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City of voices: a novel about ancient Tikal

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City of voices:

A novel about ancient Tikal

by

Michelle Donahue

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CITY OF VOICES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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City of Voices: a novel about ancient Tikal is a postmodern work of fiction that explores the collapse of the ancient Maya civilization at Tikal, in present day Guatemala. The narrator of this work, an imagined writer/anthropologist, creates the story of a young woman, whose bones have been found in a cenote in Tikal. The story of Tikal’s collapse is embodied through the coming of age story of Exa, a noble woman.

Exa yearns to defy convention and to contribute to her beloved city. When her sister marries Ome and then dies in childbirth, she forms a plan to prove to the priesthood that she has a connection to the gods. To do this, she becomes an adept hunted, and with the help of a hallucinogenic mushroom, sees a vision from the gods. When this vision comes to pass, she is accepted into the priesthood.

But Tikal is in serious drought, and as water and food resources shrink, discontent grows. Forces from a neighboring city in the north, begin to pose threats. As sacrifices increase in an attempt to assuage the gods and restore rain, Exa and another member of the priesthood, Chiccan, begin to question their roles in the priesthood. When Ome sees Exa and Chiccan breaking the priesthood rules, he reports them. When Tikal is on the verge of collapsing, Exa and Chiccan decide to flee the city, but they are captured and sentenced to death.
INTRODUCTION

As its title promises, City of Voices is a novel that delivers a polyphonic perspective on the collapse of Tikal, the grand ancient Maya city, now in modern day Guatemala. This work of fiction is influenced by the postmodernist and modernist movements in literature, while also being informed by history, anthropology, and science. Postmodernist work, one of the dominant modes of current literature, is known for engaging in this sort of interdisciplinary work, as well as blurring the boundaries between genres. City of Voices is at once a coming-of-age story, an iconic Bildungsroman of the noble girl/woman Exa, and also an historic ethnography of the possible causes of destruction, both environmental and social, of this once-great civilization. Through a postmodern approach, this text engages with self-reflexivity and self-consciousness about storytelling; the novel is born when a fictional writer/anthropologist encounters the body of a young woman on an archeological dig, and then proceeds to imagine the story around her. This body becomes the character, Exa, and the narrator imagines her life and the possible stories of the lost voices of her people. My narrator seeks to tell these stories cautiously, with care not to culturally appropriate, but rather to engage authentically and to question.

As a work of fiction, this novel finds its literary roots in the modernist movement, beginning pre-World War I and in part triggered by new discoveries and theories in other disciplines, such as Freud’s psychoanalytical work in psychology and Boas’ work with cultural relativism in anthropology. Outside disciplines have always influenced literature, and my novel is no exception. Modernism began to reject boundaries and to play more with form and narrative.

Writers like Virginia Woolf, in To the Lighthouse, embraced stream of consciousness and the ability to shift easily from one perspective to another. City of Voices engages in this
same technique as it focuses on Exa as the main character, but has the freedom to slip into the minds of other characters. This establishes an omniscient perspective, one seen in many historical novels, perhaps most stunningly in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones.

My novel, however, embraces more fully a postmodernist aesthetic. The modernists, like the aforementioned Virginia Woolf, as well as William Faulkner, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot tended to present human nature as fractured or fragmented, but the authors mourned this loss of unity. Modernists believed works of art could restore or at least capture the strange beauty of this fracturing. Postmodernists, however, embraced this chaos and fragmentation. Postmodernist authors like Kurt Vonnegut, Jorge Luis Borges, Jeanette Winterson, Samuel R. Delany, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jennifer Eagan, among others, acknowledge more directly the impossibility of a unified truth and seem to welcome the loss of objectivity. *City of Voices* taps into this tradition, embracing the unknown and the inability of stories to provide complete answers. With its more historic sections labeled “What We Might Know,” “What We Don’t Know,” and “Stories,” the writer/anthropologist narrator of my novel acknowledges the lack of complete understanding about the Ancient Maya and emphasizes that historians, archeologists, and the readers of this novel can only ever be left with doubt. In fact the narrator offers no definitive answers. Here the novelist (both the narrator and me) reflects on the possibilities, makes it clear these are musings only; there are no solid answers.

This direct, self-conscious reference to the writer in *City of Voices*, has been influenced by many significant literary works. For instance, Nabokov’s *Lolita* features the infamous Humbert Humbert directly addressing the “ladies and gentleman of the jury” throughout as he retells his relationship with a young girl and creates in his readers a sort of Stockholm syndrome, as they begin to sympathize more with the pedophile than the innocent child. Or Margaret Atwood’s *Blind Assassin* features a novel within a novel, alongside a
first-person historical narrative told by Iris. The reader learns Iris, not her dead sister, has been the novelist all along, and when this smoke-and-mirrors revelation occurs, Iris (or Atwood?) tells the audience that certainly they must have already guessed this plot twist. Inspired by these postmodernist texts, in *City of Voices* I also disrupt what the novelist and critic John Gardner calls the “vivid and continuous dream” of fiction and directly address the reader to pose questions. I do this to embrace the chaos of the unknown, and also to acknowledge and appropriate the potential critique of this novel written by a non-Maya author. These questions also serve to ask the readers how this end-of-the-world narrative comments on our modern situation, especially in terms of environmentalism and the way we currently use resources.

It is difficult to engage in culturally sensitive storytelling about people with a culture so far removed from one’s own. Because the ancient Maya are culturally distinct from modern Maya in significant ways, the task of writing about ancient Maya culture posed different challenges than writing about an extant culture. On one hand, less is known about ancient Maya culture, so I was able to more comfortably imagine what life might have been like. On the other hand, it still felt important to learn about modern Maya culture, so that I hopefully would not produce a novel that would offend modern Maya who have roots in this ancient culture. I have done what I could; I have travelled to Guatemala for six weeks, spoken to many Maya women in broken Spanish (both of our second languages), spent days learning to backstrap weave in Xela at a co-op run by native Maya. But still, this is nothing; this is only the briefest of glimpses.

Yet in a literary scene dominated so heavily by white writers, particularly white men, this type of cultural engagement seems urgently necessary. There is no writing in English written by modern Maya. There are no novels about the Maya, except a few that are self-
published and inarguably ill-written, fantastic, and culturally problematic. And so I struggled with how to write this novel in a way that might provide some insight and useful exploration.

In this novel, I employ self-reflexive, postmodernist strategies, to apologize for the current whiteness of Western literature, as a way to acknowledge the injustice of it, and to address this inequality directly. In this novel, I argue that it is impossible to enter the thoughts and minds of these people who have long since been lost, but that there is value in trying, in attempting that sort of imaginative empathy. For strategies to address these issues, I looked both to anthropology and to contemporary fiction, specifically works like Robert Olen Butler’s Pulitzer Prize winning work, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, which successfully and ethically adopts the voices of many Vietnamese characters.

I attempt to situate this novel within the discipline of anthropology and to pick up where anthropologists leave off, where science comes short. After all, imaginative empathy—the detailed depiction of what it feels like to have lived in a specific time and place—is fiction’s primary domain and its glory. No discipline, except perhaps anthropology knows how difficult and problematic it is for a writer to write about a group of people far removed, in space and time and culture, from oneself. The American Anthropology Association calls its discipline “the most humanistic of sciences and scientific of humanities.” This could be said of fiction too. At its best, fiction is an exploration of empathy and understanding; indeed psychologists Kidd and Costano, from the New School for Social Research, in 2013 found that reading fiction allowed people to better understand other’s emotions. Like anthropology, however, fiction must consider the ethics of writing other culture’s narrative and avoiding harmful tropes. Tropes like the idea of the indigenous character, the “noble savage,” have persisted in literature for far too long. To avoid exploitation, the American Anthropology Association outlines a core set of principles of ethics, which include mandates to (a) do no harm, (b) to make results accessible, (c) to be
open and honest about one’s work, including the inherent biases of the work, among others. It is this last mandate that has shaped the writing and revision of City of Voices so strongly. My fictional author freely admits that this book is fiction, an exercise in imagination. My narrator questions the very act of imagination she is engaged in and inserts that frustrating, thrilling word “perhaps” into her narrative in order to remind the reader, again and again, that this is all speculative, and that there are inherent dangers to such speculation.

This speculation is informed heavily by anthropological texts, especially those that describe ancient cultures. For instance, in his study of Ancient American civilization, Cahokia, the anthropologist Dr. Timothy Pauketat is highly speculative, not only in terms of his writing, but in how he tries to imagine the now dead civilization at Cahokia. In his third chapter, “Walking into Cahokia,” he imagines “the traveler,” a character who is walking into the city. Pauketat paints a vivid scene of the landscape. He writes a chapter-long description that reads like fiction: “Flat and open below him, the floodplain extends all the way to the distant horizon, where, on this clear day, he can see the bluff edge…” (32). In addition to these fiction-esque scenes, Pauketat also describes hypothetical information about this ancient city. He starts his book by acknowledging that “to some extent, all civilizations are built on projections, propaganda, and half truths,” and then proceeds to imagine these “half truths,” based on the discovered clues (5). City of Voices is a similar text, except it uses fiction as its vehicle rather than Pauketat’s anthropological, speculative “fact.”

Overall City of Voices is a creative work that is situated in the modernist and postmodernist traditions, through its self-reflexivity, narrative form, and its incorporation of history, anthropology, and environmental science into a work of fiction. It draws from anthropological traditions, both in terms of ethics and its speculative narrative strategy. This novel seeks to ask the reader to begin the messy, difficult work of empathizing with people from other cultures, and of understanding a new world with a drastically different ethical and
religious system than their own. It does this to create empathy, but also so that the reader can begin to question his or her own culture and mistakes. This novel focuses on Tikal’s collapse, to perhaps suggest to the readers that their society is not so far from its own large or small destruction, environmentally and/or socially. This novel seeks to ask questions about how collapse can be avoided, and what sort of empathy, unity, and understanding might be needed for continued existence.
As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day.

-Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

“But this is the essence of the [Maya], because there is no longer a way of seeing it. It was with the lords at first, but it is now lost. There is only this.”

-The *Popul Vuh* translated by Allen J. Christenson
CHAPTER 1

The Body

Here is a body. But it isn’t a body, only a reminder of what used to be full-fleshed and breathing. Now it’s a partial skeleton with bones ridging the limestone of Tikal, as if they are growing from the stone. As if the stone has tried to claim her skeleton, cement it down, but these bones have resisted.

A woman. The pelvis reveals that, with its broader sciatic notch, the outward flare of the hipbones. She’s maybe four foot nine, about average height for her time. Or so we guess, about her height, the height of her people. We find her in what used to be a cenote, a large body of water, now just dry stone.

Carbon dating will tell us that this young woman lived and died during the ninth century, or around it. She was not yet twenty-five. Her clavicle, always the last bone to develop, still holds vestiges of childhood, still is just a little under grown.

Also, she’s missing her heart. Her left ribs broken, split open like a flower suddenly bursting in its first bloom. The rib cage splintered, cracked, like a nest over a gaping wound.

This could have happened after death. Someone messing with the body. Someone pillaging, some animal sifting its nose through this old soil.

Or perhaps someone plunged his hand into her body, felt how warm, how full of life she was, saw how dark it is inside our bodies.

So this woman is young and of average height and possibly, died heartless. And she lived just as Tikal began to fall, the once mighty Maya civilization crumbling to collapse. This could have happened slowly, and then in a sudden rush, like a wave curling, like falling in love.
It’s easy to get caught up in things.

No one knows why the Maya fell at Tikal. Fell elsewhere too, all across the Petén jungle—Calakmul, Caracoal, Bonampak, Copan.

We have theories of course, but it’s hard to know if we’ll ever have anything more than this. More than stories. It’s so hard to know how these people thrived, eked existence out. What we might know. What we don’t.

No one knows why the Maya fell at Tikal.

But that’s not true either. People know, it’s just those people have been long lost. Their voices lost with their fallen bodies or else burned when Landa came in. We have little now, just this body, just the remnants of the buildings that once made Tikal. All we have are guesses, stories shaped by sparse evidence.

Just remember: this body leaves us only guess. History doesn’t leave easy clues.

I.

Long before Exa will understand why the Maya fell at Tikal, she is young, a child. For the first time in her life, she walks from her home to the city center. The air sticks to her skin as she walks with her family, first mother, Mat, with her hair oiled and braided, and then her brother, Itzali, then father Tat, and sister, Ismena. The early morning jungle sounds whisper to them as their feet drum the slick stone road to the city. They live on its outskirts, where Tat, a nobleman, runs plantations and oversees his workers.

An agauementi shuffles his long nose on the ground, and Exa aims her invisible bow and arrow. Pew. She’d stick it straight in the heart.

She slides her elbow beneath Ismena’s ribs, and Ismena screams, Exa, but Exa is
already running from the stone road behind a cedar tree, its smell like rough, sweet fire.

Tat has warned her of the snakes and other creatures that hide off the road. He fears for his wild daughter, not because he doesn’t think she can take care of herself, but because he knows she can. That this hard independence and ability could be dangerous. Especially for a woman.

His concern is warranted, because as we know, Exa might one day find herself heartless. Will one day be buried deep in rock.

But that day is so long off now, so far that in this moment it seems improbable. She stomps down the road with the jungle on all sides of her. The red conch shells threaded in a thin belt around her waist clink together as she walks. These shells signal both that she is a child and a girl. Their clattering joins the jungle’s sounds: the chattering calls of so many birds, the anxious beat of insects’ wings. She loves this place, her lovely jungle with its heat like air breathed out.

She peaks behind a tree. Pew, pew. She aims imagined arrows at Tat then Ismena. She runs back to the path where Tat captures her, slings her to his shoulders, warns her that she’ll tire herself out, that the walk is long. She doesn’t listen and instead escapes his shoulders and runs back to Ismena. Their feet keep the same pace, each step pounding as one. Ismena is older, so of course Exa admires her. But the admiration runs both ways.

Ismena cannot imagine shooting a creature dead. She fears the power there, behind the arrow, ultimately contained in her hand. Death to her seems too great a power. Death is the domain of men and Ismena admires the bravery of her sister to even consider entering such a realm. Could you really do it? Ismena whispers, Could you have shot that augementi?

Yes, Exa says, but she is not sure. She’s only been practicing aiming at rocks and trees.
An animal is a different thing. Even if she could aim well enough, she isn’t sure she could let that arrow go. She wants to think she could. As Ismena’s eyes grow wide and she says, *I wish I could*, Exa yearns to be that strong, someone worthy of Ismena’s surprise and admiration.

The sun breaks through the canopy, but still the leaves shelter them from its harsh warmth. The jungle is quiet now with only the shivery buzz of insects. The insect voices grow fainter the closer they walk to Tikal.

The closer to Tikal, the more tense Mat grows. She has grown used to the noise of the jungle, raw and cyclic, a brutal nature sound. She doesn’t miss the noise of the city, where it is all people, men’s rough grunts, the sharp guttural of language, pounding footsteps that echo against the city’s stone. She worries about Exa, who is everywhere, running up front to meet Tat, dashing back to Mat and Itzali. Poking Itzali in the ribs. She worries about Itzali, who seems so quiet, so unlike most boys his age, who want nothing more than to fire arrows, fight, speak of wars and prove their bravery. Why is it, she thinks, that it is the mat who must always worry?

Itzali stops walking, bends to pick up a flower from the beebalm. *This is quite rare*, he says as he wraps it in a bit of cloth and places it in his leather pouch. *This will cure even the worst headaches.*

*My head never hurts*, Exa says, with all the bravado of someone who is only ten, who has not yet experienced hardship. This will come. When she begins meditation, begins deep concentration in desperate hopes to convene with the gods, the headaches will come. She’ll thank Itzali for his plants.

But in this moment Exa’s head is clear and free. Full of nothing but the exciting prospect of seeing the city, of allowing her world to swell. Childhood feels so small to her, so
incomplete. She believes she is destined for greatness, because she believes, for now, in Tikal’s greatness, as all of her family does. They are fifteen years into a drought, but they have only felt faint hints of it so far. The city’s reservoirs have been built so expertly, that the cenotes, the great wells of waters, and the city’s dam, have kept water constant enough. And so they have not yet felt its hardship.

They walk. Beside the road the water channels run from the city center, the middle point, the city, the main acropolis. Tat’s workers carry maize from his fields to trade, and also goods, some made by Mat, but mostly other women, in the nearby village where Tat acts as leader.

Mat makes the best clay pots. She has the hands for it. They’re as thin as a leaf and light. Exa cannot make pots or weave or do any womanly things yet. She lacks the patience. She fears this is a great weakness of character. Very few people inhabit the space between genders, where they can enter both the male and female realms. And these people are either elite, ruling men, or are women who these men have seen in their dreams as special, important figures. Exa is neither.

But perhaps she fears nothing yet. Has not yet realized what the world will ask of her.

Tat’s workers trail behind, slower, as they bear heavier loads. Exa’s feet *pit patter pat* as she walks, as the trees grow thinner, the sun heavier, beating upon her back. The water in the air mixes with the water pearling on their skin, wetting their huipils. Mat, Ismena, and Exa wear their best huipils, thin white and colored with thread stitched into animals and the gods. Chacs, the gods of rain and crops, is on Exa’s, in his many forms and colors. She hopes rain comes soon. Even during drought it rains here in the Petén jungle. It just rains less. Rain is Exa’s favorite time. The jungle cools and sweeps as torrent of thrashing water. It makes
her feel like she is part of something larger, that she is connected to the gods above who send down this water.

It’s the edge of the dry season. Rain should come soon.

Tikal should come soon. Exa’s feet burn and she tugs at her huipil. She’s tired, even though she carries nothing. Tat has a bulging bag of cacao beans, so he can purchase new goods. He’s beginning to feel the weight of them, how they bump into his hipbone as he walks. He earns cacao beans from his plantations and from the city-states, because of his royal blood and his nobility. His brother is a Councilman in Tikal. His father had connections to both the Chief and the high priests.

*We are close*, Tat says, because he sees the tiredness etched in every part of Exa’s body—the lank hang of her arms, the slight frown about her face. He knows that her fierceness has limits, especially at ten, especially so young and tender. Tat wears only a cloth around his waist. It’s decorated with a quetzal bird, green and water-colored plumes. Water, the clear-blue shade that, in the right light, holds all colors.

They arrive. The trees stop and it is all stone, the sun rebounding from it and warming them. Tikal is mostly flat and empty of trees. Instead stone temples fill its space, interrupted only by acropolises that house the important politicians and religious figures. Apart from the noblemen, like Tat, who oversee agriculture and rule the villages on the outskirts of Tikal, all of the nobility resides here. Exa often has felt cut off from her heritage because she has grown up so far from this. This is her first time to the city, now that she is old enough to make the walk on her own. Now that she is old enough that Mat trusts her to behave.

Mat does not quite trust her, but this lack of trust lies more with the city itself, and Mat’s own family history. This city does not sit kindly with her.
A temple in the distance rises to the sky. Exa thinks it must touch the clouds and reach up to brush the god’s fingers. She points.

*The Two Headed Snake Temple*, Tat says, chest swelling with pride for it. He feels honored, humbled that he is an important piece of such a grand society. The Two Headed Snake Temple is the tallest of all the temples of the Maya. A height to represent Tikal’s greatness.

Rich blood red, quetzal green, sky blue layers on top of the orange painted stone. The temple is so bright that when Exa closes her eyes, she still sees it, shimmering in that closed-eye darkness. A faint memory of those grand colored temples. A platform sits at the temple’s top. In that moment, this pressing need to view her world from that high spot overwhelms her. Such a height would change her perspective and allow her to see what she otherwise couldn’t.

She wants to go up there. And this desire, ultimately, will prove to be her downfall.

Yet she isn’t wrong. The temple, when she summits it and cranes her face to see the gods, will provide her a new perspective. One that might not be entirely welcome.

Remember: this is all conjecture.

*Have you been up there?* She asks Tat. He says, *Only the top religious order is allowed.*

She says, *So you cannot go up there?* Her mouth open wide, the same shape as the sun as it crests the horizon.

*No*, he laughs. *Even I cannot do everything.*

And so Exa decides she will find a way up there. She needs to be that close to the gods.

They walk away from the sun, which warms their backs. They are not yet at the center,
only on the fringes of the main city. Even here groups have begun picking spots for the grand market tomorrow, which will begin when the sun rises.

They arrive at the grand plaza, with the central acropolis to the right, the pitz ball courts straight ahead. They walk past one of the two main temples. Tat points.

*This is the Temple of the Jaguar to celebrate the famous ruler Jasas Chan K’awiil.*

Exa, of course, knows him well. She loves his stories, of wars, of bringing Tikal to power and beauty. He brought Tikal to greatness after they lost the war with Calakmul. He made Tikal the strongest Maya city, the heart of all things. They also call him King Ah Cacao and remember him through their money, the cacao beans. Decorating his temple is his glyph, a well-adorned man with a small chiseled cacao bean beneath. His link to the cacao bean adds to his greatness and mystery. This strange bean held in thick waxy fruit of so many colors. The pod changes based on its pollinator: green, bright red, yellow, brown. Exa thinks it lends an air of magic and power to King Ah Cacao.

She doesn’t know that hundreds of years later, after Tikal has been excavated, partially, dug from the strong fingers of the jungle, tourists will walk through this acropolis, take tours with tour guides, some more knowledgeable than others. They’ll refer to this king, this mighty builder of one of the most iconic Maya temples, as King Coco and this will seem absurd to the Western tourists, who think of Hershey candy bars and s’mores. Who know nothing about the colors of cacao pods.

Though King Ah Cacao intrigues Exa, it is the second temple of the plaza that interests her more. Tat follows Exa’s gaze. And then for a moment pauses, his eyes searching for Mat, who he realizes has not followed them into the grand plaza.

*What is this temple?* Exa asks and points.
The Temple of the Masks, he says. King Ah Cacao built it for his wife.

Though the grand plaza bustles with people, with noise Exa is unused to, for a moment this all seems to still, and something rustles beneath. Whispers. At first she thinks it is only leaves rustling. Only there are no leaves here. All the jungle has been beaten back.

Exa thinks King Ah Cacao must have loved her. She didn’t know temples could be built for women. Though very rarely women rule, it is never for long. Men are celebrated and commemorated with stone carvings in this patrilineal culture.

Tat says, When she went missing in the jungle, he built this to remember her.

Did they find her? Exa asks. The whispers swell like a wave. She looks around but no one but Tat is near. No one could be whispering.

No, they never found a body, though they looked.

Then a man approaches Tat, and so Tat falls silent. The two men exchange greetings, and begin talking politics: rainfall, crop yields. She will learn later that this man’s name is Kukulcan, the leading priest of the priesthood.

As Tat talks, Exa walks to the center of the plaza, the Temple of the Masks, which is painted orange and has two masks with deep pitted eyes staring from its top. The plaza creates echoes, footsteps whispering across the stone. Perhaps that was the whisper from before.

But as she stares at the temple, she feels this thrilling chill, like wind slicing through her bones. She is not accustomed to this sensation of cold. Her blood thrums, its force pulsing in the tips of her fingers. All the other stones fall away, so it’s only her and the temple, this gentle whisper.

From across the plaza, Mat trains her eyes on her youngest daughter, who has an
interest in this temple so much like her own. When she was young, Mat too heard the voice from the Temple. And like Mat, Exa must learn the story on her own, if it finds her. That is the way. The gods must decide.

Exa feels compelled enough by this temple to race to it, to put her palm to that stone. When she does this, she believes she feels the gods lurking there, a flash of heat. A deep heat from the stone, like she has reached into the sun, a god’s heart. She feels crisped, tight-skinned, as if burned from the inside.

She hears it now. A voice, beneath all the noise of Tikal, coming from the stone. A sad voice, a woman. Saying something. But she can’t hear. Not yet.

There are layers inside of her, like the layers of the world. Nine layers of heaven. Inside her three: this world, with the hot sun and the temple stone, the strange woman’s voice, and then a final layer, something beyond the voice, that heat.

Or perhaps it isn’t like that at all. Perhaps in this moment, Exa has only a superficial interest in the temple. Who could blame her? With its brilliant orange paint, its intricate carvings, its large steps, anyone would be interested in this temple. Intrigued that it was built for a woman. Perhaps the voice, the possible link with the gods will come later, on her second, third, fourth time visiting the temple. Perhaps it never will come at all.

Stories

And perhaps now you are dubious—strange voices? Have we ventured past the historic and into the mythic? Fantasy.

Well yes, of course. This is fiction.

But listen, Tikal is the city of voices, and I bet any tourist there today can admit that it
echoes, that sound bounces in ways that seem strange and wonderful. It isn’t just when hands clap in the Grand Plaza and the note of the quetzal’s call sounds. The exact pitch, thus resurrecting the quetzal, now extinct in Guatemala. But it’s also the way the stone rebounds speech. There are mysteries here that I too was drawn to.

As I once wandered its grounds, I eavesdropped, like Exa is prone to. I dropped in on many tours, and just listened to tourists, some American, others European, and many Guatemalan.

I heard a young woman say, *Es algo extraño aquí, el sonido sin nombre.* “There is something strange here, a sound with no name.”

I agreed.

Even before I learned anything about the Temple of the Masks, I kept returning to it. Perhaps it was the name, but there was also something about its physical presence that made me just want to stand by it. It’s not as impressive as the Temple of the Jaguar, which sits so close to it. But, still I stared at the Temple of the Masks for hours.

And then, on one of the many tours, I learned something strange. The tour was led by a man, whose name I’ve forgotten, but I remember he said that he was Maya, that he once grew up in this place, him and his family, before it was protected as a National Park. Before the government allowed no one to live on it. He said this sadly, but he also said he was glad he could still spend his days here, that he could get paid talking about a place he loved so fiercely.

I thought that was a remarkably optimistic way to think about being forced from your land. Or a kind lie to make the tourists feel better.

This man said the Temple of the Masks was his favorite and that it had a strange story
to it. He said it was built to commemorate the famous King Ah Cacao’s wife, who just vanished in the jungle one day. He said they never found a body.

I can’t find any other source that mentions this. They acknowledge that the temple was built for Ah Cacao’s wife, but they leave it at that.

But I was curious about that body, if this indeed is what really happened.

And I thought, here is a story. Here is something that perhaps can never be explained by archeology: the cold, hard facts.

I thought, this story needs a writer. I thought, let us imagine.

II.

Exa’s family walks through the open market and there are so many people that Exa feels as if she will never see it all. It’s like someone has shot an arrow through a beehive and it has burst open and bees are buzzing everywhere. The air is ripe with the spicy and smoldering scent of too many bodies in one place. The gritty sweet smell of chocolate comes in waves as people exchange beans for goods. The sun shines heavier here than back at her village where the trees absorb so much of its heat.

Mat and Tat hold Exa’s hands and guide her through the market. Chunky, ceramic pots form mountains, fine woven fabrics become rivers of color, and sharp wooden farm tools glint.

Everywhere men come to Tat and say the formal hello, the looping Ba’ax ka wa’alik. They shake hands, pat each other’s shoulders and smile. Tat asks about their wives, their children. The head of the Tatuye family, the closest noble family to Exa’s home, lingers, pats her on the back and comments on how fast she has grown.
The man is thinking of his own children, how his eldest boy is not far from marrying age. How his daughters, who seem so tiny and young to him now, soon will have husbands, children. This sort of progression feels wild to him and causes him to remember his own childhood and how that slipped past him so quickly. The whole world moves so rapidly, the young growing old, these cycles of life occurring so quickly.

After the market Tat brings his three children, Exa, Ismena, and Itzali to his brother’s palapa.

*Muluc,* Tat says as he throws his arm up to greet his brother. *Kisa,* he says to his brother’s wife. Though Tat is all warmth, concern settles in Muluc’s frown as he says, *There is news to discuss.*

Itzali grabs Exa’s hands and with Ismena they go outside, where Muluc’s children have already gathered to see their cousins.

Exa is a stranger here, but after Ismena introduces her, Muluc’s children—three boys, two girls—treat her like they have known her a lifetime. The boys have flat, pressed foreheads and slightly crossed eyes as is fashionable. Itzali’s eyes are not crossed. Tat’s own eyes didn’t cross as a child, refused to do so, even though his parents hung a bead in front of his face as an infant, encouraged his eyes to settle toward the middle of his face. Being straight-eyed gives Tat advantages. He sees the world crisp. When he crosses his eyes, it’s disorientating. Tat doesn’t know how his brother and his children function like that. In that strange and doubled world.

Exa is the youngest and her smallness makes her feel awkward. The girls sit in a half-circle with a wet mound of clay in front of them. Their hands, mud-splattered, as they shape
the pots. Exa sits alongside Ismena, who is skilled at making pots. She coils the clay expertly, smoothes it so it is thin and light. Exa focuses and tries to shape a beautiful pot. She rolls a long strip of clay but it keeps breaking, becoming two, three, four pieces. The other girls do this with ease, none quite as good as Ismena, but all better than Exa.

*Have you never made a pot?* one of Muluc’s daughter’s asks. Her name is Kila, and she is his eldest and takes pride in all of her handiwork. In this moment she feels panicked because Ismena has outdone her. She has spent long hours perfecting her technique, shaping the pots just so, but Ismena, who must be younger than her, has fingers that move with such ease and assurance. So Kila is feeling vulnerable, flayed open.

*I have practiced*, Exa says. *But never made a good one.*

*Really?* Kila says. *You must be at least nine Haab years and you can’t yet craft a pot?* She asks Exa this not with vehemence, but with a little pettiness, and genuine curiosity.

*I am ten*, Exa says. And then she begins to cry, because her inadequacy is like a deep hole inside her and she can’t breathe because of it. Because she so wants to be a child her parents can be proud of, to be a strong community member. A strong piece for a strong whole.

