meet them by accident as did the warriors and just traded for a few, small things."

"Where do you go?" asked my father when he saw me rushing to meet the others.

"I think I found a mango tree," I lied, "ripe and full of bees. Maybe honey too." Mango was one of my father's favorites. I kept quiet about my true purpose. It was the only time in my life I had lied to my father. I ran off before he could see my face flush red.

It was hottest summer and the days were long. There were ten mothers with their children who walked into the jungle to meet the traders, even though the shaman warned against it, even though the cacique forbid it. We carried our best baskets, blankets, and gourds. My uncle and three other warriors also came.

We walked until the sun was high overhead and then sheltered in a cave while a sudden thunderstorm soaked the earth. We gathered plants and wood for the fire and left them in the cave to retrieve on the way home.

After the rain, we crossed the savanna. Soon, the Orinoco flowed like a silver snake before us. We stopped and drank water and gathered green bananas from the trees. We gathered nuts to store in a clay and stick hut at the tree line that we had built for use on our travels.

We stood together on the shore, near where we hid our dugout canoes. My uncle and the other warriors took two of the canoes and went to fish. They prepared a long line that they would attach to a remora's tail. This fish had suction cups on the back of its head. The remora would attach itself to a fish and the fisherman would gently pull both into the canoe. The men gathered their line and pushed off in the canoes.

So the warriors weren't with us when a ship came into view and stopped midstream. A Carib warrior stood next to a pale-faced sailor with hair the color of sunset. Another sailor threw a heavy weight into the water and the ship stood still in the current. There were many more sailors than we had seen the day before.

The warrior smiled and waved to us, beckoned us to come to the ship. "Let's trade," the Carib warrior yelled. "We see you have gourds for water and banana."

We looked at our full baskets, but remained reluctant.

"The fruit will soon rot on the trees if you don't gather it for us." He held up fabrics in bright colors, beads that reflected the light back into our faces and then the big iron pot.

"I'm getting it," my aunt said as she loaded a basket into a canoe. My mother looked alarmed as if my aunt stole the iron pot from her.

I knew we should wait for the men to return, but I wanted scissors.

"We've traded all up and down the river," the warrior said in a comforting voice. "No troubles."

I joined my aunt. I stepped into a canoe and lifted the oars.

We knew it was unwise to all go at once, but we were too excited. We paddled several canoes out to the ship. The captain welcomed us on board. He took our baskets and stacked them on the deck.

The captain reached out and circled his fingers around my mother's arm, I think because she was the prettiest of us. She tried to pull away, but could not. Other sailors rushed on deck and grabbed more of us. One wrapped his arm around my waist. I kicked until I twisted my way loose.

We lived on the water, so even the youngest of us could swim. We knew what we were supposed to do. We were to jump into the river, swim to shore, and then run to the village. I pushed Yessi into the water. I picked up Aya and tossed her in the same direction. Yessi floated for a few moments in the current and then circled her arms around Aya and took strong strokes toward the shore.

Mother screamed at me to jump, but I couldn't leave her. I twisted the skin on the captain's arm and kicked his ankles until he yelped and let her go.

Mother and I dove together into the river, but the captain grabbed my foot at the last minute. I slammed against the wooden side of the boat and blood poured from my nose. I couldn't breathe. The captain pulled me back into the ship. He held my arms tight. I struggled but couldn't pull loose.

I was tied with thick ropes. The others who had escaped into the water were swimming under the surface with all the grace and strength of the pink dolphin. Yessi swam out and helped each one to the shore.

The captain ordered his sailors to paddle our canoes out to catch the runaways. The sailors jumped into the boats, paddling with their thick arms to easily overtake the women who remained in the water. They pulled them inside the canoes and held tight even as the women screamed and squirmed.

My mother swam along the side of the ship in the opposite direction from the shore. When the canoes were far enough away, she climbed a line up the hull of the boat. She came for me, but my bounds were too tight.

She struggled with the ropes until the captain saw her and attacked her. Arms grabbed, flailed. I watched as the captain pulled my mother's necklace from her and it fell to the deck.

The captain swung an oar and split my mother's skull. Her blood spread across the deck toward me. I couldn't hold back the ugly sound in the back of my throat. I screamed as they threw her lifeless body into the river for the crocodiles to eat.

My eyes scanned the shoreline. Yessi stood under the protection of the lupuna trees. The trees were massive and could curse the evil spirits. Yessi handed Aya to the nearest woman and shooed the rest of other women on their journey back toward the village, but she did not want to leave without us.

She rushed toward the water to save our mother. She swam to her, dragged her to shore, rocked her body in her arms. Blood covered Yessi's arms and face. She wailed. Our mother was gone to the sky place and nothing could be done.

Yessi swam out into the river. She was coming to me until I shook my head "no." I wanted Yessi to save herself and Aya. I wanted to tell her I was gone from her now. I wanted to tell her good-bye and wish her a good life. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her.

From the shallows, Yessi raised her hands to me and I knew she wanted to

tell me these things too. She turned and ran into the growth.

On the ship's deck, I saw my mother's necklace. I thought I could reach it. I extended my fingers, touched, and then grasped it.