Or perhaps it isn’t like this. Perhaps she says, *I have other skills* and she stands and grabs a fistful of the wet clay and says, *I am good at pounding clay*. And then she smacks the clay against the stone to get all the air bubbles out. The wet clay water splashes brown across all the girls, Ismena included, though Ismena is the only one who laughs, besides Exa who takes such joy in shocking others. And she is good at pounding clay. She has a strength her small size would not suggest. The girls shriek. Exa thinks, *Yes, perhaps I am good at making people yell too.*
Or perhaps Exa would be nowhere near these girls making pots. Perhaps she would only struggle with her inadequacies in private, with her Mat, with Ismena. Instead she would be lingering on the fringe of the boys, who are cutting stones for arrowheads.

Perhaps she is sneaking behind the palapa, her ear pressed to the wall in hopes of hearing Muluc’s news. The whisperings of adults has always intrigued her.

In the palapa, Muluc places a hand on Tat’s shoulders and says, *Recent traders from Calakmul bring news of unrest there. Their crop was infected and those working the fields grew tired of watching the limited food go to the priests and nobles. King Chan Pet requested we trade with them soon.*

*And are we?* Tat asks.

*No. We are not sure we have enough for our city. The drought is beginning to hurt us. How are your yields?*

*Strong,* Tat says.

*Any signs of unrest among your workers?*

*No,* Tat says, and he is shocked to even think of this. These people he is friendly with, who he is kind to. He is a soft leader, because he respects his villagers. He believes there is mutual respect between him and his workers. He is part of the nobility, but is a little removed from its privilege because he doesn’t live in Tikal. He is not that removed from those below him.

And he is right for now to believe there is mutual respect. But when times grow hard, as we know they will, this will begin to crumble.

Outside, the girls speak of equally serious matters.
Kila lifts her chest and turns to Ismena. *The atanzahab is coming for me tomorrow.*

*Then I will have my coming of age ceremony.*

Ismena’s brow narrows as she continues to work the clay, as she pushes it, makes it stretch and deepen, to become the gaping mouth of a bowl. *This is wonderful news,* she says.

*How old are you?* Exa asks. She hadn’t imagined Kila was old enough to be entering into marriage negotiations.

*Fourteen,* she says.

Exa’s hands stray and inadvertently flatten her pot. So she has four Haab years. It seems both far away and yet much too close. She feels like she has a slice of clay in her stomach, heavy and cold and full. Four years to learn how to make pots, or else find a way out of marriage, another way to contribute.

*Has your blood come, Ismena?* Kila asks.

*No.* Ismena adds details to her bowl. Makes its lip flare at the end, brings in its base so it is dainty and small. Exa cannot imagine being old enough to bleed.

Many days later, the family has returned to their palapa complex, just to the south of the small village Tat governs, just to the north of Tat’s fields, and surrounded thickly by jungle.

Tat takes his youngest daughter hunting. Exa pulls on her masat-skin shoes, the deerskin smooth, and follows Tat through the thickest part of jungle. It’s early enough that no other family member was awake when they left, not even Mat. Nearly a year ago Tat began teaching Exa to hunt, because she was desperate to learn. Because he saw her practicing by herself with Itzali’s bow and saw she had an uncommon skill for it. Tat doesn’t care for
squandered talent.

He took her hunting as long as she promised not to hunt in front of anyone else. When she asked him *why*, he paused for a long time, because he couldn’t find the words to tell his youngest daughter how Tikal might not need her to be a good hunter. That for the good of the whole, she might need to hone other skills, ones more appropriate for women. He wondered if allowing her to hunt would only be a mistake, a moment of false belief about what might be her life. But he wanted to give her a chance to try. There were so many different paths and she didn’t have to take the most traditional. Exa, after all, took after her Mat, who knew wildness as a child, and now has settled in her maternal role. Though uncommon, women and men did not always have to follow the paths society prescribed them.

So it is with trepidation that Tat takes Exa hunting, on his free mornings, when he doesn’t have to be supervising the fields early. On those mornings they can sneak away from Mat’s sleeping form. He suspects she knows where they go, but she has never voiced this knowledge.

They walk through the jungle, where it is thickest, the most sweaty and sweet smelling. They’re hunting for a si’s, a small rodent, with pointed gray faces and the most wonderful tails—a curve like a fern frond and big and bushy like Ismena’s hair when the rain comes and brings even more humidity. People hundreds of years later would call the si’s an anteater.

Exa doesn’t like watching Tat kill si’s. The smaller creatures and the birds she doesn’t mind, but the si’s with their beautiful tails are different. She dreams about them, fluffed in the wind, the elegant swerve of fur. They are too cute, and so she regrets the blood.

But also they are stupid creatures and their meat is thick and rich. Tat tells Exa that they honor the creature by eating them that this is how the *uwächulew*, the face of the earth,
cycles.

They walk on the damp jungle floor and hide themselves among the trees, their feet almost silent in the leaves. Exa has learned to be more silent than Tat. Then, there’s the sound of scurrying to their right. Before Exa can turn and see the si’s, Tat has put an arrow through it. Exa might be silent, but Tat is fast, and this is what she must learn. The si’s, or what was once the si’s, falls to the jungle floor with a muted thump. Two others fall, perhaps a family. Tat acts before Exa can even spot them.

She retrieves the last one. Before she scoops up the body, she focuses on that little face that narrows to a black nose. From the nose sprouts white fur, which fades to gray, then darker. Flashes of white surround its eyes, small, black, all pupil. A white half-circle, like the shrinking moon, like the bags under Mat’s eyes when she is tired. Mat is tired often because she has vivid dreams, she remembers too fiercely the wildness of her childhood and that nostalgia manifests in her dreams, keeps her from safe and solid sleep. There is such shocking power in dreams.

Exa doesn’t want to hold the si’s during their way back home, but she does. She holds only one, the smallest. Maybe she thinks this little si’s is like her, the smallest of its family. Its own body a reminder of her own. Or maybe her mind is on its meat, and she remembers how sweet and soft the meat is, how tasty it will be. Perhaps she is stuck somewhere between the two, both shocked and excited by this kill. Unsettled but resigned that this is the way life circles. This is the world she lives in, and how could she wish for anything else?

What We Might Know

So often I am told that the day-to-day life of modern Maya are only a “little different”
than those of the past. This idea, that over one thousand years has changed so little seems both incredible and unlikely. On the one hand, that anyone could resist all those years, not just their passing but the heaviness of them, is remarkable. Great cities falling, like Tikal, Landa marching in, burning almost all the sacred texts, being conquered, being proselytized to, mixing with Christianity. And that’s all in the far past. More recently: genocide in Guatemala, subjugation, being seen as indigenous and thus a minority, thus the Other.

And all this? Has changed nothing? Hasn’t impacted the day-to-day interactions, how they see themselves, how they see the family unit, their relationships?

I wouldn’t know.

But these scholars, who let’s face it, are usually from the West, are almost always white, who usually have names like John or Bill or Tom. Well, they seem to know. And this isn’t meant to sound harsh, to belittle anthropologists, who after all, are conscientious storytellers. This is only meant to comment on the current state of writing and anthropology. When was the last time you read something by a modern Maya?

How could we know anything. Because I too am only an outsider looking in. That is all I can be, and so I am left with only questions. Only wild guesses. Left wondering if this is better than nothing. Better than not even looking.

I would so like to believe that it is.

III.

Exa wakes early, as she always does. She savors that gentle quiet of the jungle before it wakes. The howler monkey’s call, a soft and distant sound, like echoes in a cave. A few insect wings twitter, sensing the upcoming thrill of the sun. She leaves her straw withie and
tiptoes across the first floor of the palapa. Itzali and Ismena are still deep in the arms of Ah-Uaynih. She never could hold Exa for long. Tat says Ah-Uaynid is better at bringing sleep to men, which is why they snore and women do not. Only Exa has heard Mat snoring sometimes. It’s those vivid dreams. They clutch her tightly, refuse to let go.

But this morning, Mat’s withie is empty, as is Tat’s. Exa crosses the length of the palapa but stops at the flap of thin animal leather. The leather keeps bugs out, but it doesn’t keep Mat’s and Tat’s voices from leaking in.

Tat strikes stone with stone, as he tries to light a fire. Mat crosses her arms and worries about Tat allowing Exa to hunt. Kisa, Tat’s brother’s wife, was appalled when Mat confided in her, told her she knew what Tat was doing. Kisa believes in convention and this is not the normal way. And what of Itzali? He will need these skills, not Exa.

Mat once yearned for greatness, something other than the life of a mother, though now she is happy. She remembers that longing for a future out of reach, the fingers of hope she clung to as a child. That she could be someone special. A queen, a priest, a midwife. For a brief time she thought she was special, but she was wrong, couldn’t handle it, and disaster struck. She tries not to think about it. She doesn’t wish Exa to experience the same heartbreak.

Tat respects Mat’s opinions, but he says that he has thought long and hard about this, that Exa has skill. What he doesn’t say is that he is worried too. That he wants her to be happy, to benefit Tikal, but he isn’t yet sure what that looks like. Because she is noble, she has some opportunity to deviate from tradition, to perhaps assume more of a male’s role. But it will be difficult, and neither parent is sure this is what they want for their youngest daughter.
Tat’s fire fills the air with the spicy scent of copal smoke.

Exa likes eavesdropping, but she has had enough, so she walks through the flap and says *Morning*, though that is not quite true because Kinich Ahau has not yet brought the sun.

Tat says, *Get your bow*, as Mat closes her eyes and stands so still.

Exa does, as quickly as she can, because she is afraid of Mat’s stillness.

They head east, so that they get the most light from the rising sun. Exa avoids the driest leaves, she walks on her toes so she doesn't stomp. The rainy season has just begun, though the rain has only come in weak drizzles. When it comes with full force, hunting will be easier. The afternoon storms make the ground soft and silent.

Today isn’t about catching a creature, but about honing Exa’s aim. Tat asks, *See that large leaf up there? Imagine it is a sleeping bird, the tip, its head. See if you can hit its heart.*

Exa loads her arrow and aims. She closes one eye and tries to align her open eye with the arrow’s tip. She holds her breath and shoots. The leaf isn’t that high, but still it’s hard for her slim, young arms to pull the string back tightly enough to make the arrow fly high enough. She releases it.

The arrow pierces the bottom of the leaf, shoots straight through into the bark of a young ceiba tree.

*Your aim has improved,* Tat says, and wraps his arms around her shoulders.

*I did not hit its heart,* she says. The sun begins to peek through the leaves.

*No,* he says. *More of its butt,* and he laughs. This is why she doesn’t practice with animals. Anything but a clean, quick death is unkind. Tat’s arms tighten around her.

*Do you think you can retrieve the arrow?* he asks.

*Yes.* She is a skilled climber. Ceibas are tricky though, because they have spikes. She
grabs a low-hanging branch with two hands and swings, until she hooks her leg through and pulls herself up. Her red-shell belt that all young girls must wear catches for a moment on the tree, and she wishes she didn’t have to wear such an item. She moves, uncatches the belt, and then continues to climb from branch to branch. She is careful not to touch the spiky trunk, but she feels a little off balance. When she closes her eyes she sees the world swirling. She feels lightheaded, but ignores this and climbs higher, higher.

*Careful, *Tat says from what seems so far below.

The arrow is just arm’s reach away. She stands straight on the branch, but there is nothing to hold on to. She puts a hand to the trunk where a spike slips into her hand. She feels fuzzy for a moment. But there’s no blood, not that much pain, so she continues standing and reaches up and grabs the arrow.

*Are you okay? *Tat asks.

She throws the arrow to him. *I am fine.* She sits back on the branch and as she pulls the spike from her hand, the blood begins to flow from the wound, hot and thick. She's surprised by this, how much there is, and how shocking red it is. Her head swims a little, not because she is squeamish, but because the blood reminds her. Not a normal memory. Nothing in her past, but something, perhaps in her future. This memory of what she has not yet lived begins to haunt her.

The world shimmers. She is in the main acropolis at Tikal and she tastes sweat and a hotness in the back of her throat, a panic so strong it turns her numb. As if she is already removed from her physical body, as if she is one of the spectators who are crowded around her, all staring, boring holes into her. This is how it begins: the main acropolis, panic, surrounded by spectators. The feeling is fleeting as the present presses into her again. Only a
glimpse, and with the pain flaring in her hand, she disregards this slip quickly.

In the jungle, she takes off the top cloth of her huipil, so that she’s wearing only the flowing skirt and red conch belt. She wraps the fabric around her hand, the blood immediately turning the thin fabric red. She climbs down. It’s harder this time, because of her hand, but she makes it.

*You were very brave,* Tat says. *Not a single tear. Are you alright?*

She shows him his palm, which he unwraps and examines. *It is not deep.*

She nods and decides she will be fine until after they hunt and Mat can put some medicine on it. It stings, but isn’t too painful and Mat’s herbs will cure it.

*Tat says, You are stronger than you know. I am proud.*

Later, they return home with a large si’s for Mat to cook for breakfast. Flushed with victory, Exa has forgotten about the pain in her hand, that quick slip into that other place. She has forgotten, at least for now.
CHAPTER 2

I.

The calendars predict that today will be lucky, but for Itzali, who relishes the sound sleep that holds him, and for Exa, who is awake and brimming with energy, today will disappoint.

The first sign of disaster is that Mat isn’t asleep in her withie, but is outside with Tat by the fire pit. Exa exits the palapa and heads to the small shed, where she pulls on her deerskin shoes and grabs her bow. She doesn’t yet see her parents, but when she does, when Mat appears suddenly and frowns and shakes her head, any hopes of hunting shatter.

No, Mat says. And Tat appears behind her, also with a frown. He hates to do this to his daughter, hates that he offered her such promises, began to teach her hunting, only to take that away from her now. But Mat has convinced him. It will be less painful now, than if he did this years from now, when her blood came, and she is ill-prepared to be a wife. He wants the best for her, only the kindest, most honorable man to be her husband. But Exa in turn must do her part, must learn the skills necessary. Hunting is not one of them. She has not been dreamed to inhabit the space in between, to take more of a man’s role. And so they must proceed as custom dictates.

He hates the way his daughter turns to him, in seek of support, when he can offer none.

Mat says, From now on it is my turn to teach you. She pauses, her hand flattening the skirt of her huipil.

I can learn after hunting, Exa says with increasing urgency.

No, Mat says and Exa hates her. I am sorry, Mat says but her sorry is not enough, nowhere near enough to fill the deep pit of sadness that is forming within Exa.
Exa says, *Tat*, but he does nothing either, though he too is sorry and hates this. He stands still, and prays to the gods, asks them if he has done wrong. He doesn’t think so. He must direct his daughter along the most tread upon path. That is where their community needs her. That is the smoothest and softest path to follow. If the gods have other plans for his daughter, the gods will send a sign.

*Tat* also prays to the gods to allow his wild daughter to find another, accepted path. If it is meant to be, she will find it. He hopes she does.

Mat has left to wake *Itzali*, who stirs begrudgingly from his sleep. When Mat tells him he must go hunting, he hangs his head, but accepts this. He cares little for hunting. His interest falls to plants, but he knows this is a skill he must hone.

He shakes sleep from his eyes as he steps from the palapa, toward Exa. She holds the bow that she has been using for the past year, but is in fact, his. A gift from *Tat*, handmade and smooth.

*Itzali* won’t look at Exa. She intimidates him a little. But mostly he knows how hard this must be for her. He knows what’s it is like to be handed a role you do not especially want. But this is what makes the community resilient. And he believes strongly that it is worth it. A personal loss, for a larger victory.

He stretches out his hand and says, *Can I have my bow?*

*It is my bow,* Exa says, and she hates how much her voice shakes, how hot tears threaten to fall from her eyes.

*Sorry,* Itzali says, and like Mat, he means it. He grabs the bow and for a moment, Exa tightens her grip and he wonders if he’ll have to pull it from her, pit his strength against hers. He would win, of course, but he doesn’t want it to come to that.
It has always been Itzali’s, Tat says. Itzali is struck by his tone, so soft and gentle. Tat never talks to him like that. He has been kind to allow you use of it, Tat says.

Exa tightens her grip. She’d rather the bow break in two than give it up so easily. Tears brim her eyes. She can’t help it. She can’t allow them to fall, refuses to let anyone see that weakness, and so she drops the bow and runs, her feet pounding through the clearing that surrounds their house. She hits the jungle’s edge and keeps running.

She screams, a noise of sadness, but also anger. At Mat for demanding she abandon hunting. Exa could learn with Mat and Tat. Exa has already tried to learn weaving, clay work, and other skills with Mat.

But Tat’s worse than Mat. How dare he. That’s been her bow for the past solar year. She has never seen Itzali use it. It felt like hers. Her hands remembered what it felt like, how its wood curved. But she hasn’t even practiced on animals yet. This has only just begun.

Back at the palapa Mat screams Exa! as her daughter runs to the jungle, once again escaping the responsibility she must assume. Mat wishes Exa understood. She wishes she could tell her how hard it is to raise a daughter. But she can find no words.

Tat turns to his son. He doesn’t begrudge Itzali for his sleepiness, for his lack of interest in hunting. As a male, Itzali has more options. Though he must learn hunting, in these peaceful times, he does not have to be a warrior. He could perhaps assist a shaman instead and use his growing knowledge of plants. It is easier for men to abandon traditional roles than for women.

Tat misses Exa and her enthusiasm.

Exa has planned to be gone from the palapa all day, as further evidence of her sadness.
But then, her growling stomach draws her back, when the sun is high. She hopes Mat is not around, because her anger is still too strong, her stomach too hungry to face her now. Ismena is outside by the unlit fire pit, under a woven tarp in a fleeting grasp of shade. She braids reeds for a basket.

She smiles at her younger sister. Though she shakes her head, the corner of her lips tilt up, as if she’s fighting a smile. Although in her own life, Ismena follows the rules, and has slipped into her path with ease, she respects Exa for fighting it. She sees something in her sister that she believes in, though she doesn’t quite know what. Not yet. If she outlived her sister, she might see, but the world has other plans for Ismena.

*Where is Mat?* Exa asks.

*She went to the Tatuyes. She’ll be gone until nightfall.* The Tatuyes are the closest noble family and rule the neighboring village. They don’t live far, though Exa does not know them well.

*Why did she go?* Exa asks.

Ismena does not know, so she shrugs and continues weaving. *If you are hungry I saved some food for you by the fire.*

Exa nods her thanks and unwraps some tortillas and anteater meat and beans from a rough sack. She sits next to Ismena and feels less angry and desperate beside her older sister. Ismena always has such a calm presence. Exa takes a bite. The meat is a little dry, likely because it has been sitting out for so long, but it still tastes rich and strong, just the way she likes it. Anteater meat is one of her favorites.

*Are you still unhappy?* Ismena asks. Exa nods her head and takes another large bite of meat. *Change is hard for everyone,* Ismena says. She is pretending to be much older and
wiser than she is, as if she is practicing. She finishes weaving the reeds and lays them down. All afternoon she has been thinking of her sister, of ways to comfort her, but now she isn’t sure she should say what she was thinking. She respects her parents’ wishes, but also understands her younger sister and how being confined might lead Exa to extreme unhappiness, and perhaps something worse. And so, bones heavy with doubt, she says, *What if you practiced hunting alone?*

Exa narrows her eyes and swallows. *But they do not want me to hunt.*

Ismena pauses for a long while. Somewhere a quetzal calls, a series of soft, vibrating noises. *Yes, but what do you want? And are you brave enough to follow it?*

Exa finishes her meat. She hopes the answer to Ismena’s question is *yes.* She worries about what might happen if she disobeys. Ismena of course, worries about this too, but she trusts her sister and the gods. Exa is not like most girls, so maybe she can follow her own happiness and find a path that does not disgrace her family, and her community. Exa loves Tikal, the city of voices, the greatest Maya City.

*Thank you,* Exa says and Ismena only smiles. At least for now Ismena feels confident she made the right decision in telling Exa her thoughts.

When night falls, Tat returns with Itzali from supervising the plantations, and Mat returns from the Tatuyes. Ismena and Exa have made dinner, and Exa hopes for a thank you, but Mat says nothing. It was mostly Ismena anyway. Exa is good with a fire and with roasting meat, but she doesn’t have the patience to mold masa into tortillas.

The family sits around the fire, the smoky air keeping away the worst of the mosquitos. Anger still brims inside Exa, and every moment she fights back a scream, like a little animal
clawing up her throat. Even though what Ismena says makes her feel better.

The fire begins to die down, and Exa can no longer hold her words back. Is this it? she says and looks to Tat, who she hopes will still be her defender.

*I must work with Itzali. And it is time for you to learn more from Mat. We must respect tradition,* he says, though he will not look at her.

Mat says nothing. Dark-eyed in the flickering shadows of the fire, she thinks of what it was like to be this young.

*I hate tradition,* Exa says.

Tat immediately rises. He is usually an even-tempered man, but even he can be occasionally drawn to anger.

*Tradition is what makes Tikal strong,* he says. He doesn’t yell but speaks with a firm, determined passion that cuts deeply. *If one person does not pull her weight, then we will all fall.* He slams his fist into his open palm. *This has always been the way.*

Exa can’t help it, but her lips starts to shake and the tears threaten to spill out of her again. She knows all of this, but not all women follow such paths. What of the midwifes? The queens? Why can’t she determine how she best fits in this community?

Tat says, *You will do best to learn your place.* Tat leaves and walks toward the edge of the jungle where he wishes to think alone. He has too many thoughts, conflicting ones, about his daughter, her desires and his. He so wants to believe that she is destined for something greater, because this would make her happy. Because this would assure him that he has done right by his gods. But does he believe this?

By the fire Exa holds back her tears and thinks of the voice she heard at the Temple of the Masks. The sad woman, with a message that Exa thinks is urgent. She wants to tell Tat or
Mat about this, but she is afraid. What if they tell her the voice is nothing? What if it is nothing? She so wants to believe in it. To believe she is special. But Tikal is the city of voices; perhaps everyone hears something there.

_We will begin weaving tomorrow. Do not run away again,_ Mat says and stands, gathering the long flowing skirt of her huipil. _Please,_ she says more kindly. She sees so much of herself in her youngest daughter. When she was young it had never been easy for her to follow tradition either. How her Tat hated her. Mat had been called to be a midwife, or she thought she had. It was perhaps, more complicated.

It didn’t end well. Mat tries not to think of it. She is happy where she ended, with her children and with Tat. He is such a good man. He treats her as an equal. He was perhaps, more than she deserved, so she is thankful. But she still carries with her the regrets and the weight of her sadness in her past. When she looks at Exa she still thinks, _What if?_ Her attempt to be more than a wife ended with ghosts that still haunt her. But does Exa’s have to?

She worries she is pushing too hard. But for now, she must trust her instincts, and she has another daughter to attend to.

_Ismena and I must talk,_ she says and gives her eldest daughter a warm smile. Ismena is more than she deserves. She still wonders how she could be blessed with such a kind daughter.

And so Exa is left with only Itzali and the darkening fire. She wants to ask Itzali how hunting went. She wants to be a kind person to him, but she cannot yet gather this kindness because her anger is too strong. She hates him, even though she knows none of this is his fault.

It isn’t her fault either. So much is beyond her control.
The next morning, Exa wakes to the early hush of the jungle. She crawls from her withie as Tat gently rustles Itzali out of sleep and the two of them load their backs with bows and disappear into the jungle. Just before they vanish, Tat looks back at her. Regret sits heavily in his eyes, but so does determination. He is sorry that this is the way of things, but he is not sorry for enforcing them. This is a hard thing, but necessary.

Exa waits on a stump. She waits as the jungle awakens, the birds rising, opening their throats to the sun.

*Exa*, Mat says. Together they eat dried meat from the night before, and then they head toward the backstrap looms. A thick tarp covers the area and three looms hook to the same cepal tree trunk. Mat grabs the end of the loom and guides her daughter to it, straps her in, the rough-hewn leather flat on her back, the cords stretching to the trunk to form a line. At the end of the loom, at the part closest to the tree, is a polo, a smoothed tree branch, and then five cords tie to the branch and form a triangle, a single knot that attaches to the tree. Mat has already begun this fabric. It’s woven red and soft blue. Polos run horizontal through the vertical threads, so that the threads stay straight and untangled. There are four small sticks throughout the material, and two main polos toward the bottom.

Weaving always reminds Exa of a tangled knot, like the threads of her universe. Threads stretch out and connect them all, they run through the seven layers of the world. But sometimes these threads must stretch too much. Sometimes they break and tangle.

Exa’s weaving almost always becomes tangled.

She never has the patience to start a loom. It takes precision to pull the threads tightly enough, to stop them from tangling. She always ends with an endless, gooey knot. Ismena
with her long, exact fingers can string a loom beautifully.

Where is Ismena? Exa asks. Perhaps she doesn’t need the practice, but Exa is lonely here and she doesn’t want to face Mat alone.

Mat pauses and gives Exa the paleta, a flat, wide wood piece with dull points at each end. *She needs her rest.*

Exa dives her paleta into the unwoven threads to separate the top threads from the bottom. Though the threads look flat, there are two layers. She turns the paleta from flat to straight up, so the threads spring apart and she weaves the new thread through to create the next stitch. This is easy enough. She can do this part of weaving, usually. She struggles with the other parts: the beginning, the end, the embroidering. Those require patience and skill. She has tried to learn them, but it is always with half a heart. When she is here, another piece of her is always in the jungle. Sitting here with the woven strings, and with Mat, makes Exa feel divided. She wishes Ismena were here.

Why must Ismena rest? Exa says as she pushes the new stitch back with the polo and extracts the paleta. She moves the two main polos up and down, to make the threads loose again, to prepare them for the next stitch.

Dark clouds gather in Mat’s eyes. Mat always did have a ferocity to her. A restrained manner as if every moment she fights to keep her composure, to reign herself in. *We should talk,* Mat says. Outside the sky rumbles. A soft, light rain begins.

So Exa stops weaving and waits. She expects a grand secret, some wonderful unraveling. What she does not expect is what comes next.

Ismena is a woman now. *When the season turns she will join the other young women in the coming of age ceremony. Soon we will meet the atanzahab to discuss potential matches.*
Exa drops her paleta to the ground. Her heart beats like hummingbird wings, faster than sight. The atanzahab, the matchmaker, will match Ismena, and then she will be lost to Exa forever. Or at least it feels this way. She wants to run from this loom. Mat knew she would, which is why she has had this conversation here, where Exa is strapped to the loom, and unable to easily escape.

*But she cannot get married,* Exa says.

Mat laughs, part of this genuine, the other nervous. She is not ready to see her eldest daughter with a man. *Why not Exarena?* Mat asks, as she mentally lists the reasons why. Because no man could be good enough for either of her daughters. Because most men are not like Tat, because Ismena is still so young, because Mat needs her to help with Exa.

*Ismena is not ready,* Exa says. But what she really means is that she is not ready to lose Ismena.

*It is a long process. But she is happy.* Mat hands Exa the paleta. *You should be a good sister and be happy for her.* Exa sticks the paleta’s point in and shoves it through the threads. They groan, she has used too much pressure, and one of the threads snaps. This isn’t fair. First she lost hunting and now her sister. Itzali is much older and he has no prospective wife. She shoves the paleta through the cloth again and more threads rip.

*Exa!* Mat says.

*I will not marry,* Exa says. She has always felt this, but now this statement feels just and certain. Mat laughs again, and again it has the hesitation to it, but there is also anger.

*You ruined the cloth,* Mat says.

Exa throws the paleta to the ground, its tip piercing the soil and sticking straight up. She fumbles with the knot around her waist that binds her here, to this loom.
Behave, Mat says, but her whole heart is not in this command. A small part of her wishes to see the extent of her daughter’s wildness. And one day she will. When she does, she will regret ever wishing it.

Exa pulls and tugs at the strap around her waist that secures her to the loom. She slips the knot loose. She feels shivery and out of focus, like her world is loosing clarity. She doesn’t want to marry because she doesn’t want to be confined, because she doesn’t think she’ll cut it. She can’t weave. Her anger always blooms and she is left with ripped threads and tangles.

She is trying, but it’s not enough. It might never be.

I cannot do this, Exa yells because she has no other words. Language fails here. She runs from the loom, seeks refuge in the sticky heat of the jungle. She is young, and her solution to all of her problems it to run, fast and long. To physically escape her problems. Perhaps, this is the only solution.

What We Might Know

The ancient Maya language longed stumped archeologists, but now almost every glyph has been deciphered. It was so difficult because the glyphs can be either logograms or syllabograms, can either express an idea or a phonetic sound. Also, the Maya often adorned their glyphs with ornamental curls or decorations, so that the same glyph can appear different. Perhaps these adornments provide extra meaning or emphasis; no one knows.

Some glyphs represent both a sound and an idea. For instance the name Pacal, means “hand-shield;” sometimes the name appears as a picture of a hand-shield, but sometimes it is spelled phonetically as pa-cal-la. And sometimes it is both the hand-shield and phonetics.
Does each form of Pacal connote a slightly different meaning? We don’t know.

What we do know: the Maya saw writing as a sacred gift from the gods, and so only the elite could learn to read and write. They saw the power of language, both its ability to convey truth and to deceive. The stories they told chiseled into the stone of their temples and of the stellae perhaps only tell one version of history, one that glorified their gods and rulers, and convinced the peasants that their city was great.

This is much like our elementary history books. How Christopher Columbus became the person who discovered America, how the Civil War was only about slavery.

Language has its limits. Through language perhaps it is too easy to slip into deception without even realizing. I cannot escape myself, my language, this modern sensibility that I have. And so, remember, this story is a product of my time, of modern thought, psychology, anthropology. Though we can imagine outside this modern realm, we can never quite leave it behind.

In this story, there will be anachronisms. There will be times when language fails. Don’t worry; I see them too. I hope only that you can forgive them, and that we can escape as best as we can from modernity, and dare to dream elsewhere too.

II.

Ismena flees from marriage’s fingers. She is touched by its fingertips and soon it will reach out and grab her. This is what Exa thinks. Ismena thinks this is excitement. Her cheeks flushed, she says, *I will be a real woman soon.* Exa tries to smile, but it comes out wrong. She can’t bend her face to cooperate so instead she practices blankness, all the emotions buried deep inside her.
The sun hits the sky with light and then falls. It does this again and again. Though rain comes in soft drizzles, it never pours. Exa tries to avoid her sister because she doesn’t know how to act around her.

Three men Exa doesn’t know come and visit Tat in the afternoon. Tomorrow the atanzahab, the matchmaker, will officially meet with Ismena.

*Allow them quiet,* Mat tells her children. Her gaze lingers on Exa.

Tat receives them in his formal palapa, the northern most building. Beyond the clearing is the jungle, cut only by a narrow road that splits into three. One route goes to his plantations, the other to the nearby village where most of his workers live. The other points to trade routes with the northern tribes. Calakmul and others, and the Aztecs in the north.

*Are they traders?* Exa asks Mat.

*I do not know,* Mat says and leaves to prepare cups of bitter chocolate for the visitors.

*Can I help?* Exa asks, because she wants to see these men and because she wants some of that bitter drink that Mat rarely allows her because it gives her too much energy.

But Mat shakes her head and leaves her two daughters.

Inside the palapa, the three men sit, their backs straight and their eyes trained on Tat.

*I am surprised you have come this far,* Tat says, *You have come as far as the quetzal as it descends from the gods.* The men wrinkle their noses and are unsure how to respond. Tat does this sometimes, says a comment that makes only half sense, or none at all, just to see how people will respond. It is a good way of judging character and wit, and of gaining the upper hand. The men blink stupidly and fidget. They are clearly nervous. They are clearly nobles from the north in Calakmul. He knows these men by name only, as he has only ever
traded with their slaves or servants.

*We have come to ask for a trade,* the tallest of the outside men finally says. And because Tat is speaking to nobility and not servants, he knows these men mean a different sort of trade than has been performed between their cities before. They are willing to provide slaves or young women or fine jade in exchange for food or assured access to the northernmost cenotes closest to Calakmul.

*I will report you,* Tat says, *to my king.* Any trading that does not run through the king, that is not approved and official, is illegal.

*Our water supplies are low,* one of the men says.

*And I am sympathetic,* Tat says, *but my answer is no.* What he doesn’t say is that his king worries about Tikal’s shrinking water supply. That peasants already have reported serious shortages. This rainy season doesn’t seem to be offering much respite from the dryness.

North of the formal palapa where Tat talks to these strange men, Exa and Ismena walk through the edge of the jungle. Exa feels more relaxed here, but still her skin is prickly, as if she is being stalked by something large and fearsome. She holds her bow and arrow, a comfort to her when she thinks of Ismena and the atanzahab coming tomorrow. When she imagines her own future: a husband, a role as a mother, she just can’t picture it. Her mind doesn’t know how to bend herself into these roles. If only she could. What she wants most is to help Tikal.

Revision: what she wants most is to be happy. But she fears this is too selfish of a desire. Tat always tells her Tikal is only as strong as its community. Selflessness is central to
its strength. But she is only ten. It is difficult to think pass her wishes.

*How is practicing hunting on your own?* Ismena asks.

*Hard,* Exa says, but she loves it. Her arms have grown stronger, her body more assured. Sometimes she hangs from a tree limb and pulls her body up to strengthen her muscles.

She loads her bow and aims for a slim trunk, high in the canopy. She shoots, but the arrow whizzes past the trunk. Her aim often leans to the left. She still can’t manage to shoot straight.

They walk in the direction of the lost arrow, their footsteps becoming loud echoes through the undergrowth. It is too quiet here. For a moment Exa wonders if a jaguar could be stalking them, but no. There would be monkeys screaming. They always know. But still, it is too quiet, as if some of the animals have left.

This is the first sign of unrest.

As they walk toward the arrow, Ismena asks, *Are you mad at me?*

And Exa shakes her head and she means it, though she is scared and she is angry that Ismena is bleeding now. She sees the future unraveling, Ismena gone with her husband and Exa left alone. Exa likes to pretend she is strong and solid and alone, but she loves her sister.

*I am nervous about tomorrow,* Ismena says.

*You are perfect,* Exa says as she looks for her lost arrow.

*One wrong move and I might not be,* Ismena says. *It is important to make a good impression.* Ismena laughs, the sound of it thin and sad.

Exa nods and ducks under the underbrush. Where is her arrow? Her inability to locate it feels tremendous. She doesn’t understand how Ismena can be nervous when she is everything an atanzahab could look for. Anything a man could want. And Exa is nothing. A poor weaver,
pot maker, cook. Impatient, wild.

Then an idea comes to Exa, so clear and pure and perfect. She has a plan. If she wants to save herself from marriage, to spare some poor man from marrying her, perhaps all she needs to do is make a bad impression. Even slow and strange women usually find husbands, especially if they are nobility, but they find less important husbands. But if Exa were worse than strange, perhaps then she would be left alone.

Something in the undergrowth rustles beneath her, and she steps back quickly, her heart racing. It sounded like a snake. Dangerous. Like cloth twisting through water. She listens for it again, but the jungle is still and too quiet. She feels no bite, no sting. Ismena senses that Exa heard something, so she remains quiet, and together they wait and wait and wait. After so many moments of nothing, Exa decides there is no creature, it is safe to move.

*Are you alright?* Ismena asks.

For the first time today, Exa feels alive. *Are you scared?* she asks.

Ismena looks to the ground, then straight in her sister’s eyes, so much like her own. Long ovals, the color of thick shadows. Though their temperaments are so different, physically they are similar. Their faces hold the same traits. *Yes*, Ismena says.

They cannot find the lost arrow, though they look and look.
Exa wakes before the sun is full in the sky, but Mat and Tat have already emptied their withies, are already tending to the fire to boil water.

*Can I help?* Exa asks when she joins them by the fire. She is exhausted, because she didn’t sleep much. All night she was thinking of how best to destroy her chances of marriage, how to make a horrible impression on the matchmaker. Part of her plan is to seem helpful now, to make her parents think that all is well. Then when the atanzahab comes, she will act a little slow. Perhaps she will stare at nothing, will drool a little. And then at some point, she will say something against the gods. She has decided that this is the worst thing she can do.

She doesn’t want to do this, because she loves the gods, and she is afraid of what they might do to her if she says something against them. But she thinks that if she doesn’t mean it in her heart, it might not count. She hopes. She hopes this is better, for her, the community, than a marriage she will fail at. No man deserves that.

*Can I help?* Exa says again, louder. Mat turns from the fire and surveys her daughter for a moment. She is a smart woman, and recognizes this uncharacteristic helpfulness within Exa. Perhaps her daughter is growing up. But she suspects there is something else. Despite herself, Mat loves seeing her daughter’s wildness. Even though she knows she should suppress it.

Thank you, Mat says, *but I have arranged for you to stay with the Tatuyes today.*

What? Exa asks. Why?

*I thought it would be more fun for you,* Mat says, and ignores the slight regret she feels at this lie. *Today will be boring for you my Exarena, all about Ismena.*
What she doesn’t say is: *It is important that all goes well.*

Of course her daughter stands, puts her hands on her hips, tries to make her small body look large and says, *I do not want to go.*

Of course Mat stands, grabs her hand, and says, *You must.* She already has a leather bag with everything her daughter will need: some dried meat, her moccasins, a hollowed, dried squash for extra water. They walk to the jungle’s edge, to the road that leads away to the other village, to the Tatuyes’ palapa. The walk is not close, at least two hours, if they walk quickly. They must walk quickly, so that Mat has time to return and assist Ismena before the atanzahab comes.

Exa stamps her feet all the way to the Tatuyes’ palapa. She wonders why Mat arranged this. If Mat feared she had a plan, or if she had other intentions. Perhaps she hopes that if Exa is surrounded by more girls, she will learn how to be womanly and proper. Perhaps Mat merely wishes to focus completely on her eldest daughter today.

Nonetheless, Exa feels left out. Itzali is allowed to stay at home, but she has been forced out. She feels as if she is slowly peeling her skin from her body, unearthing vulnerable tissue and muscle beneath. Inch by inch she becomes more raw. Step by step it becomes harder not to open her throat and bellow.

Not only has her plan been thwarted, but now she wonders if she is loved.

Mat doesn’t know any of this. She recognizes the wildness in her daughter, the hot-headedness that leads to Exa’s feet stomping. But what she often doesn’t see is her daughter’s vulnerability. She will only realize how fragile her daughter is, when it is too late.

The Tatuyes’ palapa blinks into sight, and it surprises Exa with how much larger it is than theirs. Tat, though a nobleman, is modest, and does not care much for riches. The
Tatuyes, however, do not have such qualms. Their palapa is three times the size of her family’s and it is built high with stone that has been painted burnt orange, vibrant green, like the quetzal. By the time they arrive, the sun is high in the sky, and hot. Exa has been here before, but it feels like a lifetime ago, even though the time of her life has been so short.

Time, to her, seems to stretch forever.

It is impossible for Exa to imagine the world without her own existence.

The Tatuyes have five children, two girls, and three boys. Their mat comes out and embraces Exa’s mat.

*Thank you for watching her,* Exa’s mat says in a hush, though Exa stills hears it. She resent this gratitude, the exclusion, this ruining of her plan.

Exa walks behind the palapa, where the children are. The boys—Kish, Nacon, and Ome—sharpen stones for arrowheads. Ome is the eldest, and Kish, the youngest. He’s so tiny he doesn’t yet have the strength to make good arrows, but Ome has the skill.

The two girls, Emekal and Patli, are close to Exa’s age, neither old enough to meet with the atanzahab, but both quickly approaching it. They are pressing plants to extract dyes. They sit around a ceramic bowl with a frame suspended above it where two flat stones rest. They place the plants between the stones and press. The bowl collects the color and they discard the used plants. Their hands are blood red, tinged green at the fingertips.

Mat has already said a rushed goodbye and begun the journey back to prepare Ismena. Exa is looking so closely at the boys that she hardly notices her departure. She wants to join them, to make arrowheads, an activity she is skilled at. But she will be laughed at.

What she really wants is to be back at her palapa, so she can continue with her plan. But she is unwanted there. She is perhaps unwanted by the girls, who she joins anyway.
Emetaly and Patli are warm hosts. Emetaly hugs Exa and leaves faint red handprints on Exa’s bare back. From afar it looks as if Exa has been touched by a ghost, or perhaps marked by the gods. Their mat is inside the weaving palapa, but every so often she peeks her head from the flap of deerskin that covers the window to check on them.

*Alright, Exa?* She asks sometimes. Exa’s mat has put her up to this, no doubt.

*Wonderful Ishok Tatuye,* Exa says. *Ishok,* the formal and polite greeting for adults. She might be wild and rude around her parents, but she still understands the importance of community, of being respectful to her elders.

Even as Exa wonders if her parents want her around, if they are happier with Ismena, an ideal daughter, she smiles for Ishok Tatuye. She pretends with Emetaly and Patli that she belongs. She imagines her world breaking into small pieces and scattering. And here she is trying to fit one piece together with another, to perhaps build a slightly different picture. One that feels less shattered.

*Are you excited about Ismena?* Emetaly, the eldest girl, asks as she presses down on the stone to extract deeper, redder dye.

Exa thinks of her sister, how beautiful she must look, washed and perfumed, waxed and tattooed. Exa wants to scream, to claw and fight like a wounded animal.

*She is very excited,* Exa says. *I like to see her happy.*

Emetaly says, *I too will be meeting with a matchmaker soon.*

Exa is surprised Emetaly is old enough. She nods her head in congratulations, while her heart speeds a little. Marriage seems to be on all sides of her.

The boys continue to strike arrows. The middle child, Nacon, is being too tough with his arrowhead. He’ll shatter it. Ome, whose fingers are skilled and purposeful, should help
his brother, but he focuses only on his own work.

_Your arrow is beautiful_, Exa says, because she cannot help but admire expert work.

Ome throws back his head, so that his thick, oily hair plummets down his neck. _As if you know anything of hunting_, he says.

Exa’s hands are covered with watery, red dye. She rubs them on her skirt, staining the white fabric red. _I might know nothing personal of the gods, but still I can pray to them_, she says, though she doesn’t even know if it makes sense. Her purpose is to confuse him, throw him off guard, so she can swoop in and dominate. So has learned this skill from Tat who likes to throw people off balance, in order to see what will happen, to determine who is strong enough to recover and respond.

The technique works. Ome loses his confidence, his head tilting back down and his crossed eyes squinting. Ever since King Ah Cacao, who had crossed eyes, they have been fashionable. But still, they unnerve Exa. She is glad Tat and her brother do not have crossed eyes. _It is impractical_, Tat says, and this is the only explanation he’ll give about his choice not to cross his son’s eyes.

_What?_ Ome asks, after a long, confused pause in which Exa has to fight back laughter. But in those moments, where she was quieting laughter from her throat, something large occurs to her. A plan.

_Let us see who is the better hunter_, Exa says. _You or me, a sad girl who can know nothing of bows and arrows_. She stands up to show him her smallness, her girlishness.

Ome laughs, the sound rough and guttural like a wild boar.

_If I win_, Exa says, _we get to do something I want to do_. And _if you win_, she pauses, looks him straight in the eye, as she would an animal to exhibit dominance, _I will do anything_
for you whenever I am here. Exa suspects she will be spending a lot of time at the Tatuyes.

Anything? Ome says. Stick your face in the dirt, go kill a motmot, find a quetzal feather, pet a snake? His crossed eyes lighten with the possibilities of having a slave. The two girls are silent and wide-eyed.

Anything, Exa says again. If she wins she will pick an activity that sends them into the jungle, where she can escape and return back to her palapa. She might be able to save herself from a match, a husband she can’t be a good wife to.

Ome, no, Emetaly says. She stands and looks at Exa with genuine fear. Exa, you do not want to do this.

Exa sees now a real darkness in Ome’s eyes. His lips twist at the corner as he thinks of what he might make his little slave do. He wishes to see this girl humbled, because her assurance threatens him, because she is out of place in her behavior and should be quieter like his sisters. This girl who openly wears her red conch shell belt, to signify her femininity. Whatever he does will be for Exa’s own good. And his amusement, of course. What is a bargain without amusement? Without the potential for intense embarrassment?

Emetaly says, Ome, you are too old for this.

He stands, his muscles well formed and beginning to bulge across his shoulders and arms. He is tall, and for the first time, Exa is frightened of him. He is much older, much larger than she had first thought.

Deal, Ome says, and now it is too late for either to back out. They grab dirt in their right palms and extend their left palms. Exa drops her dirt on Ome’s left palm, as Ome does the same. The earth, the power layered above Xibalba, the underworld, seals the deal between them.
A shooting match? Emetaly says, though she shakes her head and is still wide-eyed. She has misjudged Exa. She thought she was wise and settled. She has not misjudged her brother, who has always had irrationality to him, like a snake. It is difficult to know if or when he will strike, and whether there will be poison when he does.

Ome and Exa nod. And so Emetaly picks up one of her dye plants, one that is still soggy, still leaks color onto her hands. She walks to the jungle, maybe three hundred steps, maybe more. She loses count, but it is far, so far that her brother and Exa appear small when she looks at them. She thinks this is a mistake, but Ome and Exa have already agreed, so she paints the trunk of the largest trunk with a red circle. She paints it as large as she dares.

When Exa looks at the circle, it looks to be the size of her fist coiled tightly. Ome strings his bow. Kish, the youngest boy, hands her his bow, which is a practical size, though it lacks the beauty of Ome’s bow, which he has spent long hours crafting. His bow is one of the few possessions he treasures. His tat would always tell him that a man is only as good as his bow. That a bow is only as good as the man who wields it. He almost feels sorry for Exa. Almost, but his desire for victory is greater.

Diosh, Exa says to Kish, a formal thank you. He is kind to allow her to use it.

Emetaly returns and flings the dye plant to the ground.

You have three shots each, she says. Whoever hits one arrow closest to the center of the red circle wins. Ome and Exa nod. Because Exa is smaller, because her bow is smaller, she will aim from closer.

Ome nods, he wishes this to be as respectable a win as possible given his adversary is a small girl. But Exa shakes her head and says, I will aim where Ome does. She needs this to be a clean win, to prove to herself that she is more than a small girl, that she does indeed
deserve greatness. She needs to prove she is strong enough to forge a separate path, or else she has no right embarrassing herself in front of the atanzahab.

Exa, Emetaly says, her voice soft, but lilting up to convey her surprise at Exa’s stupidity. Emetaly cannot understand, and yet she admires Exa’s blind willingness. Emetaly wonders if stupidity can be admirable, if it can lead to progress. She wonders if invention or discovery merely comes about when a stupid person gets lucky. Perhaps we are all stupid, Emetaly thinks.

Exa shakes her head and ignores Emetaly. Exa wants to be seen as different, to be dark and mysterious as the largest cenotes that stretch their watery fingers deep into the earth, the beginnings of Xibalba, the world beneath. She must be different so she can shed her womanhood and exist somewhere between male and female.

Her heartless body will be found abandoned in a cenote so many years from now and she will become the mystery she craves to be. The cenote will dry and become hard stone, and then we will find her.

Exa says, Ome goes first.

He nods and takes his position. Exa watches how he moves, how he tilts the arrow a little toward the sky and aims with one eye closed. She tries to pick up on any strategy she can, allow him to make mistakes first.

He takes a deep breath and then, in utter stillness, releases his first arrow. It whirrs through the air, as if cutting the world right open. The world falling to pieces. He is strong, a strength Exa cannot hope to have.

She hopes for it anyway. She focuses deep within her and thinks of the voice at the Temple of the Masks, which rings somewhere inside her.
The arrow pierces the trunk—well outside the circle, too high—but for a first attempt, she is impressed. And scared. Ome grunts, wipes sweat from his brow and retrieves his second arrow. He is slower now, more methodical. He adjusts the angle of his arm as it withdraws the string, cements his feet to the ground, makes his stance steady and strong. He shoots, but the arrow is too low and pierces below the red circle.

Exa allows her stomach to flutter with a little more hope.

*Tz’is aw’t*, Ome curses. Exa feels for that voice inside of herself, the voice of the gods, a plea to give her strength. She believes fiercely in the power of the gods, and so now she must believe in her own power, of her ability to receive what the gods might give her.

Ome draws back his third arrow. He closes one eye to refocus his crossed eyes and bring the world back to a single image. He releases, and the arrow shoots straight, as if defying the slight breeze.

The warm, wet air enters Exa’s lungs, and for a moment that moisture clings to her. For a moment her lungs mistake this for drowning.

Her body, alive or dead, will be drowned, waterlogged in a cenote.

The arrow strikes the red circle. Not the center, but even from here they can see that it is solidly within the color. The boys cheer, but Kisch, the youngest, cheers out of obligation only. He has to root for his older brother, but secretly he hopes Exa with her smallness is victorious. Kisch is small too, and the youngest child, so he feels camaraderie for her. He has a fondness for that which should not succeed.

The girls shuffle their feet and kick up dirt. But not Exa. She keeps her head straight, tries not to let her faith stagger. She must believe in the gods. That is what this comes down to. Can she believe hard enough? Are the gods kind enough?
Can she believe in herself?

She takes her bow and stands in the space Ome just vacated. She smells him, that lingering scent, spicy and rank like spoiled meat. She adjusts her stance like Ome’s on the third shot. She closes one eye, points the tip of the arrow straight ahead and pulls back on the string, the muscles in her arm aching. Her arms are small and weak and they quiver, but she ignores the pain and the shaking and she focuses on her breaths. She holds her breath and releases. It whips through the air, but there’s less power to it. It’s slower than Ome’s arrows. The wind grasps it and throws it from its path.

She hits the trunk, but she is so far to the left, as she always is, that her arrow is farther than any of Ome’s. At least she hit the trunk and she can adjust.

Emetaly cannot believe that Exa, a girl younger, and smaller than her, hit the trunk. She once practiced shooting with Kisch’s bow and she could barely shoot straight. Kisch hopes for his small comrade and now, more than ever, he believes in the possibility of this win. Ome has never been kind to him, never cruel either, but Kisch has no loyalty beyond blood to his brother. Blood ought to be enough, but in this moment, his heart strays.

You do not have a bad shot, Ome says. Exa wonders if he is taunting her, if he is comfortable enough that he will win, he does not feel threatened by her. She must learn to be a threat and learn to wield more power.

But Ome said this because he is scared. He did not expect Exa’s arrow to even make it so far.

Exa wets her fingers and raises it to the wind, to better ascertain the way it blows. She prays to U’K’ux’Kaj, the heart of the sky, a god she asks to still the air around her. Her heart beats a steady thrum, the force of it pounding not just in her heart, but in her arms, the tips of
her fingers as she draws the string back. When he closes her eyes to focus, the darkness diffuses colors and for a moment she believe she sees something beyond, as if she travels along the layers of the world toward a higher level, as if she sees glimpses of the gods.

Exa aims again and shoots. This one rips more quickly through the air, but its aim is less accurate. It misses the entire trunk and pierces another nearby tree. Ome laughs, the tension in him easing a little. *What should I make you do first?* he asks. *Shall I make you kiss me?*

Exa shivers, her bones rattling. She can’t kiss him, this smelly brute. She is trying to save herself from a man like him, to prove she doesn’t need him. To show she cannot be a wife, but is capable of something more impressive. She lowers her bow. Her fingers struggle to untie the tight knot of her red, conch shell belt. Young girls are meant only to remove this when they come of age, but Exa feels its weight and needs it gone. She finally loosens the knot, and removes it. She feels so simple and light without it. Her skin immediately embraces the lack of it. She can feel Emetal’s disapproval, see her open mouth and wide eyes.

But Exa has bigger issues to think about. She picks up the bow and trains her eyes on the target, remembers exactly where it is and then focuses to find that thread to the gods. Under the blanket of closed eyes she falls deeper into those colorful edges, where the black frays, where she believes the gods dwell. She focuses inside, where something slick shines, taller than any tree, and noise bustles, harsh and rumbling. She falls into the gods and the red target. In her mind’s eyes, she looks up at the heart of the sky.

And maybe then nothing happens. She merely pulls the bow and misses the target, and Ome, of course, is victorious. Maybe Exa is just a normal girl, who will live a normal life to a normal husband.
But normal women don’t find themselves heartless. We do not find their bones as abandoned relics.

And so let us imagine that something peculiar happens, that when Exa looks up into the heart of the sky, the sees her own heart. That time loops like physicists imagine it might, like the Maya believed it cycled.

All is still. Exa is nowhere and everywhere, split down the middle, and it is like she is watching herself. The air has stilled, and she sees nothing but the tree and the red mark. She is a ghost watching her own present, or examining its past.

And then she sees herself in the main acropolis of Tikal, with the Temple of the Masks screaming at her. The loudness of its voice enters her like pure energy as she walks to the Ah Nacoum, the remover of the heart. The crowd’s noise enters her and becomes pure energy, and she is doubled, past and present, this double energy welling inside her as she raises her bow, pulls back the string.

She hears the arrow whirling before she even opens her eyes, before she even knows she released the shot.

It speeds as fast as Ome’s and hits the trunk with a crack that has an absolute finality to it. Ome’s arrow sits on the left of the circle at the edge. And Exa’s? To the right of his. Not quite dead center, but close.

Exa’s mouth drops. Ome’s drops too.

Now this is a story suitable for a woman found heartless. Emetal and Patli and Kisch and Nacon all have mouths dropping open. They are like fish, glassy-eyed, bulging lips, open, gaping mouth. Ome’s is the largest, his eyes the angriest.

_How did you do that?_ he asks, his body swelling with injustice and with fire. He feels
wounded, as if Exa has shot him, and he is leaking hot blood as he moves, that spills from
him with each breath. Shame to him feels worse than any other emotion or bodily wound.
Intolerable.

_I do not know_, Exa says. She feels numb and hot and cold all at once. She wonders if
she just communed with the gods, if for once she engaged in more than a one-sided
conversation with them. They were there inside of her, or she was with them, up above, or
elsewhere. She is not sure what happened, is not sure if she saw herself or the gods, or
perhaps, something else. But she knows something large has happened.

She feels unbalanced as she says, _Wow_ and excitement swells within her, because her
world feels cracked open like an egg, and full of possibilities. _I win_, she says as she tries to
be practical, to proceed with her plan. This is the beginning of a knot she must unravel, but
she must be cautious, patient. _Let us walk through the jungle to the village center and the pitz
ball court so we can play. That is what I choose to do._

The Tatuyes look at Exa as if afraid at any moment she will explode. She has become
an unknown entity to them, and they aren’t sure how best to deal with her. *But Ome*, Exa
says, _you will tell your mat that the boys are hunting and the girls are looking for more dye
plants. Tell her we will stick together._

Once she is in the jungle, she will be able to escape and find her way back to her palapa.
She hopes this excuse is logical. Ome might believe she would risk so much to play pitz,
because girls are generally forbidden from the game unless accompanied by men. Exa has
only played once with Itzali before, not because Itzali will not take her, but because he has
little interest in the game. He prefers solitude.

Ome nods, his muscular body thrumming still with defeat. His crossed eyes narrow, but
he retreats to the palapa. Deals aren’t taken lightly, so he will hold up his end. This is important.

In his absence, the girls’ eyes flitter to Exa. They are flighty, awed, but also a little scared.

*How did you do that?* Emetaly asks.

*You were like the wind,* Patli says.

Exa has no answers. She can’t say the gods, because she doesn’t know if that is true, and it is too grand of a pronouncement. It is important for her to stay humble, cautious. Now that the moment where she felt that swell of energy is further away from her, she is less and less convinced of it. The idea that the gods would choose her, would settle within her body to help in such a trivial matter, seems absurd.

But we are not strangers to the power of an individual. Perhaps this was not a trivial matter. Perhaps the fate of Tikal rested on this little body. Or perhaps we see others as powerful, merely because it makes a good story.

But isn’t it possible that when Exa pulled the bow, strength snaked in her arm and she pictured that target, saw the arrow pierce the air before she even knew she released it? Perhaps it was a strange surge of adrenaline, or perhaps something more.

*I have been practicing,* she says in answer to Emetalys’s question. *I had to get used to a new bow, but the third time I adjusted to it.*

*Practicing alone?* Emetaly asks. She has a sharp aquiline nose that isn’t wholly unattractive. Exa has a sudden image of it splitting her in two. Exa wonders if Emetaly will tell on her. Tell her mat, or worse, Exa’s own.

*With my tat,* Exa says. *He says I have a talent for it, and it is a shame to waste talent.*
She misses the old version of Tat and wishes she could loop back to it, go back to the old Tat.

Ome returns. *We have until the sun begins to touch the tree canopy.* Exa reties her conch shell belt around her waist and Ome plunges forward toward the jungle and tries not to think of his defeat. He cannot dwell on it in this moment because he must seem strong and stoic. But when he does think about it, he feels violent, and struck open. No almost-grown man should suffer such embarrassment. What makes it worse is that he is talented with a bow. He was once proud of his skill with it. Clearly he has grown too arrogant. Clearly he needs to reevaluate his skills, his place in the community. He feels adrift and angry, a cold burn that as it simmers will only grow worse.

Now, as they walk through the jungle, Exa is struck by how massive Ome is, how old. When she challenged him she saw him as more of a child. But now as she looks at him, he appears more adult, as if failure has grown him up in an instant.

She shakes her head and follows him. EmetalY brings a pitz ball in a woven sack and Exa brings the bow, just in case. Ome has an obsidian knife hanging from a loop in his belt. In the jungle it is best to be prepared.

Exa walks quickly. She needs to get ahead of the group, far enough that when she abandons them that they will think she is just out of sight. She stretches her short legs, makes the steps long like shadows in the setting sun. But Ome, with his height, matches her speed easily. EmetalY, Patli, and little Kisch patter behind. The space between the two groups grows larger.

*Slow down,* EmetalY says.

Ome does, but just a breath slower. He slides his eyes to Exa and matches his steps with hers, because he doesn’t trust her. Because he needs to show his dominance in any way
he can, because he feels so small and wounded at this moment. He wants to throttle her. Not because he wants to hurt her, but because he wants to restore his authority. Power has shifted and is out of balance. He would never throttle her. Or so he believes. But as their footsteps match, his desire to hurt her grows. He tries to suppress it, but it is all he can think of.

_Are you a prodigy at pitz, too?_ Ome asks.

The ballgame terrifies Exa. She has never seen an official game and has only played it on the small court in the village Tat governs. But Tat has told her stories of pitz at Tikal. The heavy rubber ball must never touch the ground, and players can hit it into the air with anything but their hands. The goal is to get the ball through a high hoop, but this is so hard that the game ends the first time a player succeeds. There are two teams and the leader of the winning team, as a reward, must face the audience who decides whether or not he is sacrificed to the gods. The gods crave winning blood, at times.

How brave to throw your fate into the hands of so many. A crowd reckless and rowdy from drinking balche. Exa thinks she couldn’t do it, even for the gods, even for the good of those she loves.

As they walk to the pitz ball court, Exa thinks about how she could not sacrifice herself for the good of those she loved.

But years from now, as the crowd swells, and she feels distinctly how fast and hard her heart can beat, and she faces the Ah Nacoum, who will remove her heart, she wonders if she is here selflessly, almost by choice, and as a figure to protect Tikal. She wonders if that is what she has been moving toward all along. Or is she going to be sacrificed because she lost her way. Because she became too selfish.

Can these both be true?
No, she says to Ome’s question. *I hardly play pitz, but I would like to play more.*

She isn’t sure Ome believes her. He is looking at her as if she is a wild animal and he cannot trust her. She doesn’t blame him. She is not sure she can trust herself. She slows her pace and Ome follows. Emetaly and Patli catch up.

Emetaly says, *I bet Ismena is charming the atanzahab right now.*

*She is charming,* Ome says.

*Our mat says first impressions are so important,* Patli says. *Nothing can go wrong.*

Exa speeds up a little, but then so does Ome. All this talk of her sister has reminded her of her plan. She got so involved in thinking of sacrifices and the gods, that for a moment she forgot what she must do. Find the atanzahab. Make a bad impression. She speeds up again, but so does he. He’s got that dark glint in his eyes again, the one he had when he considered what he could make her do if she were his slave. The same glint that frightened Emetaly. He has done nothing violent toward her, but sometimes she thinks he is capable of it.

Exa and Ome walk until her legs ache, and though she tries to walk faster than him, she cannot. She will have to make a run for it. And as she prepares to do this, Patli’s words keep sounding in her brain. *Nothing can go wrong.* Exa wonders if she were to make a fool of herself, would that reflect badly on her sister? Might it cast her whole family in shadow? She has never thought about Ismena. So was focused on her own hopes, dreams, fears that she has forgotten her sister, who is so happy to be married, who will make such a wonderful mat.

Exa stops. Ome barrels past her for a second until he realizes, and stops and turns around. *What?*

Exa takes a moment to catch her breath and then asks, *If my family is found unsuitable, might Ismena not be able to marry?* When the tutor comes from Tikal to teach her and her
sister, Exa never pays much attention to the bits about marriage conventions. She is more interested in the stars, though the tutor says that is information she doesn’t need.

(Of course, Ome says. But your family is a high noble family, and your tat is well respected. There is no need to worry.

Emetaly, Patli, Kish and Nacom, have caught up to them, and Emetaly immediately understands what Exa is asking.

Exa’s hand rubs the length of her borrowed bow. But if Itzali were to curse the gods or something?

Emetaly says, He would never.

But if he did? The jungle buzzes around them.

Ismena could be ruined, yes, Ome says. Why?

This is Exa’s chance. If she were to race to her right, she could vanish quickly into the jungle. Even if Ome were to follow her, her smallness is an advantage in the thick jungle undergrowth. She could evade him. She would still be able to find the atanzahab and make a poor impression. She could still save herself from a life she doesn’t belong to. She could save her potential husband.

She can decide her own fate if she only races to the right. The insects rub their wings in a constant drone. She thinks of Ismena, her face flushed, how excited she is by marriage. Exa can trade her sister’s happiness for her own, if only she races to the right.

To the pitz court or her palapa? She doesn’t know what the gods wants, for her, if they do indeed care. She wonders if the gods are, after all, too lofty for such concerns. Perhaps they only care about cycles, rhythms, Tikal as a landscape. She is just a tiny pinprick, a star in the big, black sky.
She continues walking toward the pitz ball court. A hot tear drips down the side of her face and pools just beneath her chin.

*Are you alright?* Emetaly whispers. With her intelligence, she has already begun to understand Exa.

*Just a bug in my eye,* Exa says, as another tear falls.

Already she has made a small sacrifice.

**What We Don’t Know**

It is easy to talk about the past simply. To construct a narrative that feels neat and clean. There is something satisfying about neatness, about simplicity.

For many years archeologists talked about clear gender distinctions in the ancient Maya. There is clear evidence of a patriarchal system, men inheriting wealth, men ruling and leading religious events. Indeed, the modern Maya have clear gender roles. The women weave and cook. Often it is only the women who still wear traditional dress, so that in Guatemala they stand out in their brightly colored huipils, where the men blend in. Though the women’s clothes are exuberant, intricate, rich purples weaved with sky blue, sharp yellow, patterned and striped, this also makes them targets, makes racism easy.

But the distinction between genders in modern Maya is likely the result of Spanish influence, of Catholicism and Western culture creeping in.

And so, as always, we must resist the simple narrative, because the world blends from black and white, to gray, tangled knots of complexity.

So what of the ancient Maya? For so long we believed gender was simple: male and female with prescribed roles and duties for both. Some texts argue that women had to be
docile, that they would direct their gaze away from men and never speak unless spoken to. Excavations find evidence of gender hierarchy, with all the elaborate tombs built for men, with male rulers chiseled on stellae.

But what then of the women rulers? There are stories of women leading men, evidence of this on stone temples. Lady Six Sky, a young princess from the powerful city, Dos Pilas, was chosen to rule, alone, at Naranjo, 150 km away. She ruled in her own right for ten years. When her son became ruler, he was only five, and so she still continued to have the real power for much longer. Women having power was rare, but not unique. In art, there is also evidence of women priestesses, women as important parts of ceremonies. Evidence of men appropriating women’s power.

Maya dress is specific to gender. The males wear a hip or loincloth, sometimes with a short skirt, whereas women wear a skirt that ends below the knee and a huipil. But in so much art, male rulers appear in female dress. In a stellae in Copan, the male ruler, Waxaklajun Ub’ah K’awil, wears a long skirt. In blood letting ceremonies, men often wore female costumes. There was even a ceremony where the men cut the tips of their penises and bled, just like women’s menstrual blood.

So if women had no power, why then would men appropriate women’s dress, or engage in a ceremony that symbolically suggested menstruation? This suggests there were at least two gender-identified domains of power. But perhaps there is also a third, an androgynous category. In Native America the idea of two-spirit people is not uncommon. This third androgynous gender category is both culturally recognized and supernaturally validated.
In the 1500s there is evidence of the Maya sometimes engaging in homosexual practices, where a young male would take on more of a female role. There is evidence of this third gender, in the all important gods. The Maize god was male. The creation story in the Popul Vuh describes him as the “first father” or the creator of the cosmos. Yet he is also female. So often in art he has a “IL” face marking on his cheek, a glyph that reads *ix ik*, or “woman.”

So perhaps rulers, elite men, and gods could enter that more blurry, third gender category. But could women?

How might a woman become a priestess? A ruler of a grand city?

There is no simple story.
CHAPTER 4

I.

They walk to the pitz ball court and the hole in Exa’s stomach grows. It swallows her and makes her heavy. She doesn’t want to play pitz, she just wants to go somewhere quiet and think. She needs a new plan. Ome grunts beside her.

If only Ismena weren’t a factor, if only she could blur her from this world, but only for a while. Then Exa could be raw and selfish. But if Ismena weren’t here, then neither would the atanzahab. There would be no reason for her visit. With Ismena there is no plan. Without Ismena there is no plan. Exa bites the inner skin of her lip and tastes the bitter saltiness of her blood. It’s like licking stone.

Still, a part of her wishes her sister didn’t exist, just for now. Not long from now, she will feel immensely guilty to have even pondered this. She will wonder if her desire to blot her sister from this world eventually led to what happened

They walk farther into the jungle. Exa falls behind and allows Ome to lead, because he knows the way well. He has snuck here before to play with the village boys, and also his brothers. Nacon trails behind Ome and matches his footsteps exactly, but Ome doesn’t notice. Exa walks alongside Emetaly and Patli.

Emetaly asks, *Are you excited about Ismena’s coming of age ceremony?*

*I am excited to return to Tikal,* Exa says. *Are you excited to come out?*

*Yes,* Emetaly says. *I am very excited,* she adds, because she feels this is what is expected of her. Exa admires this, her desire to fit expectations. Exa does not realize that Emetaly is not like Ismena and is not as thrilled at the prospect of getting married in the near future. But Emetaly plays her part well. She always has. Exa wishes she could have such
simple desires. She wonders if perhaps something is wrong with her, something dark. Is she just selfish?

The jungle thins as they hit the edge of the village.

You will make a beautiful wife, Exa says, and she means this to instill hope in her friend. But something cool slivers through Emetaly. She will become excited about marriage, but she needs time to work up to that feeling. The idea of it still makes her anxious.

But my mat and tat will see that Ome is married before me, Emetaly says, almost to herself, almost as a reminder.

Ome’s shadows falls on the two girls, his looming form blocking the sun. Emetaly stops and turns to Exa, her beautiful cacao-shaped eyes wide. Her hands wrap around one another, one thumb rubbing the other.

We are here, Ome says.

The main clump of palapas lies farther north. The small pitz ball court sits on the outskirts of the houses. There is probably a larger one in the village center, but here they are less likely to be disturbed.

Ome pulls the ball from his side satchel, he bounces it on the ground and catches it with a single hand.

I made this ball, he says to Exa, who remains silent. Let us choose teams. I am the leader of red.

Exa says, As leader, if you win, will you be sacrificed? Emetaly stiffens and so does Exa, as she feels a faint tremor of her future sacrifice around her. For a moment, she panics, her blood pumping hot and fast through her body.

Ome bounces the ball again and it makes a resounding, hollow echo. The noise that a
hunted animal’s bones make when they break. Ome laughs, soft, maybe nervous, maybe derisive, even he doesn’t know. *Nacon is leader of blue*, Ome says.

Nacon is quiet and shy, but he is the second oldest boy, so they all accept the two leaders.

Ome says, *Exa is on my team, and Kisch*. Emetalay and Patli take Nacon’s team. Exa joins Ome’s side, but doesn’t take her eyes off of him. She doesn’t want to be here. She wanted only to play pitz because it would have forced them to walk through the jungle, where she could have escaped and fled to the atanzahab. Now that she has given up on this plan, the prospect of playing pitz is exhausting.

Ome throws the ball high and takes the initial hit with his elbow. Typically pitz has six people per team, and at half that, it is difficult for the two teams to keep the ball in the air. It’s on the ground almost as often as it’s not. Exa hits it to Ome with her knee.

His ball is heavy, solid rubber, from the rubber tree. Some balls, like the ones used at Tikal, are hollow. Those who make the ball begin by taking a human skull and wrapping it with rubber, so the resulting ball is large, but lighter. But whose skull do they use? Friend or foe? Would being hit around like that be a punishment or an honor?

Ome smacks the ball with the crown of his head and it comes speeding toward Exa. She tries to bounce it with her elbow, but it’s too fast. It hits her so hard that it knocks her off balance and falls. Her elbow burns, but she doesn’t let it show. She picks up the ball, hits it to Kisch. Ome intercepts, sends it spiraling back to her. She ducks.

*Exa!* Ome laughs. *The purpose is to hit the ball.*

Emetalay rebounds the ball against the court walls, and Patli kicks it toward Ome. He hits it to Exa again, a strong kick from his leg, and it pierces the air and whistles. She turns,
and it whacks her in the back and knocks the air from her lungs. As she gasps, Ome laughs. He hates the sound of it coming out of him, but he cannot keep it in. He doesn’t mean to hurt her, but when the ball comes barreling toward him and he sees Exa, her smallness, the injustice of his loss in the contest grows in him and is released as he hits the ball toward her. He cannot help it. Like Exa, sometimes his wildness cannot be contained.

*You are not so good at pitz,* Ome says.

Exa grinds her teeth and acts like she isn’t hurt. Her whole body aches now. Her elbow throbs. She shoots the ball back to the air, bounces it off the stone wall.

Nacon takes it, aims for the hoop high on the side wall. But his hit doesn’t have enough force to send it through the hoop.

Ome’s hit has enough force, but he isn’t looking to get the ball through the hoop. As he kicks it from the wall, he shoots it back toward Exa.

Emetaly winces as the ball hits Exa again, the sound of it like a tree falling. Hot tears press Exa’s eyes, but she bites them back.

*Ome!* Emetaly says, but everyone ignores her as the ball rebounds off Exa and Ome runs to catch it. He bounces it back and it clips her knees, which buckle, so that she is on the ground again. Exa feels like liquid, as if she can already feel the blood pooling to bruises. But she will not cry. She cannot give Ome that satisfaction.

And he does wish to see this little girl cry. He hates that he holds such a desire, it intensifies his shame from her previous victory. But the shame drives him to this distraction, so that he is stuck in a loop of ever increasing embarrassment. When she is still on her hands and knees he kicks the ball to her again. It hits her head, and it feels like her whole brain is rattling.
Stop it! Emetalysays again.

But now Exa’s anger is worse than her pain. She has had enough. And she feels strong and wild, like she did back when she pulled back that bow. She is a wild thing and cannot be contained, her anger is a whip that pours from her all at once. She stands, and when he pelts her with the ball again she grabs it, holds it tightly to her chest.

Enough, she shouts. If you were a real man, a good man, your feelings would not be hurt when a little girl beat you. She spits on the ground. If you were a real man, you would be skilled enough that a little girl would never beat you. She stands and holds herself as tall as she can. Stop it.

Ome straightens his back so he appears even taller. Her voice quiets him, muffles the fears that have been fueling him to meanness. He is able to take a deep breath, to cool down. He must now undo his wrongdoings.

I was only playing the game, he says. All this talk of sacrifice, and you cannot withstand a few hits?

Exa feels the push of her heartbeat in the tips of her fingers, in the raw places where Ome’s ball hit her. Her right thigh, left calf, lower back, upper chest. Ome walks toward her and takes the ball. She tries to hold on, but he’s too strong. She winces, expecting him to hit her again. But he just leans down over her and whispers, For a moment, I admired you. Then he stalks off with the ball, back toward the jungle and his palapa.

Exa feels confused and hurt. She doesn’t knowing how much pride Ome had to swallow to admit those words to her.

This day has revealed things to Ome that he wishes were never uncovered. As he walks through the jungle, he tries his best to quiet his body and mind, to forget what he has learned
about himself.

Exa’s bruises change. First from purple-yellow to stormy black, like pools of dark dye converging in her limps. Her thigh is home to the largest, so large that she fears Mat will see it through her white huipil. In the palapa, when no one is around, she changes in the shadows. She shrouds her colored body with sheets, her old huipil, as she covers herself with the new one.

Ismena and Mat are caught in a frenzy of matchmaking, of preparing for a potential wedding. Exa spends most of her days in the jungle. She spends hours perfecting her aim, trying to increase the strength of her slim arms.

Exa’s bruises turn from black to sickly green, like the color Ismena once turned when she ate a leaf from the blinding plant. She emptied her stomach with violent, wrenching jerks and her skin softened to a weak green. Tat and Mat thought she would die, but Exa knew she was stronger than that. She was scared but she prayed to the gods and believed. And so Ismena’s skin returned to a normal color, just as Exa’s bruised skin fades too. The bruised pools shrink, the edges drawing slowly back, much like the cenotes, as the rainy season, which brought with it only a little rain, shifts to the dry season.

Though Exa sneaks off and practices hunting every day, she cannot capture that strength she felt when beating Ome. She cannot find the gods.

Then there is only the bruise left on Exa’s thigh. All the others have dried, leaving smooth, perfect skin behind. Her bruises have shrunk as the moon shrunk and grew, passing through many cycles, full-bodied, slim-slivered, and finally Exa comes out from her hiding.

Whenever the atanzahab comes again, Exa begs not to return to the Tatuyes. Instead
she goes to the weaving thatch and pretends to practice weaving. She would so like to embarrass herself, to drool, to act as stupid as possible, but she is afraid of how that will reflect on Ismena. She cannot trade her sister’s happiness for her own. And so Exa tries to weave, but like always, she grows tired of it. Her fingertips grow numb. And so she plots. Tries to uncover a way to make herself fit better in this world. She needs divine assistance to escape the holds of womanhood.

In the jungle she aims for leaves, pretends they are animal bodies and pierces exactly through their imagined heart.

The atanzahab comes more frequently, and Exa behaves. Every visit is a reminder of what will come in Exa’s own future. She thinks of ways to avoid this path. Midwives get married but can’t have children. Priestesses live with the religious orders in Tikal. Fierce warriors, though usually men, could possibly be women, if she were strong enough, if a skilled warrior dreamed her to be fit.

When the light begins to darken, Exa returns from the weaving hut, as she always does, on the days that the atanzahab visits. Mat has prepared meat and potatoes for the family and they sit down inside, because the rain has begun. The prolonged dryness is beginning to cease, the season changing.

*How was it?* she asks. It has been eight moon cycles since the first meeting, the dry season shifting once more the rainy season, and so Exa knows they must almost be done. She dreads them finishing and finding a match. But at least then it will be over.

Even now Ismena is different. She is clean and oiled and ready to leave childhood to begin a new life. Even when she is married, Exa will be able to see her. Tat will build a new palapa next to his own, and her new husband will come to live there. For the first Haab years
the husband lives with the female’s family, to help out, to show his good faith. And then the married couple will move, perhaps closer to Tikal, perhaps closer to his family.

*We have a match,* Mat says and Ismena blushes. Outside a thick rain begins, a lucky thing, because Tat’s plantations need this moisture.

Tat says, *Ismena will meet him officially after two suns, and then we will begin to plan the ceremony.*

As Exa eats, the meat tastes oily and smoky in her mouth. She picks off the most charred pieces with her nails and lets them fall to the ground.

*Who is the man? Can I know?*

Itzali shovels potatoes into his mouth. It is uncomfortable for him, to imagine his younger sister being married before him, even if it is customary for men to marry older. He enjoys consistency, and he will miss his sister and the routine of having her around.

Tat says, *You can know.* He folds his clean hands in his lap. *It is Ome Tatuye.*

Exa’s jaw drops and half-chewed meat falls to the floor.

Mat screams something, and Tat looks at his youngest daughter. His eyes slant, and he is concerned and angry, but Exa is already on her feet, and runs to the jungle, a blur of tangled limbs, mud-spattered, grasped by her already soaked thin-white huipil.

*Tat!* she screams. *Tat.* She bellows for him, her voice louder than any rain. He appears from the door and walks through, into the outdoors and drenches himself. But he only notices the rain long enough to once again silently thank Chacs for bringing it. His eyes are on his daughter. He tries to read her.

*What is wrong?* he says.

*Tat,* she says and locks his eyes so he understands her seriousness. *Ismena cannot*
marry Ome. She grabs his arms and holds him in place, so he must stay here and listen.

*I know you do not want her to marry.*

*No,* Exa says. *Listen. She cannot marry Ome. Any other man, but not him.* The rain pounds around them, and it feels like Exa is being attacked.

*What did he do to you?* he asks.

Exa cannot explain about the bow and arrow or the darkness in Ome’s eyes. There is nothing solid there. She could tell him about the bruises, but they are gone now, and they were playing pitz. People get bruises, it is normal. Tat will tell her that Ome is bigger and stronger, and that he meant nothing harmful

*Trust me, please. I saw something that scared me inside of him.*

Tat is silent. He has met Ome, has interviewed him, has talked to both of his parents. He has known Ome since he was a small child. He saw nothing that concerned him. He trusts his daughter, but she is young, and is prone to letting her anger and her wildness guide her. He wonders if she only saw what she wanted to see. That she thinks no man could be good enough for Ismena. He is no stranger to that feeling.

*I will talk to Ome again tomorrow. I will see the true man. If there is anything to worry about, I will see it. Is that enough?*

Exa nods. She wants him to say that he will call off the marriage, but she knows he can’t be so rash. Breaking this off now would be a political disaster. The Tatuyes are also a family with strong royal connections and religious influence. They belong to a different noble bloodline than Exa’s family, so Ome is an acceptable, an ideal match, even. The goal always: to mix the blood, strengthen it through many ties to the rulers and the gods. But if Tat were to break off this match now that both parties have agreed, it would be social suicide.
The Tatuyes would see it as the utmost insult. Perhaps Ismena would never be matched because of the shame.

Nonetheless, if he sees anything in Ome that causes him concern, Tat will call off the marriage.

*Thank you,* Exa says.

They walk through the rain back to the palapa. Mat rises, her fists balled, but Tat puts his hand up and shakes his head as if to say no, not now. *I will explain later.*

Ismena’s eyebrows are wrinkled and she looks to Exa for answers. *Sorry,* Exa whispers. Exa prays to the gods to let Tat see what she saw. For Ome’s true heart to surface.

The next day Tat rises early and only says, *I am going for a walk,* but Exa knows he is journeying to the Tatuyes’ palapa. Only she knows his secret and that feels so special and intimate, like when they walked together and hunted. She misses that and envies Itzali. She picks at a conch on her red belt, and like so many times before she wishes she could remove this symbol of girlhood and exist only in her skin.

Tat returns when the sun is high in the sky, but before the afternoon rain has begun. The rain, at least for now, has come every day, though it is usually soft, a whispering drizzle that vanishes before the ground grows too moist. In the north the rain stops coming at all.

Exa sees Tat from the weaving thatch and runs to him. Tat leads her to the edge of the clearing, where the jungle begins, so they won’t be overheard, except by the gods.

*I talked with Ome,* Tat says, *until my voice grew hoarse. I observed him closely, asked him questions that might have offended lesser men.* Tat touches his hair. *He was charming.* I could see nothing of darkness.
Exa hangs her head, looks only at the ground, at the tree roots as they disappear beneath the earth.

Tat says, *Might you tell me what makes you fear him?*

But it is like trying to hold mist in her hand. It is a feeling only, and the bruises, which will not be enough. Even grown men get bruises when playing pitz.

*His sisters fear him,* she says, because that is all she has.

Tat chuckles, and Exa does not understand. He says, *Most sisters fear their older brothers a little. They are big and smelly and because of the natural relationship of siblings, they might be a little harsher than they would be otherwise.* The sky begins to darken and wind sweeps in, signaling rain. A relief, after all this dryness. Tat’s fields need such moisture.

*I do not fear Itzali,* Exa says, and again Tat chuckles.

*Yes, but I think that is because Itzali fears you.*

She doesn’t understand. She isn’t close to Itzali, but she has certainly never seen fear in him. Has she been unkind? That thought puts her in a panic. Is she just like Ome?

Tat places his arm around her back and holds his daughter. He wishes he could allow her to thrive on her own terms. He wishes a priest could dream a fitting future for her. But sometimes we must fight to convince the gods of greatness. This is the way. If his youngest daughter has been chosen for something beyond this normal path, she will find her way. He hugs her and then turns and walks back to the palapa.

*What about Ome?* she yells after him.

He stops but doesn’t turn. *We will proceed as planned.*

Exa does not move for a very long time. She does not move until the rain begins, its heaviness falling around her like a rough blanket. She wonders about Ome’s ferocity and her
own. She takes Itzali’s bow and ventures into the jungle, only a little bit of the way, because it is unsafe and growing dark. But still, even with the rain, there is light enough.

She walks. She stops, unties her red conch shell belt and leaves it bright and red on a tree where she will be able to locate it on her way back.

She walks, each step more silent now, somehow lighter.

She looks for a hard target, an impossible one. And there is one of Tat’s cacao trees, very far away, so far she can barely see the bright red pods. She picks just one to aim at. She strings the bow. Breathes, focuses on herself, tries to find that deep well of energy that she captured that day with Ome. The jungle whispers around her and she thinks of that voice at the Temple of the Masks. She delves deeper within herself, like plunging a hand through cold water. She reaches and reaches more, and there, a warmth.

They will burn grand fires at Exa’s sacrifice.

She pulls at this warmth and brings it up and her arm pulls back the strings with a force that perhaps is not wholly her own. And the world slows, and the arrows is fast, and its stone tip hits the cacao pod. The stone isn’t strong enough to go through it. She would need a real obsidian tip for that. But that’s too valuable for practice. But she hit it. The rain rings with victory.

Is this ferocity like Ome’s? She hopes not. She does not want to be like him. But she does want to be ferocious. She is on to something. She has begun to dip into that other self. She needs to only figure out what to do with it.

The sun rises and spreads its fingers into the air and then begins its fall down the length of blue sky. When the light begins to settle in the top leaves of trees, the atanzahab arrives as
do Ome’s parents. They gather round the flat, woven mat outside and whisper like insect wings.

Exa squeezes into Ismena’s withie and stares into her dark, dark hair.

Exa? Ismena whispers, clinging to sleep, eyelids still heavy with that forgetfulness.

I am happy that you are happy, Exa says. She has done a lot of thinking. It is her job to protect Ismena from Ome’s possible evil. But also, it might be possible for Ismena to be happy with him. Perhaps Tat is right and Exa is wrong. There are so many possibilities.

Ismena says, Thank you.

What makes you excited to be married? Exa asks. This is what she is most curious about.

Ismena stirs, pushing sleep away from her. She sits up and leans her back against the wall of the palapa.

The newness of it and the power, she says.

Power?

Mat has power, doesn’t she? Tat listens to her.

Mostly, Exa says.

Mostly, Ismena agrees. Except sometimes when it comes to you. She smiles and runs her slim fingers through Exa’s tangled hair. I think marriage is the only way I will have power, she says into the weakening dark of the palapa.

Exa has never thought of marriage like this. Ismena is right. From the outside Tat is in control. He is the symbol of their family, but from the inside, the real truth, is that Mat has control. Tat could disobey her, he could beat her even if he had just cause, but he never would. He listens to her and values her opinions.
Ismena says, *I tried to be like you. To be good at those other things. The stars, hunting, learning the god’s stories. But my mind does not work like that. My hands know weaving, turning clay pots. That is what I have fallen into.* She holds Exa’s hand, and Ismena’s palms feel like a small fire. Exa wants to let go, but she cannot.

*I love you,* Exa says.

*You have different talents. Different ways to power so you can help Tikal thrive. Hold onto it.*

Ismena doesn’t think her sister realizes how powerful she can be. Ismena is happy, but she recognizes that she is noble. That she is lucky and noble and that is why she is happy. But a part of her envies her sister. A part of her yearns for that excitement, that sort of excellence.

When the sun finally slips away, Ismena’s marriage date has been set.

They venture to Tikal for the wedding. First there will be Ismena’s and Ome’s. And just a few days after, Emetaly will be married with a man she has been matched with. His name is Pacal. Exa doesn’t know him but Tat says he knew his father, who was a good, strong man. So three great families will be tied together. Everyone is all grins and excitement.

Exa respects it, but it also makes her nervous. She can’t quite say why.

Ismena wakes early the day of the marriage. Exa has hardly slept. This loss of her sister, of the routine she has come to expect, of Ismena, who she loves, has made her unable to fall into that troubleless place of dreams.
Mat shakes Ismena awake, although Ismena has already been awake for some time. Her body is tense and excited for today.

_The calendar says today is a lucky day for you_, Mat says as a whisper into Ismena’s ear.

Exa creaks from her withie, bones already stiff and hard. The bottoms of her calloused feet hit the floor with a crack that mirrors the bones of her stiff back. Her spine, a whole series of noise. Ismena stands and stretches her arms, all the time a small smile about her face.

Mat has a large bucket full of warm water. She places a cloth into it, as Ismena shrugs off her huipil and stands naked as Mat washes her. Mat wets her hair, long dark snakes of it. The water makes it cling together to form thick pieces that send cool water dripping down Ismena’s freshly cleaned skin.

Exa shivers. Perhaps she should leave, allow Mat and Ismena this happy moment alone. But she decides to stay, to watch and observe, perhaps understand their happiness.

Mat dries Ismena and then rubs sweet oil on her skin so that she glistens like a flower in the morning. Like the sun against the Temple of the Masks. A mask: such a strange name for a temple. How it allows for secrets, allows anyone to become someone else.

If someone Exa loved died, she wouldn’t hide who they were. She would revel in it. To celebrate their them-ness every day. She wonders about the story behind the Temple of the Masks. There must be more to it, more than the Queen Lady Twelve Macaw losing her way in the jungle and then dying, and the King so sad with grief that he built the Temple. Exa thinks that masked face on the temple promises more, something hidden.

Mat rubs her hands over Ismena’s skin, to evenly coat the oil. When she finishes she bends and kisses her daughter’s right shoulder.

_You look beautiful_, she says.
Outside the palapa, Tat and Ome’s tat and Pacal’s older brother, Chiccan, meet and talk in huddled voices. Pacal’s father has long since died, and so his older brother, who is a high-ranking priest, will attend his wedding ceremony in place of his father.

All three are joyous at these marriage unions, first Ome and Ismena, and then Emetaly with Pacal. And this closeness has brought them together, so that other concerns spill forth from them.

Ome’s tat says, *I have heard whispers of dissension among the peasants in my village.*

Tat says, *My workers remain loyal, for now. But they see the cenotes drying. They are concerned.*

And Chiccan, as a member of the priesthood, shakes his head at this. In Tikal there are whispers of deserters, of peasants losing faith in the King.

Tat asks Chiccan, *Is there reason for concern?*

And Chiccan would prefer to stay silent, but he respects Tat too much. Tat once fought alongside Chiccan’s tat, who spoke of him so highly. So Chiccan lifts his head, so that his eyes meet Tat’s, both wide and dark and brown. *Yes,* he says and leaves it at that.

What he doesn’t know is that right now a small contingent from the north marches toward Tikal. A small group of men, not looking for war, but for water. For food. Resources Tikal cannot spare.

Inside Mat and Ismena laugh. Mat is so pleased at her daughter’s excitement. Mat oils Ismena’s hair and wraps it around her head. It trails down her right shoulder.

Finally Exa cannot stand this happiness any longer, because it makes her so sad and because she wants to find Ome. She brings Itzali’s bow, though as she walks through Tikal with it on her back, she feels deeply the eyes upon her. No girl should carry such a weapon.
But she feels she needs it, just in case. She scours Tikal’s grounds for Ome and she finds him not far from the Temple of the Masks. He is not yet adorned and dressed, he is unfeathered, and only wearing a loin cloth. The temples of Tikal loom brightly over them and serve as a reminder of the gods and the hope and morality Exa has backing her.

*Ome!* she yells, and he stops in his tracks and turns and smiles. A friendly sort of smile, nothing menacing. Now that he is to be a husband he has been trying to quiet the wildness in him, to assume the role of a good husband. He is not a child anymore and so he must grow up. He is trying.

Exa lifts Itzali’s bow from her back, for no other reason but to frighten him. And Ome does shrink back, but only for a second, only a slight knee jerk reaction from his body. It is silent around them, here behind the temple. For once, no one is in sight.

_Exa, how nice to see you_, he says and clasps his hands in front of him and squares his shoulders.

Exa cocks an arrow at him. He wants to flinch, but he manages to keep his face impassive. He must be an adult. He must not flinch.

*If you do anything to Ismena, Exa says. I will kill you. I do not care about the consequences._ She had intended this more as a threat, but now that she has said it, she feels the veracity in these words. She would do it. Her love for her sister is so fierce that she would do it unthinkingly.

*I would never hurt my wife,_ he says with his chest puffed. He smells like copal incense and rubbing oil. He does want Exa to trust him, although he does not appreciate being threatened by a young girl. It encourages anger inside him, though for now, he suppresses it.

She says, *If you so much as lay a finger on her._
He chuckles. He cannot help it. *I will be doing more than that,* he says to try to lighten the mood, but Exa’s eyes narrow and she does not quite understand. Mat has only mentioned sex to her briefly and she does not yet know its intricacies.

*I will not hurt your sister. At least not in the way you fear.*

She is unsettled by this answer. What she doesn’t understand infuriates her. The threat of marriage has been heightened now. There are complexities to it she cannot yet fathom. Her stomach clenches. She feels nauseous. Overhead the voice from the Temple of the Masks sings.

*I will be watching you,* she says.

*You do that,* he says with a slight laugh, and Exa keeps her bow raised at him, just long enough for another man to come up behind her and say, *Is something wrong here?* She lowers the bow and turns, and it is Chiccan, who is grinning, despite the potential seriousness of this encounter.

Ome grinds his teeth. His sister will be marrying Chiccan’s brother, and now Exa has embarrassed him in front of his soon-to-be family. It’s even worse because Chiccan is such a high-ranking priest.

Ome says, *I was just showing Exa how better to aim,* he says. Exa turns and glares at him, but also is thankful, because this lie is at least better than the truth.

*You know how to shoot?* Chiccan asks Exa.

*Only a little,* she says. *Tat said I had a talent for it, and that talent should not be wasted.* What she doesn’t say: he has since changed his mind, has decided she should be more demure and fit for marriage.

Chiccan laughs. *He is right.* He walks toward her, stares thoughtfully at Exa, and then
Ome, as if weighing them, trying to discern their character. But you should not be carrying this bow around here. This is sacred land. He stretches out his palm and Exa hands her bow over. She isn’t sure if she is indignant or thankful of his protection.

Chiccan says to Ome, You are a large man indeed to teach her how to shoot. And Ome bows his head, but his eyes are dark and fiery.

_I must change for the wedding_, Ome says and takes his leave.

He turns and walks away, his large form being swallowed by the sun and stone of Tikal. Chiccan does not move, only stares at Exa as if trying to decide something. He doesn’t care for mysteries, and isn’t sure what he just witnessed.

_Was he bothering you?_ he says finally.

Not yet, Exa says.

_Be careful_, Chiccan says. I will bring this bow back to your tat. And then he leaves too, so that Exa is left alone with the voice from the Temple screaming.

A few hours later, Tat takes Ismena’s hand and leads her to the place of Temazcal, the purification ceremony. He leads her toward Temple IV, the Temple of the Two-Headed Serpent, Tikal’s largest where the high priests go to commune with the gods. They walk away from the main acropolis.

_I love you_, he tells his daughter.

The sun pounds on them like a weight. Without the protection of trees, Ismena sweats and feels a little lightheaded. They arrive to a stone structure with walls but no roof, only the sun above and the gods.

Ome is there with his mat and tat. It is only the parents and the atanzahab and the
Shaman. Around the walls men sit with drums and pound music out. Like the beat of rain, like a heart. Then the high-pitched shriek of a flute.

A marriage, a link like this, is supposed to tie the couple to the universe. This bond should bring that thread through all the world’s layers, from Xibalba, to the layers of heaven, where the gods reside.

Exa lurks near the Temazcal with Itzali and Ome’s sibling. Far enough so she cannot be seen, but close enough that she can hear the drums. She hates being excluded, even though she wants no part of this. She wants to keep an eye on Ome.

Ome clasps Ismena’s hand. The Shaman chants, urges the Gods to make the couple pure. They are barefoot so that they can better feel the energy of the earth. And Ismena does feel it, like fire underfoot, like insects buzzing all around.

Exa notices there are fewer bugs here in Tikal. Cut down the trees and the insects leave.

The Shaman takes water from a clay pot and dips his hands into it. He places his wet, outstretched thumb and middle finger to Ismena’s face, one finger on each cheek. He does the same to Ome. Ome takes a deep breath, wills this ceremony to purify him completely. To rid him of his wildness. He wishes to be clean and soft and pure for his wife.

Incense smokes around them. When the smoke stops, the ceremony is over. They are pure. Ismena beams at Ome and he feels such a light happiness around him. He knows she is better than he deserves, but he vows to cherish her.

Now finally, Exa and the rest of the family, Itzali, Emetal, and Ome’s brothers join them.

Ome takes Ismena’s hand, and Exa cannot help but wincing. Ome cannot help but noticing. His eyes slit, but no, he is clean and soft and pure. He looks away.
Ome and Ismena, followed by the family, walk the stone paths of Tikal. Temple IV looms above, reaching to the sky and to the clouds. When Exa closes her eyes, she sees her body, crumpled on Tikal’s stone. When she concentrates she feels the hollowness of her chest, where her heart once was. This should frighten her, how she always sees herself dead, but it has become a comfort. It feels right, safe somehow. All her blood on Tikal’s stone. She feels Ome behind her, like a thick plume of smoke. She can smell him, like meat a day too old.

Ismena is all grin, and it is like her happiness is contagious. Ome feels it and so does Exa, and she cannot help but feeling relieved. Even though she doesn’t trust Ome. If Ismena is this happy, then perhaps Exa should quit her worrying.

They walk from Temple IV toward the grand acropolis, to the Temple of the Masks and the Temple of the Jaguar. They will be married close to the Temple of the Masks, but on the north-facing slope, so the temple will be just out of view.

At the site of the marriage, the Shaman purifies the four cardinal points of a large stone floor. He burns dried copal sticks and sounds a conch shell horn, a low grumble growing stronger. It rings through Tikal, echoes off the stone. The masked voice echoes, the proclaimed city of voices amplifying the sound. So many people gather, most of the nobles, people Exa recognizes like her uncle, Chiccan and Pacal, and people who seem to her strangers.

In the middle of the stone floor is an altar with four points, one in each cardinal direction. Red flowers, white, black, blue.

Chiccan stands behind Tat. He grits his slightly sharpened teeth. Something about Ome and Exa has unsettled him.
Candles flicker at each cardinal point. Each light represents one of the four cosmos gods, as if four stars have been pulled from the sky and convinced to sit here, dousing the young couple with light.

Tat stands tall and proud and bends his head toward men Exa does not know. Chiccan pats Tat on the back and laughs. He is skilled at masking his face.

Ome puts his hand on Ismena’s. A candle sits at the center to represent the union and to tie the couple to earth. The candle burns among beans and squash and fruit, their rich offerings to the gods.

The main Shaman begins to speak. Then the couples’ parents recite the words of the gods, to bind the two families together. Emetaly keeps sliding glances to Pacal, and he smiles at her. Both are so excited to make their marriage real.

*Let them be safe,* their parents say.

The Shamans brings the center candle to Ome and Ismena. Their hands are clasped and they are side-to-side, whole bodies touching. This closeness is hard for Exa to watch. The Shaman tells them to blow the candle out. Together they inhale, in unison blow out, smile. The candle’s flame flickers, vanishes and that is it. In the space of a heart beat, Ismena and Ome are married. They are swept in a wave of happiness of their families’ limbs. Of the cepal smoke from the Shamans. Ismena feels light and whole now. Ome beams, feels that finally he can become the man he wants to be. Can escape his own darkness. As he holds Ismena’s hands and moves through the crowd toward the reception area, he is aware of Exa’s eyes on him. Her gaze sits heavily on his skin and makes him tense, so that he must calm the anger rising in him. He wishes she would leave him alone, so he could forget how he lost to her, how she embarrassed him so completely.
Later, there is a feast of turkey wrapped in cornmeal with beans spiced with chilies, potatoes, and tortillas. Exa isn’t hungry. Her ears are still ringing with the hollow sound, of her heartless chest, of that voice pulled from the masked temple. Ismena and Ome eat voraciously, their happiness opening up a new hunger inside them.

Everyone Exa knows is gathered here, just north of the main acropolis. Itzali is deep in conversation with one of their cousins, Emetaly is moving everywhere, from person to person, her face light and excited by the prospect that her wedding will be like this, will be so soon. Chiccan and his brother, Pacal, are laughing and talking to Tat. Pacal keeps breaking from the conversation to locate Emetaly’s moving form, and each time he does so, his eyes light up and he can’t help but smile faintly to himself. Chiccan is not so light; his mind is heavy with politics, and other things.

Exa hugs Ismena, and wraps her arms around her sister’s waist. She doesn’t want to let go. *I am so glad you are happy*, Exa says. *You look beautiful.* And Ismena beams and thanks her.

*Congratulations,* Chiccan says from behind Exa. *Thank you,* Ismena says and turns away to thank her uncle. Exa turns, and together her and Chiccan’s faces fall, because they both feel it, the same misplaced dread that lingers when waking from a nightmare. Chiccan’s mouth loses all of its happiness and instead forms a thin, worried slit. They say nothing, but both acknowledge it. They do not yet know each other well, but here they feel that they soon will understand each other.

And then Chiccan is off congratulating Ome, the smile returned to his lips. Eyes light and carefree.
How does he do it? It is so hard for Exa to pretend.

After the feast they dance. Men and women with feathered headdresses, the brilliant quetzal plumes glowing with greens and blues. Exa feels antsy and stands removed from them, as many others do too. For every dancer there is an observer, so her lack of enthusiasm goes unnoticed.

And though Exa does not dance, she enjoys watching Ismena and Tat fall into the rhythm of the drums, to lose themselves to the movement, to the music. It makes Tat look younger, more like the Tat of her memories who took her hunting, who didn’t seem as frowned and still. And Chiccan, when he begins dancing, first with his brother, and then with Emetaly, his whole body falls into the beat, his shoulder tensing, throwing his arms back, his feet pounding the stone.

She can’t take her eyes off him. Can’t help but to lose her worries, to fall completely and unreservedly in love with Tikal, and to be swept into the music too. Mat takes her hand, she joins Ismena, Tat, even Itzali, as they form a circle, stomp their feet, allow the gods to hear their joy. And Chiccan’s chant, his laugh, thunders through their pounding feet, and augments the drums and rattles. They all fall into the chant of sound, of happiness surging through their bones.

They dance late into the night. Until bone-weary, they collapse into sleep and dream of a life as simple, as complete as this dance.
Let’s return to the body and her missing heart. If these bones weren’t so old, we could know whether or not the rib cage wound occurred pre- or postmortem. We’d look at bone fractures, possible areas where healing had begun. But there is none of this, only bone shards, dry as sand, just waiting to crumble.

So let’s imagine it was a sacrifice. That’s much more exciting. There’s something undeniably sexy, alluring, to sacrifice, isn’t there? That craving for death built from both fear, and a wish just for a glimpse of it, a taste. That’s what the Maya are known for, aren’t they? Bloodthirsty violence. There have been movies about this, such stories have even made it into elementary level history books.

This is what bloodthirst and violence might look like.

I.

Two days after the wedding, there is to be a human sacrifice. The calendars predict that today will be unlucky. Exa doesn’t want to believe it. Her family is still in Tikal, and she is in the Grand Plaza, Ismena and Ome are not far from her, but already she has lost them in the swarm of sticky, sweating bodies. It is raining lightly and the heat sits like a thick blanket.

Two men in front of her are talking loudly, trying to compete with the noise of all the people. Chacs has been unkind to us, but now finally he delivers.

The other man nods and says, It has been too dry for too much time. I hear rumors of great starvation in the north.

This sacrifice will help. The crowd begins to grow louder, though Exa cannot see why.

It better or our King might have some problems.

The crowd shifts, the men move closer to the front. She wonders why the King would
have problems. He is King; she has never imagined him with problems. He is like the gods.

But then they have problems too, conflicts they must resolve.

Tat worries too about his crop yields decreasing. Already his workers begin to murmur about the depleting food.

Exa bumps into more bodies. She needs to find Ismena and Ome.

The goddess, Itzmana, has just begun to reign the sun across the sky. Early colors bleed across the lightening air. The air is thick with moisture so that Exa feels like she is drowning.

The Temple of the Masks towers over her right and she feels once more that constant buzzing from it. No distinct voice now, just the urge to come closer, to dig her hands into its stone, into its heart. But there are too many people around her for that.

She won’t be able to find Ismena until after the ceremony. Her sister, for now, is lost to her. Exa is stationary, able only to watch the temple, the ceremony as it unfolds. Four young priestesses walk toward the raised platform. Quetzal feathers are braided into their dark, slick hair. They walk with seeds beaded to their anklets. They are beautiful and weightless. Exa envies them. These priestesses who have learned how to read the codices, to read the skies, to send thoughts to the gods with smoke.

On a raised dais stands the K’ul Ahau, the King of Tikal. She has never seen the ruler, K’awill II this close before. She has heard only his name, a rustle of revered whispers from Tat. He is impressive. He wears a fine cotton loincloth decorated with embroidered figures. She is too far away to discern all the various gods adorning his loin. Over K’awil’s slick shoulders is a cloak of white cotton, so thin it’s transparent as the rain hits it. On top of his shoulders is a jaguar skin, with pitted, hollow eyes. K’awil’s headdress is a rainbow of glinting quetzal feathers towering high on his head, so that he looks off-balance. The feathers
are greener than Exa can believe. Greener even than the jungle. The ruler looks wild and strong, but also almost too-tall. Only a truly great man could carry such a headdress.

Beside K’awil are four men, who represent Chacs, a god who often divides himself into four to represent the cardinal directions: read east, white north, black west, and yellow south. The men are clothed in their color and positioned accordingly. Black West Chacs eyes the crowd and winks. He’s enjoying this.

Exa recognizes Chiccan under that black makeup. She admires him, how he can revel in the seriousness of such an event. Who can appreciate the dark and the light of it. The blood and the hopeful salvation this sacrifice will bring. His taut muscles gleam with sweat and rain.

A girl walks through the crowd toward K’awil and the four Chacs. She is a member of Tikal’s low-ranking nobility. The girl’s family was trading illegally with Calakmul. Since all trade is regulated and must be approved by the King, such an act is seen as duplicitous and against Tikal’s best interests. After the great wars between Tikal and Calakmul, there has been little approved trade between these cities. But her family grew desperate. They ran plantations like Tat, but in the north, their fields grew fallow.

And this is the consequence of desperation.

The young girl walks through the crowd. She is small and attractive. Maybe 14 or 15 Haab years. Young.

Last night, Exa asked Tat, Why did her family trade with our enemies?

Tat said, They are afraid.

Of what?

That we are running out of food. That K’awil is not communicating with the gods properly.
Is that true? Exa asked.

Tat said, They are idiots to place their faith anywhere but with Kʼawil.

This sacrifice of the girl is a punishment but also a boon. Noble blood should appease the gods. Should convince them to make the crops grow. So that all of Tikal can continue to proposer. They all must believe, in Kʼawil, in Tikal, in the gods, and then they will all reap the rewards for faith. Tat always said a beehive is only as strong as its weakest member. Exa understands that the wrongdoing must be punished and that this girl is dying so that Exa may live. This day sacrifice is both a punishment and an honor. So Exa thanks her, but also is nervous for her. Somehow this sacrifice feels wrong. She has never seen one before, but has heard all about them.

The young girl walks toward Kʼawil. This is also a way out of marriage, though one Exa wishes desperately to avoid. This girl is no doubt unmarried. Maybe there’s something about virgins that makes gods go wild. There have been more sacrifices than normal. Maybe virgins are no longer enough. Exa wonders if perhaps they should sacrifice crumpled, old women instead. Perhaps crumpled men. Maybe the gods are tired of the innocent doe-eyed virgins. Maybe they want to try another meat for a change. Maybe Exa just doesn’t want to see this girl die. Maybe sacrifice doesn’t sit right with anyone, ever.

Maybe no Maya would ever think this way. Would be so ironic and skeptical of the gods.

Maybe this is the only way for us to think about it.

But death, particularly the death of a young woman, a child, shouldn’t sit right with anyone. Even if it’s for the common good. In some ways that makes it worse. Sometimes we need irony, humor, to defend from all the blood.
Maybe the Maya never sacrificed anyone.

Maybe the gods crave a little decay and dirt. The gods need grime. Exa thinks of Ome and the darkness in his eyes. *The gods need grime*, she wants to yell, loudly. The voice from the Temple of the Masks grows stronger in her ears. It’s always a woman’s voice, but she can never hear what she’s saying. A great heat sweeps inside of her and she feels light and alive and terrified.

Exa says nothing, though the voice grows louder. She cannot detract from the sacrifice, which suddenly feels so much like her own. This is a feeling only; she has not yet connected that other place, deep within herself, to her own death. That will come much later.

But the young noble girl about to be sacrificed is proof enough that familial wealth and prestige only protects so much.

The sacrifice begins. The four Chacs close in upon the girl. Rain pounds against the stone. The two Tikal temples, the grand Jaguar and the Temple of the Masks, sing of rain, the painted stone pinging. *Pit patter pat*. Though the drought grows worse, they are still, sometimes, blessed with this rain. Everything is echoes, vibrations here in the grand central plaza. Each Chacs grabs one limb. The girl doesn’t flinch.

Exa feels hands on her own limbs. She looks, and of course there is nothing.

The girl doesn’t even look scared. Her body screams motionless. She looks at peace, as if she knows the gift she is giving her people. As if she could know such a thing. Can faith ever be so strong?

Sacrifice is an honor, maybe, but it’s a painful one. Exa is captivated. A piece of this feels just and safe, like this is the logical way of the world unraveling. And then there’s panic. Because that’s what this is, isn’t it? The world unraveling. They girl’s family betrayed Tikal,
she betrayed her people. These transgressions will be subdued by this sacrifice, her blood will help them all. Her blood will bring back the rain, that hasn’t come regularly for so long.

Sacrifice. For so long, this has been an answer.

There’s something raw and terrifying and comforting. Like when Tat killed the si’s. This is necessary and brutal. Exa would prefer less blood. She would prefer this not to happen. Everyone in the crowd feels the same throbbing necessity. Their water is running out. If people abandon Tikal, betray it, they all might die. But no one wants to kill a young woman.

Exa wishes the girl looked less like Ismena, like Exa, with those deep, oval eyes. She would prefer not to see this, not to be a participant. But sacrifice requires an audience. The gods must know that their people feel all they give to the gods. Life requires death. We all need blood. We’re both thankful and fearful of it. Sometimes, even gods can be unkind.

In the crowd, anxiety and repulsion turns to excitement. Like a hysterical laugh that replaces a swooping cry, they all turn giddy and restless. Men holler. Women shift in a frenzy. They want this. And they don’t. K’awlil moves toward the girl. They need this. The Chacs hold her down, tight and fierce.

K’awlil raises a sharpened stone spear in his hand. He is the Ah Nacom today, the person to remove the girl’s heart. That’s what interests the gods the most. The center of blood, of life of the sky and earth. K’awlil lifts his obsidian spear.

Now the girl struggles. Her piercing scream cuts through the flat sound of rain and the swelling voices that rebound off the stone here in Tikal, the city of voices.

The girl’s teeth are filed, as razor sharp as jaguar claws. Some families do this, a statement of fashion and maybe ferocity. *Why are my teeth not filed?* Exa asked Tat once. He
smiled and said, *My daughters do not need teeth to be fierce. And it will make kissing unpleasant for the husbands.* He laughed and Exa frowned at the idea of kissing a man. She was young then.

She is young now. She will still be young when she dies.

She cannot look at the girl or at K’awil as he brings his spear down. So instead she looks at Black West Chacs, at Chiccan. His face is attractive, oblong with a flat forehead. He isn’t crossed-eyed. Crossing her eyes makes her feel disoriented.

She should look at the sacrifice. She is dishonoring it by looking away, but she doesn’t want to see this. Doesn’t know if she can look. So she crosses her eyes and the world blurs and doubles. She sees two Black West Chacs. Two sacrifices, the girl and her tender, slivered limbs. Two rulers, two spears, two sanguine rivers of blood forming on the base of the platform, two hearts. The rain pounds, draining the blood of its colors, spreading the red across the stone. The Chacs drop the girl from the dais. A crack like a fissure in stone as two corpses hit two pools of water turning red.

Exa uncrosses her eyes and the sharp details of the scene drive the breath from her. The bruised corpse, chest emptied and swelling blood, the dying fist-sized heart displayed on the platform.

Sacrifice looks cleaner, more purposeful through crossed eyes. Now that the sacrifice is over, and the restless energy of the audience is diffusing, everyone loses the purpose of all of this. The voice from the Temple of the Masks in Exa’s ears grows stronger. Her heart begins to deflate in the rain. She pictures its heat flowing out into the air, empty. She doesn’t feel the gods here anymore. She feels nothing but the pounding of the rain and the voice like a dark promise.
Black West Chacs bows, and then leaves the platform. His energy drains from him like the blood from the girl. He feels restless now, and vaguely nauseous. He wonders why he isn’t used to this yet. Exa is off balance, like the ground beneath her feet has shifted. She looks for Ismena and Ome, but sees nothing but unknown faces.

She re-crosses her eyes, the world blurring and doubling once more. That feels better, more normal. With crossed eyes she can ignore the body at the base of the platform. She tries to push her way toward the Temple of the Masks, to that voice hidden within, but the crowd is too thick, the rain too loud for her to hear anything else.

That voice is important in all this. A missing key to the success of the sacrifices. The gods are yelling, but all Exa hears is whispers. They are missing the warning. She stands silent and still and listening and lets the voice fill her, tries to discern words.

They return to the palapa, and Ome and Ismena move into their newly constructed one just a stone’s throw from her parents. A long, powerful, throw, but if it weren’t for the little copse of trees between the palapas, Exa would be able to see theirs from her own. She likes this, because now she can keep an eye on Ome. She still doesn’t see Ismena as much as she would like.

The sun paints the sky with light, and then falls, bringing darkness. Exa gets lost in this cycle of light and dark.

Many solar days after their return. When the sun is still low in the sky, Exa sees her sister outside of the palapa and walks to her.

*How is married life?* Exa asks. Ismena blushes.
Wonderful. A little hard to get used to, but in a nice way.

And Ome?

She says, I think I am beginning to care for him deeply.

Exa isn’t sure if she feels comfort in that, or panic. He has been kind?

Of course, Ismena says, her voice swelling like a bird twittering.

But still Exa fears that darkness in Ome’s eyes. She still remembers her body covered with bruises. He is a man walking along a fine edge. A little push could make him slip.

So she watches him. She sees nothing, yet. The rain comes in a drizzle and then leaves for the dry season, and still Ismena seems happy.

One morning, a normal morning, Itzali says, I need your help. He is in the shadows of the thatch shed where they keep their bows and arrows. She nods.

He says, Tat says it is time for me to make my first kill.

And you do not want to? Exa says. She understands. She has not yet killed an animal with her own bow. She has only practiced aiming and shooting. But now her aim is exact and she should practice hunting animals.

I do not think I can, Itzali says. And even he isn’t sure if his inability is caused by skill or fear. Thoughts interest him, medicinal plants. He wants to save not kill. He is comfortable not assuming the expected masculine role. In times of peace, it is easier for men, to inhabit a space between men and women, to still be respected even if they do not hunt. Women, however, are expected to fall into their rightful place. Unless they are truly extraordinary and the gods deem them fit.

Do you think you could kill an animal for me? he says. If he were a smaller man, he
would never ask his sister for such a favor. He wouldn’t be able to swallow his pride. But he
doesn’t take pride in the normal tasks.

_You will have to make a kill one day_, Exa says, because it’s true. Even if he is not a
warrior, he will have to hunt occasionally, especially once he is married. But also, Exa says
this because she’s a little afraid to kill.

_I know_, he says, _but I need to build up to it. Can you understand?_

_Yes_, Exa says and takes his bow and grabs his hand. Together they walk into the jungle.

_Were is Tat?_ Exa asks.

_He is meeting with some traders, I think. I asked him to let me make this kill alone._

_Good_, Exa says. It is good they are alone, good that she finally will be forced to make a
kill. She has been putting it off, and she mustn’t allow fear to control her. This is the next
step in her training, to prove to herself that she can follow a different path. All men can hunt,
and so she must too.

The jungle vibrates with insect noise. She thinks of the temple, of Queen Twelve
Macaw and of Chiccan who knows more about the voice than he is telling.

_Do you know how women become priestesses?_ she asks. She remembers the priestesses
at the sacrifice. How powerful they seemed. Exa feels as if growing up so far from Tikal has
left her with gaps in knowledge of how the city’s hierarchy works. Mat and her tutors have
taught her well, even taught her to read. But the tutors spoke little of women and other
options beyond marriage, since it is rare for women to assume other roles in Tikal. This is a
question she has been wondering about for awhile, and only now has she realized Itzali is the
perfect person to ask, because he has been tutored longer, because he is willing to be quiet,
and to sit and listen.
They are chosen, he says.

Yes, but how?

By the gods. While they walk, Exa tracks footprints of an azotochtli, an armadillo. This will be a good first animal to kill. They are slow, so her aim can be accurate. And she doesn’t much like them, with their sneaky faces tapering to sharp points. They don’t have cute faces like some of the other animals, the si’s or the wild pigs with their flat pressed snouts.

How? she asks again.

The girls must be from noble blood. Usually a priest or priestess dreams of them and they are chosen that way. Or the person must somehow convince Princess Mahaway who leads the female priesthood that they have been chosen.

Exa squats to the ground and fingers the light indent of a print. They’re getting closer.

She asks, How would you convince someone you had been chosen?

It is about showing that you have power, isn’t it? he says.

She thinks of the story of Hachakyum, the sun god. He wished to humble two unruly, smaller gods. Even gods can misbehave and so must be punished by a mightier god, like Hachakyum. He made the two gods sit on a bench and then turned the wood into two azotochtli. The creatures jumped high into the air and the gods tumbled and fell in defeat. He must have laughed and laughed. Exa would.

So she must conjure some power like this, learn how to turn wood into animals. Of course, she is no god, so her exhibit of power will be smaller. But the idea is the same. She must show she is more powerful than others.

She wonders if gods have emotions. Certainly they must have a sense of humor. They are always playing tricks on one another. But do they have fear? Is there something above
even them? Something kind but threatening. What does Hachakyum fear? What are his deepest desires?

There is a rustle in the undergrowth beneath a cepal tree. Exa freezes, threads her arrow and waits among the noises of the jungle. The distant looping echoes of howlers, the leaves twittering in the air, a motmot call. The azotochtli pokes his head out from the ferns. It doesn’t even look at them, but Exa looks at it. This perhaps is a sign of the creature’s willingness to be hunted. Yet this creature is so alive with blazing desires and warm blood, how can she kill it? He is so quiet and peaceful. She doesn’t want to end his life, even though it will be a quick, clean death. She is skilled enough now. Right to the neck, to the soft spot between hard, armored plates. The breeze rustles her hair and her whole body tingles, the tips of fingers turning numb. Shoot now, she thinks. The azotochtli shuffles into plain view. Further evidence of his willingness to be hunted. It’s unafraid and innocent, little gray feet flitting between fallen leaves. If she waits longer, she’ll lose her clean shot.

She thinks of Hachakyum and about power, and how she must prove she has more of it than others. She thanks the armadillo for his sacrifice.

She shoots. Her aim is true, the arrow piercing the creature’s neck. It falls to its side, legs squirming, a sad echoey screech filling the jungle, and then silence. Death. It’s that easy. A decision in one moment and now there’s only a shell of a body, blood still spurting from the wound. Even that slows.

Years from now, Exa’s blood will spill from her, and she’ll be just a body. We’ll find her as a crevice in the rocks, as someone nameless, heartless, in a cenote. How quickly life leaves us and we are forgotten.

Exa doesn’t want to touch it, but she does, and it’s surprisingly stiff and heavy. It was
such a small thing. She places it in her leather satchel and slings it over her shoulder, the warmth of the blood sticking to her back. For a moment she is part of this little creature.

*Thank you,* Itzali says. He looks uneasy and thankful, his eyes dark and directed at the ground. It seems silly to be so hesitant of killing a creature. This is a part of life. They eat meat frequently. But it is different when it is your own hands. Exa cannot ignore her own culpability.

The journey back to the palapa stretches, and suddenly is impossibly far with the dead azotochtl on Exa’s back, the blood pooling, dripping from the bag. When they get closer to the jungle’s edge, she hands the bag to Itzali to let him carry it. She gives him the bow too. He heads straight toward the palapa, while she curves and takes a longer route, so she won’t be seen, so no one will suspect that she killed the creature. There is blood on her back, and she tries to wipe it off with leaves, though it still stains her white huipil.

She hits the jungle’s edge, near Ismena’s and Ome’s palapa. There’s rustling inside, so Exa allows her footsteps to pound loudly, in case it’s Ismena and she wants to talk.

It is. She pokes her head through the leather flap window and says, *Exa!*

*Hello,* Exa says, though her mind isn’t quite here. It’s with the dead creature, her own dead body elsewhere. Though she doesn’t yet know it, she catches these rushes of her own future, and they leave her feeling doubled, strong, yet panicked. That curl of adrenaline and life that fear brings.

Ismena and Ome come out of the house. Both are smiling, the action making Ome particularly goofy, so unlike the day Exa beat him shooting.

*We have news,* Ismena says.

*Oh?* Exa says. She could use good news.
I am pregnant. The Iyom k’exelom just confirmed. She just left. Iyom k’exelom: the midwife from Tikal.

A baby? Exa says, unsure why this surprises her. Ismena has been married to Ome for over one Haab year. But this isn’t what Exa was expecting. She can’t imagine her sister as a mat. Or Ome, the young man she shot against, being a tat.

Yes, Ismena says. Ome wraps his hand around her, a gesture that says he cares for her, but also that she is his. Truthfully, he is frightened. Halfway through the rainy season, we should have a child, he says.

That is wonderful, Exa says. Ismena and Ome leave to tell her parents of the news. Exa stands still, and feels death all about her. A child is a wonderful blessing, but she feels full of cold dread. She puts her right hand to her stomach and dreads her own ability to have children.

She returns to the palapa with Itzali. There Mat is hugging Ismena. Everyone is wide-smiles, like the slivered moon.

Tat hugs his daughter and pats Ome on the back. And Itzali made his first kill, he says. Tomorrow we will celebrate both. Exa won’t meet Tat’s eyes, because she knows if he does, he might see her lie there. He’s always been able to read her well. But Tat already suspects. The shot was straight and clean, and Itzali’s always has a little tilt to it. His shots enter at an angle.

The shot through the creature is perfectly straight. But he allows this lie to pass for now. We are going to the Tatuyes with Ismena and Ome, do you want to come? he asks Exa.

No, but thank you.

Everyone leaves but Exa and Itzali. They both are drawn to the dead armadillo in the
bag, and end up sitting together, in front of it. It’s still leaking blood onto the ground, although the flow has slowed.

_Are you going to prepare it?_ Exa asks.

He is silent for a long time, but then says, _It was your kill, you should._ With everyone gone, it is safe for Exa to prepare it, so she sits in front of the fire pit and spreads a tarp out and puts the creature on it. She peels off its skin. Takes a sharp knife to pry off the plates, and then removes long strips of the soft skin beneath. As she does this, she thinks of Ismena’s child. Exa has grown accustomed to the idea of her sister being married, but now Ismena will have a new family.

Her body shakes, but her hands are solid and steady. She washes the peeled body with some cenote water and then sticks it on a spit. She stocks the pyre, rubs flint to convince flame to sprout, and then sets the spit over the flame and waits.

She is happy that Ismena is happy, but that isn’t the same as feeling happy for her. A son or a daughter would be wonderful, but Exa needs time to digest this.

The oil from the meat drips from the spit and sparks the fire. It’s hard to think the meat on the spit was an armadillo not long ago.

_Months later, when the sun strikes hot overhead, Exa lurks around Ome and Ismena’s palapa._ Now that Ismena is pregnant Exa needs to be more diligent. From the outside, Ome has been a caring husband. But Exa already knows he is a slick liar. He fooled Tat, made him believe there was no darkness in him. And Tat knew to look for it.

Or maybe she is wrong. She would so like to be wrong, to believe that Ome is a good man like Tat. Sometimes Exa believes she is like Ome. Meaning to be good, but with
darkness inside.

Sometimes, when she closes her eyes, she sees blood, a beating heart.

The shade cast by their palapa is a cool place. A good place for her to learn how to make perfect arrows. Elsewhere she strikes thin rocks to flints, because it’s too loud to do while snooping. But she wraps the heads onto the slim, firm strips of wood here. She has a small pile of arrows. She hides her quiver full of them behind a tree not far from here.

Here she is, in two layers of duplicity, and yet she hopes the gods understand. That this is not evidence of her darkness. She shouldn’t presume to know the gods, but ever since that moment with Ome in the clearing, she has felt closer to them. Closer to herself.

Footsteps. Ome, with the hard, rough sliding way he walks. Exa tucks herself behind the tree that hides her arrows. Her pile of newly made arrows are still in sight, but Ome doesn’t see these as he walks into the palapa. He’s had a rough day, tough in the fields. Tat yelled at him for being too yielding, for not making his rules clear enough. Ome is all or nothing: absolute and brutal, or soft and understanding. It’s hard for him to find a balance. And so he feels flayed open and soft, a feeling he hates, a feeling that reminds him of how a little girl once beat him in an arrow shooting match. He must be better. A better man for his wife. For the gods and Tikal.

Ismena is inside the palapa and is sleeping. This pregnancy has tired her body, and sometimes she can do nothing but sleep. She has known nothing but exhaustion since this baby took up home inside her.

Outside the palapa, Exa holds her breath and listens.

Ismena, Ome says, as he walks into the palapa. There’s movement inside. Exa creeps from behind her tree, to the palapa’s thatched wall. She is right beneath the leather-flapped
It is late, Ome says. I have been supervising production in the fields and now I am hungry.

Exa hears Ismena stir. Sorry, I feel asleep.

I was expecting pork wrapped in corn masa to be ready when I returned. Ome sounds sullen. The withie creaks as he sits down on it. I see you have cooked nothing. Normally Mat and Ismena would cook together, but Mat is away and is visiting her sister just west of Tikal.

I am sorry, Ismena says, and her little, wavering voice, breaks Exa’s heart. This does not sound like her sister.

She hears more creaking. Ome moving. A wet slurp. A kiss? Exa shudders. She doesn’t want to hear this.

It is alright, Ome says. And then more of that wet sound, more noise from the withie. And Exa begins to crawl away from the window, when the sound stops.

What? Ome says his voice sharp and shallow.

We cannot. The baby.

Tz’is ‘aw’t, Ome curses. And then there’s a noise, a large sharp crack. Ismena cries out and Exa is ready to go flee and get Tat.

You have no food for me and cannot do even this? he says. And again a thumping noise, and Ismena crying.

Exa runs. She doesn’t care if Ome will hear her. She runs to her palapa in search of Tat. Feet thumping the ground hard. But Tat is nowhere. She calls his name. She calls for Itzali. But nothing but the thrum of the jungle. She looks around, and the world seems to quiet, and her heart is so loud. And so she takes Tat’s hunting knife and her bow and runs back to
Ismena.

At Ismena’s palapa, it is quiet.

*Ismena*? she calls.

Ismena is at the door. She flings the leather flap back. Her eyes are wet with tears, but she looks unhurt.

*Where is Ome?* Exa asks.

Ismena averts her eyes and says, *He went on a walk.* She pauses. *I need to tend the fire.*

Exa watches the way her sister moves to the fire pit. She doesn’t appear to be in physical pain, though she could be hiding it. Could Ome have been hitting the withie, the wall, the floor?

*Are you ok?* Exa asks.

Ismena breathes in deep. *Yes,* she says. *We all make mistakes sometimes.* She turns to the fire and Exa helps her light it, string meat to the spit to roast it. Exa sees no sign of physical harm. She stays for as long as Ismena will have her, until her sister says, *he will be back soon. You should go.*

Exa kicks the stump outside of her palapa. It makes her foot ache, but she likes that, that pain, knowing that she is here and alive. She needs proof of Ome’s meanness. She needs proof of her power so she can become something special, like a priestess. But she has nothing, only questions, only the murky dark of a mystery. And so much hangs in the balance. Ismena’s future happiness, and her own.
She will keep a closer eye on Ome. She will abandon her hunting practice for now, at least until the baby comes.

Something twitches inside her, in her lower abdomen. A short, sharp pain.

This doesn’t bode well.
CHAPTER 6

I.

It is a shock and a horror, when the blood comes. It is quiet inside the palapa. This incredible snake of pain in the lower reaches of her stomach flares, and she touches the place between her legs and feels hot thickness. Light from the fire outside still flickers through the palapa window thatches. She brings her finger to her eyes. The strict, earthy smell of blood. She rips a strand of sheet, folds it, presses it between her legs. She can hide the blood for a while.

She feels tremendous relief, because now the worst has happened, and somehow there is comfort in that. No more wondering. It feels like her second self is here, her older self, a real woman beside her, waiting to be released. She’ll do her best to contain this older self. She lies in bed, tossing.

Somewhere in the future, she walks through a crowd of wild people, in a slow march to sacrifice. A man walks beside her. There is comfort in that, and also panic, because hers is not the only death she must worry about.

Her muscles tense in the dark, with only the moon’s crescent above, and the jungle’s whispers. The calls of howler monkeys start with a low rumble, rising to a high throb, a desperate wave of noise building. High-pitched and unrelenting, the noise of nightmares. She tosses and turns, her bones cracking at their joints.

Somewhere, time will crack her bones. She will become sediment and remnants.

The howlers’ noise makes a circle of low-high-low sound. She wants to see this blood that pours from her and so guarantees her a commitment to a man. She is running out of time. A match will take perhaps two seasons, but that isn’t much. She tiptoes from the palapa, to
the quickly dying fire. She crouches by its flickering light, its ghostly remains of heat, and brings the wadded fabric that was between her legs up to the light of the flame. A red, almost brown smudge on it, a smell with a sharpness. Deep brown, not at all the color she expected.

For how long can she hide this blood? How long after would the atanzahab come and visit? In how long might she have honed power to prove to the priestesses that she is chosen?

Perhaps never. Perhaps this is the beginning and end of things.

She throws the bloody cloth into the flame and watches it burn. The edges turn black and then fall into the empty air, become nothing but soot that is too fine to see. She goes to the backstrap looms and hunts for some discarded, imperfect fabric. There’s quite a bit of it, odds and ends, false starts, mostly from her. She always was too impatient, always tried to weave too quickly. Her efforts always ended in snarls. Tangles that couldn’t be undone. Tat says threads run through everyone and connects them, to each other, to the gods, to the layers of the world above and below. Many too-thin-to-be-visible threads run through the universe and hold everything together. And what if her threads are tangled. What if it is all unraveling. Her body and the trees around her. The Temple of the Masks and her king.

A sound outside. An animal? Exa wads the new fabric and places it between her legs, but there is still blood on her hands. The noise continues, comes closer.

Mat’s face in the shadows, her arms crossed.

So the blood has begun, Mat says. Exa hides her hands, shakes her head.

No, she says. Outside the howlers’ screeches fill the air.

Please do not tell Tat, not yet. Exa’s own voice surprises her. So small and pleading, just like Ismena’s when she apologized to Ome.

Her body is panic coursing like a river. She cannot face this. Her body betrays her, as it
shakes and she rubs the blood from her hands onto her white huipil. She leaves feathered streaks of brown that in this light look like dirt.

I will not tell Tat, not yet, Mat says. The panic of her daughter is worse than she could imagine. This suffering. Mat felt like this once. She comes from a long line of independent women, but this independence has not ended well for most. Mat is strong and she survives because she gave up on those desires to forge a more unique path. Some make it. Mat never wanted to simply be a wife. But she is happy enough now. She loves her children.

She is content, but she is not yet ready to allow her daughter to give up. She has been blessed, with Ismena, who is perfect in every way, who is adept at the expected skills, and is kind and beautiful. And with Exa, who is something so apart from that, even she doesn’t know what to expect from her.

But perhaps all mothers think this of their children. They are prefect and extraordinary.

We cannot hide the blood from people forever. But you have a little time, Mat says.

Exa doesn’t understand Mat’s intentions, but it is like she can breathe again. Thank you, she says, as the darkness envelopes them, wraps these two women in its blanket of blackness. Mat is warm as she hugs her daughter and there is enormous comfort in that.

Exa hates maize season. From one of Tat’s maize fields, where the jungle ends and the clear-cut land begins, Tat’s workers bring large bushels of it to the palapa. Mat houses it in a shaded area alongside the palapa on a leather tarp. The smell of raw husks, sweet and clean, permeates the air as the family sleeps.

The calendars say today is lucky, where the gods smile bright above them. A good day for a feast. Just with Exa’s family, and Ismena’s new one. The Tatuyes will settle here
tonight.

Ismena is round and bulging at the middle, the skin of her belly pulled tightly. Exa moves the maize from the shade to a wide, flat stone, beside the cooking fire. Ismena tires easily, but she insists on helping.

They bend over the maize, husked and ready. They peel the greenness from it. Exa hates the way the husk of maize feels: rough, sharp at the bitter edges. But she loves the smell, so fresh like a promise of new life. They throw the discarded husks into one pile. If they can, if the rain does not return today, which it likely won’t because it has all but dried, they will dry the husks in the sun, allow it to lose all wetness, so that later they can use the dry crackly remains to fuel the fire.

Tat watches from afar. He takes comfort in watching Ismena’s deft hands move over the maize. Even in this Exa is unsure, and has none of Ismena’s swiftness. He also watches, because he is concerned about his maize. His yields decrease each year, this year even worse than most, and he worries the maize he does have is of lesser quality than usual. He looks to the skies and pleads with the gods to end this.

Exa peels the husk from the cobs. This is the part she likes, peeling the green husks to reveal the color of the cobs. It’s always a surprise. Purple, black, and yellow spots. Warm orange. Deep red. It has been many moons since Exa’s blood first came, and still Mat has not said anything. She gives her fabric to catch the blood, and together they wash them, or if they are too stained, burn them.

_Are you happy you are married?_ Exa asked Mat one night as they washed the cloth.

_Not at first_, Mat says, then hesitates and says, _Yes. When I met your tat I was excited to marry him. I accepted this path._
You just gave up your other paths? Exa asks.

No, I merely altered my thoughts. Resisting can be dangerous.

Exa peels off the green leaves from the cobs.

My cob is more beautiful than yours, she tells Ismena. They always make a game of this. It is the only way to make it fun.

Ismena says, I bet my next one will be mottled, purple, red, yellow. These are their favorites, like a rainbow. Exa often feels the need to keep these cobs, these colors, and collect them, so she can always remember them. She has always been drawn to color, and feels color represents a certain permanence. The green of the jungle will never fade. Nor the black of obsidian arrowheads, the cacao brown of tree trunks.

But we know the paint of the temples of Tikal has faded. The sun wearing the deep orange out. The temples are bare, pale stone now.

I bet mine will be dull yellow, Exa says. They exchange these bets and wager chores or time from this task.

They peel the husks to reveal that they are both wrong. Ismena’s is yellow and Exa’s is mottled color. The laughter comes to them so easily this day. Ismena is happy and warm, and this happiness spreads to Exa. Light, carefree. It is odd, but welcome.

You are quite big, Exa tells her sister and bends her head to the curved stomach.

Perhaps this moon the child will come, Ismena says. Ismena beams and Exa yearns to feel as her sister does now.

You are happy, Exa says.

Yes. Ismena peels back a long strip of green. Are you?
Exa peels the husk from her cob and all those silky threads hidden beneath, so the cob is bare and clean.

*You look hot,* Exa says. Sweat pours down her sister’s face. It can’t be good for the baby. Exa locates a tarp, thin leather, and strings it up above them, between the two cedar tree trunks, wedged deep in the ground for this very purpose. Shade casts its coolness, but still there is enough light.

*Thank you.* Her hand touches Exa’s, and Exa just wants to fling herself at her sister, to hug her and cry. From sadness or happiness, she is unsure. She has found with the blood, strange emotions come also. Sweeping, inexplicable sadness. Irritation. And sometimes, ungrounded happiness.

She asks, *Are you ready to be a mat?*

Ismena shakes her head, the movement slow and steady. *No, but I am not sure anyone is.* She stops shelling the maize and holds Exa’s hand and thinks about how tired she is now. She hopes once this baby is out of her, her strength will return. *I so wish you were happy,* she tells Exa.

*And Ome? Does he make you happy?*

She pauses, a little flicker of hesitancy. Exa sees this as a sign that Ismena has also seen the darkness inside Ome.

*Has he hurt you?*

Ismena focuses on Exa’s face, on her image bounced from Exa’s pupils. *No, he would never.* Her hand retreats and returns to the husk, her eyes following her hands. *Men are difficult. They are hard to understand.*

Exa’s love for her sister swells like a blooming flower as the day breaks. It bubbles so
hot inside of her that she feels this tremendous urgency to do something, though she doesn’t know what. She still is unsure what to believe about Ome. She was so certain that he hit Ismena.

*I love Ome, just as I love you, always*, Ismena says.

They hug, with the shelled maize glistening before them, the shade pressing upon them. Just a moment with each other. Exa is gathering up the courage to ask Ismena about Ome again, when Emetalay joins them, followed by her sister, Patli. They slide their eyes to Exa and nod. They have shared something secret between them, and now they hold it. They have told no one of the way the gods swept Exa in their arms and pulled the bow and made her beat Ome. Or at least, that’s one version of what happened.

There are others. There are so many ways to tell a story.

Exa’s desire to believe it was the gods is so strong, that she can no longer envision an alternative. She has chosen her path and feels herself spiraling toward it. Exa’s power, her strength in shooting is growing. She will need something more concrete to convince the priesthood, but she feels she is barreling toward the answer. She will find it.

Patli and Emetalay are still a little wary of Exa. Maybe afraid, but it’s also respect.

They shell the maize, Ismena moving slower and slower. They pile it in large ceramic bowls that Mat and Ismena have made. Exa’s pots are always misshapen. Not very good for carrying maize, or anything.

In another pot, Exa gathers water. They set up three slab stones and place them on the fire. Then Emetalay helps Exa place the pot on the stone. They wait for the water to bubble. Ismena closes her eyes, a hand resting on her belly.

*Are you in talks with the atanzahab?* Emetalay asks Exa. Now that Emetalay is married to
a good man, she is excited by the prospect of others marrying.

   Exa thinks of the blood that pours from her body. *No, I am not yet a woman.*

   Patli is gone. Exa didn’t notice her leaving. Maybe to get more corn or more water. She doesn’t know how she has lost her, that memory of her leaving.

   Emetaly says, *Marriage is exciting, but it is hard too.*

   Exa wonders if it is as hard as convincing a princess you are seeing vision from the gods.

   When the water bubbles, they put the cobs into the pot and allow them to half cook. Ismena leaves to lie down on her withie. Ome is probably with Tat, probably hunting, setting snares, shooting crisp, clean shots. Or else keeping an eye on their workers at the plantations.

   Emetaly and Exa take the pot from the stove and let the water sit until it cools enough for them to plunge their hands into it and find the maize cobs. They line them up in a clean, woven mat so the cobs will cool.

   Emetaly asks, *What do you hope your husband is like?*

   Exa has never thought about this, never imagined there would be something she would like about a husband.

   Exa says nothing. She can’t picture a husband.

   The maize cobs cool and wait for their hard covering to be removed. Waiting to be ground into flour and made into tortillas. Exa retreats to Ismena’s palapa. She enters slowly into the one room, with a withie and a small, wood table. They seem to exist in an enormous space. Ismena looks so small as she stirs from her sleep.

   *How are you feeling?* Exa asks as she lies down on the bed with her, feels their skin touch slick.
Just tired. I am so excited to push this baby from me and to meet it.

I am excited to meet it too.

It is soft and quiet in the palapa, like the world stands still here. Exa could burrow here and comfortably hide. Ome and Tat did a clean job building this home, even though it’s temporary. In a few Haab years, Ismena and Ome will be free to move wherever they choose.

I have a feeling the child is a girl, Ismena says. Ome so wants a son.

Of course, Exa says.

Ismena says, If it is a girl, will you promise to teach her how to be wild? Like you?

Exa slides closer to her sister. Are you sure you want her to be like me?

Yes. Do you promise?

Exa wraps her arm around Ismena and whispers in her ear, I promise.

It is a bad sign because the day the pains in Ismena’s belly begin is marked as an unlucky day. The second to last day of the tzolkin, the sacred year. The nineteenth day of the thirteenth month. The last day would be lucky, but this day is too far from the end, too close. Too in-between.

Mat hovers over Ismena, her front teeth sandwiching her lower lip, and drawing a thin pinprick of blood. You cannot hold the baby until tomorrow? she asks, but already the answer presents itself as Ismena cries and clutches the lower bulge of her belly.

I will get the ioyom k’exelom, Mat says. The midwife has been living on the outskirts of the clearing, in a small palapa that Ome and Tat built for her. She arrived one uinal ago, 20 solar days, just in case the baby came early. Tikal is too far away to wait for a midwife to journey from there.
It is raining. Today should have been a celebration for it, because it has been so dry, even in the rainy season. It has been weeks since water has fallen but now it is a hindrance. It is important for a baby to be born outside, for Ismena to have fresh air. And so Tat and Ome rush to put a tarp over the chosen birthing area, so that the midwife and Ismena will stay dry. Mat lays a leather covering over the ground and on top of that, puts a soft, woven blanket.

Exa lurks at the corner of this small area. Far enough to be out of the way of the midwife, but close enough so she can see everything.

_I will bring my family_, Ome says and then he is off, gone. The Mats will assist the midwife when they can. Ismena screams again and Mat hushes her and strokes her hair.

The midwife arrives, with a large ceramic pot and some wood. Beneath the tarp, she begins to build a fire to boil water. She wets a small cloth with rainwater and places it over Ismena’s forehead.

_Breathe in and out. Do not forget to breathe._

Then she sets up another fire and fuels it with dried cedar bark and cepal leaves. The fire burns a thick, smoky gray. The spicy smell of cedar fills Exa’s nose. The midwife wafts the smoke to encourage it to escape the tarp, and it ascends to the layers of heaven above, so that same scent in Exa’s nostrils fills the gods, the sky’s expansive heart. The midwife wafts the smoke over Ismena to cleanse her. The midwife hums, low and guttural in the back of her throat. She is not yet worried about this delivery. All is as it should be.

The midwife’s hums grow louder, they become a plea to Ixchel, the goddess of birth. The midwife speaks the ancient rhythms of the goddess. She holds a sacred quetzal feather between her two fingers, holds it over the smoke, but is careful not to burn it. When the single feather has soaked up the smoke, she walks to Ismena and tucks it behind her ear. The
feather should give her power and strength. Should keep her safe.

Ismena screams again. Exa has never seen a birth before, and doesn’t even know much about it. She feels frustrated by this cloud of mystery, how she doesn’t quite know what to expect. Already it feels strange and awful to see Ismena scream this way. Exa keeps fretting because today is an unlucky one.

She is glad that she is out of the way, at the edge of the leather tarp, so that small trickles of rain blow onto her skin. She is glad to be close enough to experience this, although like the sacrifice she is here through concern and obligation, not because of desire.

Like the sacrifice, staring at Ismena, somehow feels like a glimpse from her future. If she gets married, this could be her.

The rain grows stronger, stronger than it has been since the last rainy season, or perhaps even the time before. In fact Exa can never remember rain this strong. It is the only noise until Ismena opens her throat and pierces the rain with another scream. It pours. Chacs is raging today. Sometimes Exa thinks of the rain as his tears, because this is Chacs’ water and he’s giving it to them in the shape of human tears. As if he’s up there crying. He’s the saddest person Exa knows. But of course he isn’t a person. He is a god. She shouldn’t think of think of him that way.

Chacs has not been as sad as he normally is. It feels wrong to wish for his further sadness, but they need the rain.

Exa wonders what makes Chacs sad.

Ismena’s screams send Exa reeling. It is so sharp-edged, with so much surprise and pain, terror at the pulses of her body. And what’s not quite her body, what will soon not be her at all, but a child. It’s so strange how birth works. How we all begin coiled inside
somehow. How we really begin as someone else. Our blood is all theirs, our life so fully linked to our mothers.

Ome’s Mat joins the birthing party. The men are nowhere in sight. Tat and Ome are off praying, and Itzali is gathering more bark for the balche. A celebration when the baby is born.

*Should I help?* Exa asks her mat.

*No, but thank you.*

This is good. Exa wishes to be left alone, in her little borderland, with the rain becoming more and more wet. It is so sticky and warm, the smell of ripe plants so stiff in the air, that she is glad for the rain. With the heat and the screams and the peppery smoke from the fire, Exa enters this trance. She is sweat-slicked, rain-covered. Her whole body feels raw and open. She is blurring here at the edge of the birthing. She is a heavy thing, stiff, but losing her substance as the rain pelts her and the smoke fills her. She is the smoke escaping the tarp and fleeing to Ixchel. She is climbing the layers of the world, up to the heavens and pooling at their feet.

At some future point, Exa’s blood pools on the stone of Tikal.

Ismena screams, rough and abrupt. A scream so fierce that Exa is pulled from her heartless body. There is blood between Ismena’s legs. The blood makes Exa think of the armadillo she hunted, the wound.

The midwife curses and dips her hands in the near-boiling water, to cleanse them. She rushes to Ismena, shoves something green into her mouth and commands, *chew.*

Ismena is crying, or attempting to, but she doesn’t have enough air in her body. She opens her mouth. If her voice embodied her pain it would be deafening, but all that comes is a faltering whisper.
Exa lurks on the edge. She is worried that something is wrong. But nothing can be wrong because Ismena is perfect and the gods would never punish her. The corollary? If something is wrong, it is Ome’s fault.

Ismena opens her mouth again. Her body shakes with a ferocity greater than Exa has ever seen.

If it is a girl, will you promise to teach her how to be wild?

In this moment, Ismena could teach more about wildness that Exa could. Exa’s mouth tastes bitter and acidic and still her sister’s body shakes. This isn’t her sister. She has been taken over. This is not the way it is meant to go. Exa’s stomach churns and bile burns at the base of her throat.

And still, the screaming.

The midwife curses, when she realizes there is a problem. Perhaps the baby is obstructed, is facing the wrong way, or is simply too large for the birth canal. It could be anything, really.

Already Ismena is bleeding, hemorrhaging.

I do not think I can save both, the midwife says. She isn’t sure she can save either, but for now she presents the option. *Your life or the baby’s life?* she asks Ismena. Who should she try the hardest to save? She is aware of the impossibility of this question, but it is a decision that should not be hers to make. She is all business now, because she has a life to save. There will be time for reflection and regret, but this is not it.

There is so much blood.

It is your choice, the midwife says.

Though she is so consumed by the pain, her mind so foggy with it, for a moment
Ismena slices through all that hurt and clears her mind.

_The baby_, Ismena says, her voice hoarse, but clear, insistent. And there is part of Mat’s wildness and strength passed onto her. Exa wasn’t the only one who inherited this. _The baby_, Ismena says again. It isn’t even a choice for her. She already cares so deeply about this child. She already feels if only this child survives, then she too will continue to live within her. This is the way: parents sacrifice much for their children. Children outlive their parents.

Ismena’s eyes are wide and innocent, like the armadillo Exa put an arrow through.

Mat closes her eyes and tries to think of anything but the midwife, her daughter, the screams, and the blood. She pretends she is elsewhere, pretends she is nothing, that she no longer exists. The alternative? She would crumble. Mat has memories that are too much like this. _I am sorry_, she thinks, to her daughter, to the gods.

Exa wants to run from her spot, and hug Ismena, or else run into the jungle and try to forget all of this.

Time feels like a loop. Exa yearns for the beginning. She has just killed the armadillo and Ismena is telling her she is pregnant and Ome is beaming. Exa puts her hand on Ismena’s stomach who says _Do you feel it?_ They are preparing maize and Ismena says _If it is a girl will you promise to teach her how to be wild?_

Exa is in the future, where she has perhaps pushed her wildness too far and is on the dais looking into the eyes of the King. She is being emptied of a heart, of all her blood.

The midwife is hard and cemented in the present. Her whole hand is in Ismena now, as she tries to turn the baby. Ismena’s mouth opens but there is no sound.

The midwife withdraws her hand, presses a warm, damp cloth between Ismena’s spread legs. She has a knife in her hand. The spicy scent of smoke mingles with another rancid smell.
Hard and salty. Sweat and blood.

Exa cannot look, but buries her face in her lap and focuses on the darkness. And then, a stillness. A baby’s cry. Exa does not look. Another scream, a wail hits the air, Mat, returning to this moment, her voice clear and strong and so sad. The same looping, clear sadness of the woman Exa heard at Tikal that spoke to her at the Temple of the Masks. The full-powered sadness is the same, and the tender way they hold their words.

The midwife holds a baby, swaddled with bright cloth. The face is pink and gooey and she cries, solid and safe and very alive.

Mat is bent over Ismena and her cries are louder than even the howler monkeys, as if this sadness has hallowed her body and she is nothing but noise. Mat forgets about the baby, because her own is too motionless and cold. Exa opens her eyes, even though she doesn’t want to, even though she knows that her sister must be dead. And she wants so desperately to vomit now, only she can’t seem to do anything, can’t seem to stop thinking how Ixchel, goddess of childbirth has so profoundly failed them, has allowed for this end.

Or perhaps this is not how it ends. Perhaps Ismena is fine, tired, but laughing and holding her new baby girl. Perhaps there were no complications. Perhaps the gods favored the family that day.

But in mere decades all of Tikal will be gone. Its people nothing, not even memories, because who would remember them? Only people who left, only people who are now dead. Only words that have long since burned.

Her death, brutal and bloody, makes a better story, doesn’t it? Aren’t we all fascinated by that gore, life’s force shuttering out of a body in an instant? I am sorry for her death.

One solace? Even if her death doesn't happen at this moment, her death will happen
later. This whole landscape fading.

I suppose this isn’t a solace at all.

What We Don’t Know

Everything.

II.

The rain continues, and now Chac’s tears are appropriate. Exa does not need to cry, because the whole sky is crying around her, turning the world hazy and blurred.

Ome’s mat leaves the clearing to find the men and deliver the news. Mat is in no state to think of others. Though her tears have quieted, she kneels in front of Ismena’s body and is perfectly still, as if she has become stone.

Exa follows Ome’s Mat without even realizing. Her body acts of its own volition, because her mind is too numb. Ome’s Mat is the only solid, sharp thing she sees. Exa follows her to the men, and only knows that Ome’s Mat has delivered the bad news, when she hears Ome slam his palm into a tree.

She closes her eyes and she is outside Ismena’s palapa and there are harsh, pounding thumps because Ome is angry she hasn’t cooked for him. Angry because he feels antsy and wants some release. He is hitting the palapa or he’s hitting the wall or he’s hitting Ismena. How are we to know? Maybe her stomach and his anger made the baby angry and this is the consequence.

Maybe.

Exa feels somehow she is to blame for this, because she knew Ome’s darkness and
didn’t save Ismena from it. No, this is Ome’s fault, that big, smelly, brute. Ome thinks this is his fault too, he doesn’t know why. He runs from his mat, his feet taking him to the jungle. Exa follows. Somewhere behind her Tat’s curse, his voice ragged.

Ome and Exa run from that darkness inside them, from the ambiguous culpability they both hold.

He is by Exa’s palapa now. His strides are long, and quick, and they both are running as fast as they possible can, faster than they could believe, but then loss creates the impossible. As she runs past the shed, Exa grabs Itzali’s bow. He is always careless, always forgetting to put the bow away, so it’s just lying there, like it’s fate that she should pick it up. Fate or coincidence? The gods or random chance?

She runs with the bow in her hand, runs after Ome, and he is her animal. She is the power, the predator, her body shaking with sadness that she tries to forget.

He pierces through the jungle, and she is close behind. She grabs a single arrows, drops the heavy quiver, but he’s moving too fast for her to shoot now. She would do it. Her moccasins squish with rainwater and the damp, leaf-strewn jungle floor. She keeps her eyes to the ground. Her braided hair is heavy from the rain and smacks her shoulders as she runs wildly. Her red conch shell belt clinks. Together, they jump over buttressed roots, check the ground for snakes. There is no one here but Ome and Exa. And maybe whatever is left of Ismena, if indeed anything is left.

And always the gods. Chacs with his rain, Ixchel up there too high. Exa is certain Ome did this, she feels it deep in her bones. She hopes that if she does something unforgivable, the gods will still take her side.

The trees thin, little by little. Ome isn’t even aware of Exa behind him, so vast and raw
is his heart ache. He is being swallowed by a cloud that feels like the sun. Like the dark space between stars. He doesn’t know why this happened, but he knows his guilt, his imperfections, and the thought of this is driving him to wildness. He screams. He hits a clearing and his run turns to a walk, turn to stillness.

Exa slows and stops right before the trees thin, so she is only half hidden and Ome is all open. Closer, so much closer to her than the tree they shot at so long ago.

She has only one arrow. She loads it. Pulls back the string of the bow.

And finally, Ome pulls from that haze of grief and sees Exa. His body shakes, his face is wet from the rain, so that it looks like he has been crying. Perhaps he has.

_You did this!_ Exa shouts to him. His whole body tenses, the way an animal’s does if they see a hunter before the shot. The mark of a bad hunter. The meat grows tough from stress.

Exa and Ome are growing tough from stress.

It is best to kill a beast before they know it’s coming. It’s more kind.

Exa isn’t looking for kindness.

This is your fault, she says. This is about punishment and also, power. To prove she has it. She has made even her sister’s death a little about her.

Ome’s eyes are cold and stern and his body is still tense as laughter peels from him. It sounds inhuman, a skeleton’s laugh, all hollow vibration.

_What is funny?_ Exa asks as she pulls the string tighter. That unnatural sound crawls inside her, replaces her sadness with fear. Who is this beast?

Ome’s hands are shaking and he’s moving them up and down, in sharp, swift swipes. 

_You are not going to shoot me_, he says and laughs again. He rocks in place and turns his head
in every direction, as if he does not quite know where he is.

_I could kill you, you know_, he says, but he isn’t looking at Exa, but to the sky.

Exa aims the arrow for his wide, barrel chest, but does not yet release. He looks at her and the arrow, his body tensing more, then he covers his heart with his hands like a shield that says _do not kill me_. He takes a deep breath and the anger drains from his eyes, they loosen, grow kinder and then widen in fear. Then stillness, silence broken only by Exa’s ragged breaths.

_Think Exa_, he says, finally his voice just audible over the slowing rain. _What would they do to you if you killed me?_ He allows a breath to expand his chest, his hands still covering his heart. _I am a Tatuye, and you? You might belong to a great family, but you are not your family’s heir._

This shift from anger to logic shocks Exa. This is not the Ome she suspected. He has many faces, like masks he can put on and off. Perhaps she does too.

_What did you do to her?_ Exa asks. She thinks of his anger in the palapa, of those strict thumps, which could have been him hitting Ismena, making something wrong.

He says, _Think of how sad your tat would be if he had to turn you in. Sentence you to death. Could you make him lose both daughters in one day?_

Exa sees herself, heartless. She wonders if she has already been lost.

Death. There it is: what frightens her. The uncertainty of death has always been what scares her. Dark uncertainty. That is at least half the reason marriage terrifies her. What is it like behind closed doors? What had Ome done with Ismena, to Ismena that created her death? The unknown is blinding.

And what scares her is how alluring death is sometimes. How curious, how she can
picture herself, dead, already. Her body on the ground, bleeding. She tries to gather energy within her, to tap into that mythical place, but she is too tired.

She is no longer sure this is Ome’s fault.

*Put down the bow,* Ome says. He is no longer afraid of death, and in this feels invincible. He walks toward her and she keeps the bow raised.

*You hurt her,* she says. She sees guilt, not sadness, because she wants to. She sees it in the way he forces his shoulders straight and strong, in the tremor in his lower lip. He is sorry, but not quite sorry enough.

*You will not shoot me,* he says and turns away from her. She is no longer worth his time. He takes one step foreward, and another.

He is still close. She still has the bow raised, still has the single arrow loaded. She has been practicing and so it is easy to tilt the bow in one swift kick, to aim for him and to release. From this close it isn’t difficult to land the arrow exactly where she wishes. It pierces in the center of his left butt cheek.

She expects blood, but there is none. She expects a scream, but he just grunts, the physical pain somehow duller than all the other pain in him. Perhaps this is a relief. Ome turns. His mouth open and rushes toward Exa, the arrow still wedged in him. She darts behind a tree and runs.

*Tz’is ‘aw’t,* he curses.

Exa shot him in the ass because she knew it would be hard for him to chase her. Also, it is what he deserves. Also, it’s funny and she so needs to laugh.

The laughter comes bubbling from her throat like fire, as she runs through the jungle and weaves her way, not home, but to the closest cenote. Her laughter is dark. Yes, this is
power. It flows through her body, but then, so does the fear. Her heart is a drum inside. What has she done? She shot Ome without even being completely certain that he is to blame. But he’ll be fine. He’ll have an agonizing walk back through the jungle, but she hasn’t done any lasting damage.

Is that good enough?

She just shot a man. A man who is a member of her family. They are one strong, thriving community. Blood ties and marriage bind them all, the strongest of the connecting threads. She has misstepped.

She only stops running when she reaches the sacred cenote, where dead bodies sometimes are tossed. No bodies in it today. The only death is the one she knows. And the sadness of it comes to her now.

She cannot move for a long time.
CHAPTER 7

I.

When Exa returns to her palapa, Ome is there, his face a grimace. His bottom is wrapped with thick cloth, so his wound has already been tended to. They know. She skirts the edge of the jungle. Perhaps she could say the shot was an accident. Grief does strange things to people, how could they know what was running through her mind?

It would be Ome’s word against hers. But she could say the arrow slipped. Admit that she had it raised, but she is a girl and what does she know of bows and arrows?

Tat would see through that, but he might ignore it and go with the ruse. He might not. Exa thinks that she has kept her hunting a secret, but she hasn’t been sneaky enough to hide it from Tat. He knows and has allowed it. Admires it. Though only Ismena was supposed to know.

Ismena. Exa’s heart remembers her sister. The panic comes in waves, and her own dilemma no longer matters much. Let them do what they want with her.

She can be the girl who shot her brother-in-law. She would never be married then. Perhaps she should spread word of this. Make herself untouchable. Dangerous.

The danger is if she pushes this too far. She is desperate now from sadness, from the fear that she will end up like Ismena: married and then dead. If she killed Ome, one of her family, she would likely be sentenced to death. But an arrow in the ass is only a little wound. Disgraceful, not deadly. Clearly she wasn’t going for his heart.

But who knows what Ome might demand. He is unreadable to her. Like a scared animal, he might do anything.

Perhaps she should run. She is stuck in that moment, halfway through running and
deciding to stay here and face what she has done. Half of her doesn’t want to face Ismena’s death.

Her feet are ready to tuck her back into the jungle, when Emetaly comes from the west, the dropping sun casting her body in light. Now that Exa has been seen, there is no escaping.

*Did you hear about Ome?* Emetaly asks.

And this isn’t what Exa was expecting to hear.

*What happened?* Exa says, and tries to keep her voice level. She isn’t sure how to play this yet.

*He said he was walking through the jungle and in his sadness he slipped and fell.* She pauses, chuckles a little. *Sorry,* she says. *He hurt his bottom badly.*

Exa would have never guessed Ome to lie for her. Or perhaps he’s embarrassed. Although who would fault him for getting shot? His wife just died and no one expects a young woman to come at them with a bow and arrow. But the location of the injury certainly is embarrassing. So perhaps he wants to hold this information so later he can use it against Exa. She can’t know how he might do this, but now he holds two secrets about her. She knows nothing of him, only his uncertain darkness, that smoky, weightless thing.

*Poor Ome,* Exa says, though even she can hear how hollow that sounds.

Emetaly takes her hand. *Are you all right?*

Exa shakes her head. The relief of Ome’s lie is overwhelming, but it also brings with it a future weight. A punishment that has perhaps, only been delayed. If Exa were less distracted, she would notice uncertainty settling in Emetaly’s eyes, a sort of fear. Some expansion of the awe Emetaly has felt since she watched Exa outshoot her brother.

*Of course you are not,* Emetaly says. *We have balche, it might make you feel better.*
Exa nods. Tat has never allowed her balche before.

Emetaly and her husband Pacal, Exa settle around the small fire pit at the back of the palapa, near a trough of balche. Itzali and Ome’s brothers join them. During the birth Itzali gathered the balche bark for it, but he now regrets leaving. He should have been worried about his sister. Death in childbirth is not common, but it is not unusual either. He didn’t even think. He feels so removed sometimes.

He prepared this balche as a celebration for the new child. He poured water and honey into the rough-hewn wood and then placed the sharp balche into it.

He ladles it out into thin, ceramic cups. Exa presses it to her lips and lets the thick, sweet liquid slide down her throat.

Whoa, she says, as warmth already pools in her stomach. The drink is sweet and spicy, with a decided heat.

Be careful, Itzali says. Do not drink too much. He ruffles her hair, with a tender protectiveness Exa has never felt from him before.

Yes, Pacal says. The first time I had balche, he pauses, didn’t end well. There’s a light in his eyes that reminds Exa of Chiccan.

Exa wonders where Ismena’s body is now. Who has her child? She doesn’t want to know. The funeral ceremony will occur a few days from now. The sun slides down the sky and Itzali lights the fire. Tat joins them, every movement slow, as if every part of his body aches. He too feels guilty. He too wonders if he had heeded Exa’s warning, if all this could be avoided.

He doesn’t blame Ome, but simply wonders if there could have been another path. He stares deep into the fire.
A pain in Exa’s stomach flares. She drinks more and more balche. Head spinning, delicious, familiar, like when she settles into the gods and sees herself bleeding. These visions should scare her. They do. But they also feel comforting. A touch from the gods?

Emetaly leans closer to Exa. The heat and closeness makes her think of Ismena, and it’s only by taking a very long breath that she can keep herself from crying. She needs a distraction.

*Is the child alright?* she asks.

*She is fine,* Tat says. *The midwife says she is healthy.* His hands clasp each other, his knuckles white. *A blessing,* he says.

This should be a relief, although it does nothing to lighten Exa. It simply does not add sadness, merely keeps her where she is: spinning. She is angry at Tat for considering this tragedy a blessing. She is angry at him for making Ismena marry Ome. She is wild with anger.

She will teach Ismena’s daughter to be wild, as Ismena asked. She will do it in her sister’s name, and so that the child’s life might make up for Ismena’s missing one. For now Exa must grieve, but then after this, she will begin thinking of a plan. Towards what? She is not yet sure, but she must begin moving toward a life that looks different than Ismena’s.

There is an emptiness in the universe now, one all of the family is trying to fill with their own spiraling guilt.

Ome joins the family, but remains standing. He doesn’t look at Exa.

Exa grips her gourd that holds the balche even tighter.

Exa’s and Emetaly’s mat join them too, followed by Patli and their younger brothers. So here they are, the whole family, or what has become a whole family. Itzali pours the
balche and Mat drinks it without even looking at it. Drinks it like water. Exa has never seen
her so loose. Ome stands across the fire pit from Exa and now his dark eyes never leave her
body. All of his weight rests on his right leg.

The pain in Exa’s stomach grows and she feels the warm dampness settling between
her legs. She looks to the moon; it’s almost full. The blood is a little early, but it has come
again. And so she leaves, the balche setting her off balance. She pit-patters to the weaving
hut and folds cloth between her legs, wraps her torso and legs with thick cord to secure it.

Blood, thick and hot, came from Ismena’s legs today too. And in the dark of the
weaving hut, Exa collapses, her grief like an arrow piercing her, her skin tingly and burning.
She claws at her skin and wishes she could peel it from her, to walk from it and escape. Skin
herself, like an armadillo, place her own flesh on a spit and just burn.

Days after Ismena’s death, the family gathers at the Tatuyes’ burial site, somewhere
between the Tatuyes’ village and Tikal. The rain that came during Ismena’s giving birth, her
death, has long since left, and the air feels dry and too-hot once again. The family stands
around her body, which is encased in stone. The stone is embellished, with glyphs, with a
rough portrait of Ismena. The carver was skilled, but Exa thinks no one could quite capture
her sister’s life. The sweetness about her face, her eyes. Exa has been told all her life that
they look similar, only Exa holds her face sharper, her eyes more intense, slanted, whereas
Ismena’s were wide and soft.

And so her family stands around her, their faces darkened from coal, a sign of
mourning and of loss. This is an intimate event, only close family, Exa’s parents and Ome’s,
and their siblings, gather here.
A Shaman comes with spiced smoke. Tat plays the drum, a slow beat, and he is thankful to have something to do with his hands. Thankful he can focus on the beat and lose himself to it. Mat weeps. She cannot help it, but the tears come, and they are like a torrent.
And her tears seem to solidify not only Ismena’s death, but the prospect of something graver, larger than even this. It’s what the family doesn’t talk about, or says only in whispers. How Exa overheard Tat talking to a nearby trader, about the food shortages in the north. About how he has seen peasants heading south, abandoning Tikal.
What no one wants to say: Ismena’s death foretells disaster. If Ismena, who was so kind and pure, who fit so seamlessly into her role to help this community, could die, could be punished by the gods, then so could anyone.
Ome wishes Mat wouldn’t cry, because he too would like to cry, but it doesn’t seem right. And so he holds himself stiffly. His buttocks aches, and so as he stands rigidly and doesn’t cry. Instead he glares at Exa. He has such anger and resentment toward her, this little girl who has bested him too many times. He hates that she blames him for Ismena’s death, because he too feels a tremendous guilt. The midwife merely told him that sometimes bad things happen, she assured him it was not his fault. And yet his wife is dead, his wife who was too good for him. Could the gods have known? Exa did.
Exa has no tears left in her and so she merely glares back at Ome because that is better than thinking of Ismena, the loss of her. Though Ismena is gone, to a higher and better existence up in the heavens, Exa misses her fiercely.
And so it is easier to blame Ome, to believe in his darkness, to warp her memory and to decide that he hit Ismena and caused all of this. It is easier to stare at him, to not flinch, even though with his black face, his slightly sharpened teeth, he scares her.
The Shaman chants, Tat continues to pound the drum.

Ome wishes Exa would break her gaze. He hates how something about her unearths a part of himself he despises. He knows he is a good man. But he is prideful and she destroys that. He hates how much he looks like Ismena.

The Shaman says his final prayer, and everyone joins, the words unraveling into a long, thrum, pulled deep from their throats. And then, when they must all turn their eyes to the body, Exa and Ome must break their stare. But Exa lingers still for a second longer. Ome bends to protocol first, and she takes one last look at him, his partially shaved head, his long hair gathered at the nape of his neck, before directing her eyes down to the stone. She smiles, despite, or perhaps because of, her sadness. She wins against him again.

The Shaman says the last words to lay Ismena’s body in peace. Exa imagines her body, a little crumpled and waxen from all that blood lost. They will have cleaned her the best they can. In her mouth are jade beads and some corn seed to keep her safe, protected, and nourished on her passage to the layers of heaven above. She wears a string of jade beads too, to mark her status, to provide her with any riches she may need.

Tat throws all his power into beating the drum, until the Shaman reaches his last note, and then he stops. Only the sound of the drum’s last beat ringing. Only the sound of the jungle, leaves rustling, the dry, empty throats of birds.

**What We Might Know**

The yaxché, the ceiba, the sacred tree, grows through all planes of the world and connects them, for there are many layers to this universe. Layers of everything, of heaven and hell, or whatever equivalent of these ideas that might exist.
The earth is the bridge between the lower world and the upper one. The ceiba reaches thirteen levels to the heavens where Hunab Ku, the supreme god, lives at the top. His energy creates and surrounds. He creates consciousness.

Every Maya city had a massive ceiba at its center, or near it, so they could be protected by the gods.

The ceiba reaches nine layers down to the underworld. This isn’t hell, a place of fire and punishment. It’s Xibalba, a cool, dark, damp, place. It’s a place where darkness goes so that it can transform and become light.

I find this comforting, this idea, that those who have wronged are not punished or exiled to fiery realms. Instead wrongness goes to Xibalba and resides there until it can become good, until it can be light. Though the Maya are so often thought of as violent and bloodthirsty, this sense of “heaven and hell” is so peaceful and calming.

II.

Two days after the funeral, Exa awakes early with the sun. The day before they received news of fights in the north, of El Mirador falling. It’s true El Mirador is a small city, almost just a nice village, but it is close to Tikal. They do not yet know who attacked it and why. Though they can guess: for food and water. Though resources are dwindling in Tikal, it is worse in the north, where the drought is more severe. Where they have planned less diligently.

She sneaks from her palapa and walks to the jungle’s edge. The world has this pink, dawn glow. Mist hangs heavy in the tree canopy. This time, with the sun only beginning to creep from the earth, with the air still and cloudy, is her favorite time. Like a dream. Any
moment when the sun hits the trees, the jungle will awake. It’s instant, a curling waving of noise. The howler monkeys’ whopping calls, so many birds twittering. What a change a little light can make.

Exa enters the jungle when it is still silent, so there is nothing but her quiet footsteps. This is a dangerous time, when the jaguar prowls. But she is close enough to the edge, where the trees clear, that she should be safe.

Then, a noise. Not quite a bird, but a high-pitched echo. Definitely not a jaguar, but neither is it any creature Exa knows. It comes from the west and she follows it. She balances her weight on the balls of her feet to mute their sound. How quiet the jungle is, with this tender noise piercing the sky.

As she walks the sound grows. She is good at tracking noise now. All that practice secretly hunting animals has attuned her ears. She walks and walks, until: Tat, collapsed around the base of a ceiba tree. A small one, not even half grown. Nothing like the massive ceiba in the center of the village that Tat governs. Tat hugs the ceiba, this tree that connects the layers of the world, dark Xibalba to this earth, to the stacked layers of heaven above, to where Ismena is.

The jungle awakes, a bloom of noise surrounding them, the sun breaking through the trees and conjuring the melded noise of monkeys, insects, too many birds to name.

Does she disturb him? Wrap her limbs around his body in an attempt to comfort, or allow him solitude? She is torn, because a piece of her wants to tell him that this is what marriage does. That this is the path she’ll soon be forced into, and look at how destructive this can be.

He knows.
She walks to him, allows her feet to tread loudly, but even then Tat doesn’t turn. Though his ears are attuned to any small noise in the jungle, he’s so far gone that he doesn’t hear her even when she wants him to. She walks in front of him.

*Exa,* he says, his voice so soft and hoarse the insects’ voices overpower it. She wraps her arms around him and together they kneel at the ceiba and tell Ismena that they love her.

As the sun climbs down the sky, as the birdcalls change, their tears pool out of them and they’re left with only a raw, hard numbness. This is an improvement, maybe. They must live through this process of sadness, this cycle, where grief swells and ebbs. But Tat’s mind is also on El Mirador, and on the potential fights that might follow its fall.

Tat rises and together, hand in hand, they walk home. The sky above is still bright and blue, or at least the edges that pierce between the heavy boughs of the canopy are. They walk past Ismena’s former palapa. They change course a little, walk farther west to put more space between their bodies and that palapa. Someone stirs inside, and it feels so much like Ismena, like it must be her, but of course it is only Ome. His head peaks from the leather flap. There is Ome, his heavy body walking toward them, with a slight limp.

*Exa, congratulations!* he says. And there’s that dark glint in his eyes again.

*What?* she asks, the question like a burst of surprised wind from her throat.

*On your blood,* Ome says. And dread whips through her and tenses every muscle inside. She knew he would get her back. He saw the way she had clutched her stomach the past days, he knew from his sisters, his mat, and Ismena what that might mean. So he went looking for evidence. She had soiled cloths under her withie. Ones she had not yet cleaned.

*I was helping your Mat inside and saw the cloth with blood by your withie.* He looks to Tat. *I thought you would already know.*
Is this true? Tat asks his daughter. She could say no, but the lie has run dry. Tat would know it was a lie now. Instead she watches Ome. A ghost of a grin sits about his mouth. He is still limping, still cannot sit. If she had a bow and arrow, she would shoot him again.

It is true. Though Tat knows what this must mean to her, he still lightens a little, happiness still pervades. He takes pleasure in watching his children grow. In seeing them inhabit their own skin. But the smile on his face is also part lie. After losing Ismena to childbirth, he fears losing Exa too.

Exa’s time is out. Mat’s lie was meant to buy her time to adjust and cope with her womanhood. And she had time, but it hasn’t been enough and now with Ismena’s death the weight of marriage is so much heavier. She runs from Tat and Ome, back to the jungle. She needs some solitude for now, needs to kneel at the ceiba again and perhaps, cry for herself.

Back at his palapa Ome laughs. He knows he should feel bad, but he hasn’t done anything wrong. He merely has pushed her back in her place.

Exa has always been so excited to come to Tikal, to visit the Temple of the Masks and allow its voice, at once sad, at once powerful, to fill her. But this time, she feels nothing but dread. Off the main acropolis so many young bodies gather, bodies like her own, who are only beginning to peak into adulthood. The girls all wear their red conch shells tied around their waists, a symbol of young innocence. The boys wear a white bead strung into their hair.

Kukulcan, the main priest, stands tall and decorated. He will be the elder, this ceremony it taking place off of his main residence, in the patio that extends from it. All these young, twittering bodies gather who think they are ready to descend into seriousness. Four other men, to represent the four Chacs also stand next to Kukulcan, and the main shaman.
The four Chacs, in the four cardinal directions, look so impressive and formidable to Exa. Except Chiccan, kind Black West Chac, who spots her instantly and smiles. She wishes it was Chiccan or Pacal that Ismena had married and not Ome. She is only glad of her relation to Ome because it connects her, though distantly with Chiccan, who feels to her like the beginnings, perhaps, of a brother. She loves Itzali, but he was always on the fringe of her childhood, always lurking somewhere out of sight. He let her be, let her breathe and she loves him for that. But if she had grown up with a man like Chiccan, perhaps she wouldn’t be here, waiting to be declared a woman so that she might marry and end up like Ismena. Married to a man not quite good enough for her. Married and then dead.

Before Exa arrived, Kukulcan and the four Chacs swept the patio and then covered the stone with woven mats and a bed of fresh leaves. Exa finds these leaves comforting, the bright green of them against all of Tikal’s orange and burnt yellow stone.

Exa stands in a line next to maybe six or eight other noble girls. She knows most of them by name, but she grew up too far from Tikal to know them well. There are five or six boys here too, and they stand opposite the girls.

This doesn’t feel right. Exa feels vulnerable and looked at. After all, she is on display, in this ceremony that says she is all grown, that she is eligible to be married.

The four Chacs begin covering each child’s head with a thin, white cloth. Chiccan reaches Exa and covers her head. He says nothing, but just seeing him makes Exa feel calmer. But as he drapes the cloth on her she feels his rough hands on her forehead and sees a flash of herself, her body on Tikal’s stone, heart wrenched from her chest.

She keeps her head lowered and focuses on her breathing, but this image has tensed her even more. Is this a vision? A foretelling of her future? Or a warning of what might happen if
she continues down this path toward marriage? She knows this ceremony isn't a marriage, but it is the first step towards it, and that thought terrifies her. She looks up, at all the parents, all wearing their finest embroidered clothes, while in the north, while the peasants around Tikal begin to starve, their bones growing close to their skin, forming marked ridges around their ribs.

The white cloth clouds Exa’s vision, so that all she sees are shadowed figures. Shapes that have lost all their details, great bursts of light.

Beyond her realm of vision, a shaman hands Kukulcan a jaguar femur bone, and the elder goes from child to child, tapping their forehead with it nine times. He reaches Exa, and she can feel him, his warm, smoky smelling breath, but still when he taps her she flinches, almost raises her arm to block the offense. But she regains composure, counts each tap, each time hurting a little more, though it isn’t hard. Then at nine, he lifts the cloth and she can see. The world seems too clear, too bright. She is left blinking.

The four Chacs carry gourds full of blessed water. They visit each child. Chiccan finds Exa once more, and dips his thumb and forefinger into the gourd, then presses his fingers to her forehead. With the press of his skin, she once more sees her body splayed on Tikal’s stone, once more can almost feel the ache of a chest emptied. She gasps, and when she stares into Chiccan’s face; his mouth his open too and there are goose bumps prickling his forearms.

Exa opens her mouth, is on the precipice of words, some warning, when Chiccan shakes his head, and so she falls silent. His shake of the head says, Not now. It says, Let us talk later.

Chiccan moves on to the girl beside Exa.

When the four Chacs are finished, the mats find their daughters, the tats their sons.
Each tat cuts the white bead from the son’s head. Exa’s Mat stands before her and begins to untie the red conch shell around Exa’s waist. All the other mats must dig their nails into the knot, but Exa’s unclips easily and Mat’s fingers almost lose ahold of it. Exa, Mat says in a whisper, and this utterance of her name is enough to make Exa understand that Mat knows how Exa would often untie the conch. It is expected that proper girls wear the conch shell at all times to symbolize their innocence and purity. But Exa found it jingled too much as she walked, so she undid it each time she hunted. The string grew smooth from her constant tying and untying, and so each time she knotted it, it grew a little less tight.

Exa gives her mother a half smile, tries to look innocent, but she suspects she cannot fool her mat. Indeed Mat laughs. Exa’s intransigence both amuses and worries her. It’s the light, easy way Exa seems to violate so many rules, that amuses her. It’s the potential consequences of such deviance that worries her.

She bends down to kiss Exa’s forehead. And now you are a woman, she says. She remembers saying these exact words to Ismena and then her belly tightens. The memories come and go. They lurk unexpected and then pounce. She is never ready to bear them.

The shaman lights tobacco pipes and passes it around first to Kukulcan, then the four Chacs, then the parents. Once the pipes have made the first circle, the newly turned adults can take a turn. The young men go first, inhale and try not to cough. This marks the end of the ceremony, and after the smokes is all inhaled, the remnants left to float up to the gods, they will head south toward the main acropolis to partake in food and drinks. Exa is looking forward to this the most, because she believes she will be able to talk to Chiccan. She hopes that perhaps he can tell her what her visions mean.

But before the tobacco smoke is even half gone, the figure of the King comes marching
toward them and there is instant silence. He wears his headdress of quetzal feathers and from this close he looks even more impressive than ever.

*Kukulcan,* he says. All of the nobles, the parents and newly-turned adults, kneel as the King walks past. Even Exa, who bends her body willingly, but perks up her ears.

Kukulcan begins to bow too, but the King, whose face is as fierce as fire, jerks his head and merely says, *I need you.* And then he turns and begins rushing the same way he came, and then stops suddenly, as if having forgotten himself. *I am sorry for interrupting. And a grand congratulations to all those who came of age,* he says. But the corner of his lips sag. But there are great, sooty rings under his eyes and his shoulders are taut and his neck aches.

And then they leave. The nobles stay kneeling until the King’s footsteps turn to silence, and then as one, they rise, crane their necks, eyes asking the questions their mouths cannot. *What is happening?* The King would never interfere with such a ceremony, would never allow himself to seem rushed. Not unless the circumstances were dire.

Exa looks toward Chiccan, but he is already walking off, not racing; he wouldn’t give himself away. The other three Chacs follow him. She looks to Tat, to all the men, and then the women. They are all perplexed, the joy drained out of them and left with only doubt.

Later they will learn that Calakmul captured the King’s brother, who was in the north for negotiations. The King had hoped to make a treaty with Calakmul, to avoid a war in these times when food was scarce. He wanted to focus on the dilemmas at home and not spiral his attention outwards.

But they have taken his brother. They have sent him a message to tell them their demands. They aren’t looking for a treaty; they only want food and access to one of Tikal’s northernmost cenotes, one that is still well supplied with water.
After the nobles have learned this, after the word spreads like fluttering insect wings, Exa, who is after all a woman now, walks to Tat, looks him straight in the eye and says, *Tell me what this means.* She thinks of these visions of her body being sacrificed. She thinks of Ismena and how easily she left them.

Tat bristles at the demand, but understands her urgency, her frustrating confusion. He too feels it. *I am no expert,* he says. *The King has talked to no one but Kukulcan and the high priesthood and leaders.* He puts a hand on Exa’s shoulder. *But soon, we might be sending men to fight.*

*A war?* Exa asks.

*Not officially, I do not think. But now we must prove our strength.*

She wishes she could talk to Chiccan.

Two days after her coming of age, Exa wakes before dawn. They are staying at the edge of Tikal with Tat’s brother, Muluc, but it is only she and Itzali in one palapa and his withie sits empty.

They will be here for a few more days, until Ismena’s second burial ceremony, and then they will return home. Exa misses it, where the jungle is thicker and the stone all but disappears. The stone only present in the roads that wind to Tikal and to the north where conflict rages.

She plans to try to find Chiccan today, to speak with him. She tried yesterday, but the inner heart of Tikal was like a swarming beehive, men rushing in and out, and she could not locate him. She isn’t allowed in the main acropolis outside of special ceremonies, and she
didn’t dare defy that custom with so many people around. In a time as fragile as this.

She feels sorry for the King. She can understand what it’s like to lose a sibling, but all that must be made harder when you are supposed to be strong and mighty. The King is meant to converse with the gods, to channel their power to earth. To have someone you love ripped from you, taken by mere men, must be a blow that rattles deeply.

She steps from the palapa and heads to the jungle. Her body is tight and tense, and listening to the jungle wake to the sun will calm her. So she walks the not-long distance to the jungle’s edge. It is thinner and somehow incomplete here compared with what she is used to, but it will have to do.

She sits and waits. She is beginning to unravel her plan. Since Ismena’s death she has been certain of one thing: she must not marry, cannot do it. Since those brief, but more solid flashes of her body, sacrificed, brought on by Chiccan’s touch at the ceremony, she has decided her best course of action is to try to enter the priesthood. Those flashes of her body, they must be visions, messages meant for her to unravel. She believes this to be true. Or is it merely hope?

So this is the plan. She only needs now to figure out how to implement it.

Today the sun crests over the canopy, the light warming from soft and dusty, to the warm heat of a dying flame. She sits on the stone, at the edge of her great city, eyes facing east. She holds her back straight, closes her eyes and focuses on her palms flat on her knees, on the gentle breeze. Then the not-quite stillness shifts all at once to a drumbeat of sound. The birds begin with their aching calls rising from the treetops, and then the insects crack their wings in constant, high-pitched buzz and the howlers, not to be outdone, empty their throats of their clattering calls.
As the noise fills her, she is rinsed, if only slightly, momentarily of her doubts, the rising tension that has taken home in her bones.

Exa.

She jerks, drawn from the peace behind her closed eyes, from the cacophony of the jungle awakening. Itzali sits down beside her. She has not seen him much lately. She realizes now, how little she knows about him and what goes on inside his head.

_I could not sleep_, Itzali says. His skin hangs under his eyes, bulging like the cepal pod. Itzali was always quiet, and Exa wonders if she mistook his silence for happiness.

_Nor I_, she says.

_How is being a woman?_ he asks. Somewhere a mot-mot bird makes its last calls. Exa knows the sound it makes when it dies—high-pitched and ululating, until it peters off and then, silence.

_I feel no different_, Exa says. _Did you?_

_No_. It is odd, because the coming-of-age ceremony signals a woman’s readiness for marriage, but men come of age years before they intend to marry. Itzali has been a man since before Ismena, but it is as if he is halfway between adulthood and childhood. Old enough that he must behave properly, but young enough that he may still live at home, until he takes a wife. Under normal circumstance he would enter into marriage negotiations soon.

He says, _Let us hunt_, and there’s an edge about him, in the way he is holding his mouth and spitting out his words. They pierce through that outer skin of jungle, where cleaved land meets trees. Itzali has his newer, larger bow, and Exa has his old one.

A lone howler monkey calls, the low guttural call gathering deep and then rising higher as it is expelled through the air. They walk, his footsteps echo louder than hers do, but he has
more grace to him than he once did.

_You have been practicing_, she says and gestures to the bow. It has been some time since they hunted together. He laughs and both Exa and he are surprised by how mean it sounds, as if it bubbled up cold from Xibalba and entering his hot body.

_Do not mock me_, he says, as he adjusts his quiver of arrows. _It is hard enough having a younger sister who is so good with a bow._

Exa pushes a tall fern from her way and squints as they enter a bare patch and the sun reigns down on them. She is surprised by Itzali. She has never thought he cared about such things. She is also angry, because she envies him and his position.

She says, _And yet today I am expected to behave, to make bad pots with the women, while Tikal is perhaps going into battle._

Itzali swears. _And today I must go hunting with my little sister because we need meat and I might not catch it on my own._ Sometimes Exa hunts and then hands the meat over to Itzali so that he might pretend he has caught it. He is no good at killing. Even when he has the courage for it, he hasn’t the aim. He has practiced, and gotten better, but he is far behind Tat and Exa.

A bird twitters in the jungles, one Exa doesn’t recognize, which troubles her. The jungle feels different, like it is changing. She does feel sorry for her brother, but there are larger worries on her mind.

Itzali needs to shift his mind away from such thoughts, so he keeps bending down and gathering various plants. He reaches for some ferns. _For broth_, he says, and collects some wide leafs as well. _Even if Tat’s crops fail_, he says, _there is a lot to eat in the jungle. If we had not cut down so much of it, there would be even more._
They walk a little farther. Though Itzali is more silent than he was in the past, it is still hard for Exa to concentrate with his crunching footsteps. The animals are hiding today. Or perhaps she is too focused on Itzali, with those bags slung under his eyes.

_What is wrong?_ she asks.

He bends to the ground and touches the soil there, but he does not pick up a plant. He merely stays like that, low to the ground and breathes out. _Tat is sending me to war_, he says.

And this is shocking enough to bring Exa down and so she squats too. This is shocking enough that when she tries to speak it comes only as a whisper.

_We are not at war_, she says.

_Not yet, but the King is angry_. He doesn’t look at Exa, only the ground, still soft and moist, still defying the drought. _Not long after Ismena’s second burial, I will leave with a contingent of men to the north._

Exa bites her tongue for as long as she can, but the silence, but Itzali’s sad, crouched form, but the animals hiding out of sight, bring her to words. Bring her back to full-blown panic. _But you are not a killer._

Itzali says nothing, does not even move.

_But you will die._

Itzali stands and turns from her. He wipes his eyes, but when he speaks his voice is steady. _It is my duty. Tat is too old to go. I must go in his place._

_What good will you be to Tikal if you are dead?_ Exa says.

Itzali laughs again, the same dark, cruel noise. Then he strings his bow and arrow, turns, for one brief moment the arrow pointed straight at Exa. And then he redirects, and shoots his arrow into a nearby tree. He was aiming at nothing, only he felt a panic in his arms, and he
had to do something.

*It is my duty*, he says and then storms off.

Exa returns with a single armadillos, caught only from luck. The poor creature wandered in front of her, and so she had to kill it. Though she had already given it up, there this creature was, offering up its body for her. Exa said, *Thank you*, as she shot it. The sound of the swift arrow shot still ringing in her ears as she walks.

When she returns to her Uncle Muluc’s palapa she offers Itzali the armadillo, but he turns his head, says nothing more than, *It is yours.*

*I am not preparing it*, Exa says, and abandons that dead body at her uncle’s palapa. Her heart is too heavy.

She ventures into the center of Tikal, in search now, not for Chiccan, but for Tat. She walks, every moment her heart seething, and her feet pound the hard stone of Tikal, until she hears Tat’s voice, sees his form parting ways from a group of other noble men.

*Tat*, she screams, not caring if anyone can hear her. He turns, his face pinched and displeased, as he walks toward her. *How dare you*, she screams as she comes straight up to him. He might be much taller than her, but she can still scream.

*Itzali told you*, he says, his voice soft and level, but cut too with a menacing rumble.

She lowers her voice, that rumble, and this closeness beginning to frighten her. She says, *You just lost a daughter, and now you are ready to lose a son?*

His face is impassive, like a statue, so stiff and stoic, he could be made of jade. *Do you think me so hardened?* he asks.

*Yes.* Exa says. *Is it mandatory that he go? Or did you volunteer him?*
The King needs his nobles’ support, Tat says.

A group of noblemen walk past them. They greet Tat and keep their eyes trained on Exa longer than necessary. She averts her gaze, as is customary, but then returns her gaze fiercely to Tat.

He says, This is not a conversation to have here.

In a whisper, Exa says, Itzali is no warrior. You did not have to volunteer him. Who would remember?

I would, Tat says, shouting now, his fist raised and for one wild moment Exa fears he will hit her. She shrinks back, but he doesn’t even notice. The gods would remember, he says and slams his fist into his open palm. There are eyes on them now, from all around the acropolis. Tat quiets his voice. They are displeased with us, Exa. Now more than ever we need to follow the old ways. He is shaking now and Exa has never seen him like this: small and frightened.

In this moment she does not like Tat. But it is worse, she pities him. Because he is writhing with fear just as she is. He has been scared since they lost Ismena, as if her dying were somehow a reflection of his goodness.

Tat changes all that guilt and sadness and desperation into hard anger. He is stubborn and he will not yield. Just as he would not yield when Exa warned him about Ome. Maybe Ismena would not be dead, if only Tat had seen his darkness.

But she saw it. And she sees Tat’s darkness too. Perhaps men are unused to fear, but Exa isn’t.

He says, We need to behave as community. You have never understood that. We do everything for the good of the whole. That is how we work.
Exa understands it now. As she sees herself up on that stone pedestal, her hands trying but failing to protect her heart, when she sees the man who will remove it from her body. Yes, she must think more of the community, because the cracks within them have already been forged. Because this: Tat standing here, Itzali at war, is only ensuring the cracks will stay. Tat is right, the gods are displeased. She has seen it. They must not continue the way they have.

Yes Tat, she says. We must all make our sacrifices. That masked voice clamors inside of her. If she just opens her mind to it, it fills her, like a sharp shiver. It gives her strength. She needs to talk to Chiccan. If only she could find him.
CHAPTER 8

I.

Exa’s days in Tikal pass slowly. Without the jungle she knows and craves as refuge, she is left wandering aimlessly through the city, in search of Chiccan, who seems to be nowhere. She refuses to speak to Tat, and Itzali isn’t around whenever she searches for him, and so she spends too much of her time with Mat.

When we return home, Mat says, we will begin talking to the atanzahab, begin finding you a match.

Exa thinks, No. She thinks of ways to escape this.

I want to talk to Chiccan, Exa says, knowing how strange this request could sound. Asking to see this man, who she is only very distantly related to, and only by marriage.

And sure enough, Mat arches her eyebrows, and doesn’t need to ask the question, Why?

Exa says, He is part of the priesthood, and I have a religious question for him. This after all, is the truth, or nearly. She needs to consult him about these visions.

Mat says, Tat asked him to perform the ritual for Ismena’s sacred burial. You will see him then.

Exa smiles, thanks Mat, and then excuses herself. She flees to the jungle, grabs Itzali’s old bow. She ventures deep enough so that she will not be seen and practices trying to meditate, to fall into that vision of her body dying. She wants to learn as much as she can about it before she asks Chiccan. She sits in silence, pictures the image of it, feels the heat and fear and pain that surround it.

She sits for a very long time. Her head aches, and her eyes cross and become blurry. A fist of pain forms in her chest, as she sees her own body, collapsing on stone, sees her own
beating heart.

But she can’t get past that image. Can’t see anything that might be enough to convince the priesthood of her ability to talk to the gods.

Her family gathers in the far northern acropolis, on Tikal’s outskirts, by the burial tomb of Tat’s family. Ismena’s body lies with the Tatuyes but here they will commemorate her with Tat’s family, the B’alams.

So here Exa stands, with Itzali, Tat, Mat, and Uncle Muluc and of course, Ome. She hasn’t seen him since he betrayed her and plunged her on this path toward womanhood. In truth, he has been avoiding her, because she brings out the worst in him, because in his sadness, he is afraid of what he might be pushed to. In truth, he has been trying to distract himself from sadness, he has been living with his uncle, a great warrior, who will soon be leading Itzali and other men into the north. Ome has been studying politics, warfare, anything he can to direct his mind away from Ismena and toward helping to save Tikal. He believes that if he can help his city, he can, in a way, begin to absolve himself from darkness.

And so the family stands, their faces once more painted black from pulverized coal and ember. Black-faced and sorrowful.

Mat holds the jade necklace Ismena wore when she married Ome. This is the item that Chiccan will bless, that they will bury here along with all of the other B’alam family history. Exa hates it; that this necklace, this symbol of the marriage that killed her, will become Ismena’s memory. It should have been one of Ismena’s pots, which embodies only her: her skill and power and beauty. One of her thin, finely decorated pots, perhaps even her first pot, which Exa has still kept through all of this time, would suit Ismena’s burial far better than
anything associated with Ome.

Mat kneels and holds the jade necklace outstretched, and they are all silent, all calling up memories of Ismena, trying to bring her back to them through vivid recollection. Everyone except Exa who is still too angry at Tat for volunteering Itzali, too angry at Ome for bringing this on, angry at herself for being so small and helpless. And she is angry too at the gods. So she stands and seethes as everyone else allows nostalgia to carry them through each moment. Mat remembers how she had been so fearful when Ismena was born. Afraid she would be born too small, or deformed, but how perfect she was. Tat remembers the joy of watching Ismena and Exa walk through the jungle, hand in hand, on Exa’s first foray to Tikal. When Exa poked Ismena’s ribs, how Ismena shouted, *Exa!*, half annoyed, half joyous. Ome remembers the first time they had sex, how wide her eyes were, how she thanked him for being so soft and gentle. He felt this tremendous surge of warmth in him as he hugged her afterward, as they kissed.

Chiccan burns incense in small pots. He places four, at each cardinal direction and he waits until the smoke burns thick and strong. He is dressed in full priesthood attire, a short feathered headdress, embroidered and beaded loincloth, body painted blue and black.

Chiccan takes the jade necklace from Mat and they make a circle around him, so that Exa and Ome stand across from one another. He carries a gourd, full of clean, sacred water and he plunges the necklace into it. Exa winces, the thought of something so dark and tainted mixing with good, clean water. Ome watches her wince and he grinds his teeth and makes fists, his fingers tight and threatening. He clenches and unclenches his hands, and his fingers tingle.

Chiccan removes the necklace from the hollowed gourd and holds it high in the air. He
motions to Tat and Mat who step forward, who kneel at Chiccan’s feet and chant their love, their final goodbye to Ismena.

*Be well,* Mat ends her chant. *We miss you.*

And then they each stands and kiss the jade necklace and then return to their spots in the small circle. Then Chiccan nods to Ome, and he comes to the center of the circle and kneels. Exa hates seeing him like this; it all feels like an act to her.

But to Ome it isn’t an act. His heart feels like a tender thing just waiting to split open and break. He feels as if he has been hollowed out and he is a shell of who he was with Ismena. She was Exa’s antithesis, and brought out the best in him. He didn’t always treat her the way she deserved, but she always forgave him and reminded him that *We all make mistakes.* He is very sorry about her death, and feels worse still that he did this to her. That the young daughter they created split Ismena open and resulted in all this sadness. And so when he opens his mouth to say goodbye to his wife, it is hard to find words that express the complexity of emotion. And so he says only, *I love you. I hope you are well.*

Exa watches Ome like a viper, and she hates him, because she wants to, because it feels safer and less severe than feeling small. And when she hears him say, *I love you,* she can’t help it, she isn’t even quite aware of the dark, soft laugh coming from her mouth. The laugh like Itzali’s that surprised both him and her. And like that laugh, hers surprises Ome even though it is soft, just above a whisper. His eyes are on her. And she has never seen them so dark. The other’s eyes flicker to her briefly, but then Ome resumes talking, and they try to forget this laugh. Try to convince themselves she was only fighting back tears.

But Ome cannot believe that she would laugh at him like this. He has always been shocked by her lack of respect. That a girl, no a woman now, could embarrass him so much
and on so many occasions. A woman who looks too much like his dead wife, who seems to
him a crude copy of Ismena, one wrong and wicked, but physically similar. The slanted eyes,
the rich, brown pupils.

_I miss you_, he says, his eyes still on Exa, as he stands, kisses the necklace and returns to
the circle.

And Exa? She knows she has crossed a line here. Perhaps this is her largest deviance,
because she did it accidentally and in public. Though the others will convince themselves
that they are unsure of what her noise was, Ome is convinced they all are secretly laughing at
him too. He will not be made a mockery of.

He hates this. He hates that Ismena is gone.

Chiccan takes the necklace and walks to the B’alam burial tomb. The door has already
been unsealed and opened. Deep within the tomb, underground, are the bodies, but closer to
the entrance is a small room, where the family’s tokens reside. It is on a small stone, where
Ismena’s name is written, that Chiccan places the necklace. He exits the tomb, closes the
door, and lights a fire on its hearth. And so the family watches the fire burn. Exa watches and
thinks dark things, and apologizes to her sister so high above for disrupting her ceremony.
She does feel badly. Ome watches and seethes. It takes all of his willpower not to bolt from
his spot and yell, to throw Exa against the stone floor until she can’t laugh anymore.

When the fire is out—the little fire shrinking and then finally winking from existence—the
ceremony is over, and slowly the family stands. Chiccan takes off his headdress and bows
his head. Tat shakes Ome’s hand, and then Mat embraces him in a hug. Exa removes herself,
walks to Chiccan and says with her head bowed, _I have a question for you. Might we talk?_
And Chiccan doesn’t know quite what to think and so says, _Yes, but I need some time to_
clean this area and finish laying your sister to rest. I will find you when I am done.

Exa bows her head even further and says, Thank you. It is a great honor. And then she leaves, Ome watching her body as she does. It’s easy, with her back turned, to envision her as Ismena. They have the same hips, the same long arms. He watches her walk north, her movements calm. He thinks he knows where she is going—where the stone touches the jungle, the clear edge of Tikal. He knows her better than she would like.

And so Ome takes his leave and he runs to that border just north of her uncle’s palapa. He takes a slightly longer path, so that he will not be seen, but he will confront her there on that edge, because he is raw and wild with sadness and because she needs to be put in her place. He has no plan. He moves now from impulse only.

Exa sits at the edge of the jungle, and it is calm and quiet here. This jungle is softer, less loud, than her own back home. Exa feels as if she is close to something, close to discovering what she needs to join the priesthood. First the loss of Ismena, and in just a few days Itzali will leave too. He might return. She still holds hope that he will stay safe, but his leaving has settled a darkness in her. She cannot take much more loss. She feels as if she is close to a tipping point, where she might be pushed in the direction she needs. She cranes her neck to the sky and says to the Gods, Help me.

And Ome has been watching her. This movement, these two words to the gods surprise him, because they remind him that Exa is fragile. That she, like anyone, is soft and unsure. In need of help. He watches her from behind, where he cannot see her face, where she looks so much like his dead wife.

This will stop, Ome says, the sound of his voice ratcheted high, so that his voice booms.
Exa jumps and turns around. As soon as she sees him she is on her feet, but she is small and he is large, and neither of them have any weapons.

*You do not frighten me,* she says, and he hates how even now she stands tall and proud and stares him straight in the eye.

*One day,* Ome says, *you will be punished for your impudence.*

*Is that a threat?* Exa says. Ome walks closer. Though there is still quite a space between the two, perhaps ten or twenty footsteps, he grows closer still. Exa doesn’t budge.

*Maybe,* Ome says. His chest heaves, he is almost out of breath as if he has just run a very far distance. *I will not tolerate you embarrassing me any longer,* he says. He balls his fists, holds himself straight and tall and takes another step closer to her. *This will stop,* he says.

And Exa is tired of being told what to do, being pushed around, for having to slowly watch the world crumble. She won’t do it. *No,* she says, not as loudly as Ome speaks, but solid and resolute. *No,* she says again.

*This will stop,* he says again, and he is close enough that she can smell him, raw and rank like old meat.

Exa is terrified, because she knows how small and vulnerable she is here in front of him, and she hates him. She is terrified because she put an arrow through this man’s ass, she has already descended to violence with him. But she doesn’t have her bow, only her small fists. But still she can’t let him win and refuses to back down.

*Make me,* she says.

And now Ome is all rage. He wants to shuttle his fist through her face, wants to run and stampede around her. His sadness for Ismena is nothing compared to his anger now. He tries
to contain it and master it. He fights against it as much as he can, each muscle taut and straining against the will to act.

Exa says, *How does it feel to be beaten and embarrassed by a young woman?*

*Apologize,* Ome says. *Stop this.*

*Make me.*

And this is the moment Ome breaks. When all of his restraint cracks, and he is all flesh and rage and impulse. He crosses the distance between them in a heartbeat. He throws his body at hers, and pins her to the dirt. His great barrel chest smashes against hers and whips the air out of her, so she is gasping, so shocked and surprised and unable to breathe that she just lies there. With one hand he grabs her small wrists and pins them above her.

*Stop it,* she says, the air beginning to return to her lungs. She has breath only for this short whisper. She is laid out and terrified, her heart a drum beating.

*Make me,* he howls, his face right up against her, his breath all over her. She cannot breathe with him on top of him. And though she tries to fight against his weight, he has her tightly.

*Stop it,* she says, these words desperate and pierced with tears.

And she looks so much like Ismena, and there is a need in Ome to process his sadness through violence, to release his rage like this. He holds her wrists tighter with one hand, while the other grabs her breasts and she cries, and that noise is so pure and horrible that he cannot stop. His hand runs down her body, lifts up the skirt of her huipil. And now she is screaming, her lungs full with air again, and she empties her throat and bellows, small and scared and desperate. His hand runs down her leg and he lowers his mouth to her ear and says, *Remember this.* He slams her wrists to the ground. *How does it feel to be beaten?* As
she screams his hand runs higher up her leg and stops just before it hits the topmost portion of her inner thigh.

_No, please_, Exa pants. Her face has lost all of its sharpness, and something about this vulnerability reminds him so much of Ismena, the Ismena he loved, that he stops, hesitates. He is not himself. He is not this sort of man, and the loathing that begins to writhe inside him is almost worse than any sadness or anger. He keeps her pinned to the ground as the moments pass, as he wonders how this will end. She breathes in and out in large gasps and she is crying and struggling beneath him. Never has she known the weight of helplessness quite like this. Never has she been pushed so close to the edge.

Ome would like to believe that he decided not to do it, decided that this was enough, when he hears footsteps pounding, when something hard slams into him and knocks him sideways, off of Exa. And someone is on top of him, he struggles for a moment, and Chiccan pins him down, presses one palm on each shoulder.

_What is this?_ Chiccan says. Ome pushes against Chiccan’s chest, knocks the man off of him, but Chiccan retaliates, pushes him over, Ome pushes back. They roll on the ground like that for a few moments, until Chiccan manages to stand, and so does Ome and they stare at each other until Ome lunges at Chiccan, trying to aim a punch, but Chiccan is too fast and darts out of the way. Ome feels wild and throbbing. He has no plan, only he cannot stomach being found out like this. He lunges for Chiccan again, but again Chiccan is too fast and moves left, and then leaps at Ome and knocks him to the ground.

*I am a high member of the priesthood*, Chiccan shouts. _You will respect me._

Ome gets to his feet, his heart thrashing, the force of it throbbing in his fingertips. But he takes a deep breath and grits his teeth and hates all of this. But he knows when he has
been beaten. He has been an idiot, but also he has forgotten his place. He remembers it now and bows his head. He does not move.

Not far off Exa sits up, but she is too shaky to stand. She hugs her legs to her chest and smooths her huipil over them.

*I repeat*, Chiccan says, *What is this?*

*I am sorry*, Ome says, his eyes still to the ground. *She attacked me. I was defending myself.*

And Chiccan laughs. Ome balls his fists; he will not be laughed at. He almost tries to strike Chiccan again, but he masters himself and does nothing.

*Ask her*, Ome says. And he hopes that she remembers that he lied to her family, to his, when she shot him in the ass. Hoping that she will remember if word spreads that her sister’s husband tried to rape her, that not only Ome will be disgraced, but Ismena, and the pure, truthful memory of her.

*Is Ome telling the truth?* Chiccan asks Exa, his voice soft.

She wants to say no, but she is too scared. She has realized how powerless she is and doesn’t want to put herself toward the path of vulnerability again. And so she says, *I provoked him*, which is not quite the same thing as saying she attacked him, but has the benefit of being a little true. Not that any amount of provocation would be sufficient to bend a good man, an ethical man, to such an act. But here she is, with one man she believes to be good, and another, who she knows now for certain, is not.

Chiccan is surprised. Not because he believes Exa, but because he hadn’t thought she would lie. He would so like to press this issue, but he knows better than to push. He will respect her decision to lie. He would so like to pummel Ome anyway, but he supposed he
should behave himself. He reminded Ome of his rank, just as he must remind himself of it.

And so he walks to Ome and whispers in his ear, *I am watching you*. And then walks to Exa and kneels beside her. She is shaking and she will not look at him.

*Can I do anything for you?*

*Do not say anything*, Exa says.

And though Chiccan hates this promise, he nods his head.

*May I go?* Exa says, and he nods again. So she stands, takes a deep breath and then runs as fast as she can into the jungle.

When she is out of sight, out of earshot, Chiccan curses. To Ome he says, *Leave.*

Ome does, his heart heavier than it has ever been. He feels dark, and awful, and tarnished. He is so sorry. He cannot believe himself. He vows never to act like this again, to become a better self. He promises he will never allow that darkness to consume him.

He makes the promise, but he will break it. And the consequences will be far worse than they are now.

Exa runs through the jungle, runs only north, because she doesn’t know this jungle well and doesn’t wish to get lost. Or does she? She cuts east and doesn’t stop until her body begs her, until she is gasping for air. And then she walks. She wishes she had her bow; it seems so foolish now to have entered the jungle without it. If she had her bow with Ome, this would have never happened.

She feels small and powerless and she hates it. Her body still shakes, still remembers how weak she was as she tried to fight against Ome and could barely move. He made her cower, tearful, sniveling, made her beg for him to stop. She hates that she turned into that,
that it was so easy for him to bring her to the ground and hold her there. She remembers how
it was only Chiccan pressing his status that made Ome stop.

Exa walks until she reaches one of the city’s ceremonial cenotes. It is one of the largest
remaining cenotes, but even it seems to have shrunk, the edges of the water drawing back,
but leaving a faint, darkened ring where the water once was.

Tikal has many of these ponds, some reserved for backup supply of water, others, like
this one, reserved for special bodies, special deaths.

Here, at the cenote, she allows herself to crumble. She vows this will be the last time
she cries over this incident. She will allow it this once, and then she will rinse it from her.

She howls for a long time.

In the pool the trees quiver, their reflections growing downward, the mighty trunks
extending into the earth. Bodies float in the water, face down, hovering, at least two of them,
all ghostly limbs and tousled hair. A girl and a boy, both young, both recent sacrifices to
Chacs, god of rain and crops. They need rain and crops. Exa needs the gods to guide her from
this helplessness.

She stands, wipes the tears from her, kicks off her sandals. She steps in the pool.

She doesn’t want to think of herself anymore, and so the dead bodies make her think of
Ismena. Though her death happened so many moon cycles ago, Exa keeps reliving it.
Sometimes she feels as if her death has not yet happened, she only knows it will. With every
blink of her eye she grows closer to her death. With every blink she gets further from it.

If Ismena were here, this would have never happened.

Exa crouches, her face so close to the water that the tip of her nose threatens to touch it.
Beneath the tangled and tousled limbs of the other bodies, there is a third body, a young
woman, she thinks. It’s hard to tell. The corpses are muddled, vaporous. Water magnifies everything. The bodies drift, distorted and large. They are giants in death.

The young woman reminds Exa of Ismena, a little of herself.

In the cenote, she studies the bodies, hovering, hair like thick spider webs. That third body, the woman who looks like Ismena, is perhaps the woman from the village who committed suicide not long ago. Just after Ismena’s burial, or perhaps it was just before.

It’s hard to tell who that muddled body was, but the height is right, the haircut, the length of the arms. Exa hopes it is the woman from the village, because at least then the death was an honorable one. Suicide reserves you a special place in heaven. Ixtab, the goddess of suicide, takes care of such arrangements.

Suicide. Another option to escape.

The sky is cloudless blue. The cenote reflects sky between tree branches. Bored blue sliced between tree limbs, between the limbs of the bodies. Exa wades farther into the water.

Now that Exa is a woman, now that she has learned her current helplessness, the urge to join the priesthood now becomes a desperate necessity. Not only for her, but for Tikal, for Itzali going to battle, for all the other men and women who are beginning to starve.

Are the gods really talking to her? She hopes so, because she needs them to be. Because Tikal does. Even the King’s own brother isn’t safe.

But how? She needs a push, something to solidify her visions. She hopes Itzali will know of something. She has to give this her all, or else she feels like she is being pushed under water and she’s not sure how long she can fight it.

*When in doubt, you can always kill yourself.* Mat used to say this and then laugh and say she was only joking. Only Exa doesn’t think it’s a joke. It’s a valid option. Drowning
works, but a noose is better.

But she doesn't want to die. She is stuck between these two extremes of wanting, of feeling so overwhelmed and so in love and hate with this world, that she laughs, overcome with this shaking panic and delight. She needs to overcome the shadowed memories of Ome’s hands on her. She needs to feel strong and useful.

She lifts the skirt of her loose, white huipil and steps farther into the small pool. Thigh-deep, her body still shaking, she urinates. This indiscretion calms her. She shouldn’t urinate here in this freshwater, especially because of the bodies, which are believed to be clean and sacred. Especially because they might need this water. They would never drink this ceremonial water though, unless truly desperate.

Exa wouldn’t want to drink water soaked with these bodies anyway. And so she doesn’t feel guilty. But as the urine empties out of her, she feels a little bit of her recklessness return to her.

For a moment, the consequences of getting caught are alluring as well. But then panic settles in. She stops urinating. Looks down at the bodies. She feels sorry for them.

She doesn’t like the idea of having your soul locked in a layer of heaven and your body perpetually floating in someone’s piss. But that’s also part of the draw, isn’t it? Of squatting here on there bodies. It’s the power.

And these bodies are dead. Chacs has already taken what he wants from them. She looks at the cloudless, dry sky. He’s taken, but it isn’t yet enough.

She wades out of the cenote and stands next to it. It’s so small. Her reflection shimmers among those empty bodies. Those ghostly limbs in a pond.
It takes her a long time to wind her way back to her Uncle’s palapa, but the walk is good and comforting. She needs this time for her thoughts to unwind, untangle, so she is left unknotted, and certain. When she breaks through the jungle’s perimeter, she walks straight to her uncle’s palapa and keeps her eyes peeled for Ome. He is nowhere. She retrieves her bow, slings it over her shoulder, and the weight of it lightens the panic settled like a fist in her stomach. She feels confident she could best Ome if she had her bow.

She searches for Itzali, and instead she finds Mat, who is behind Muluc’s palapa and is beginning to make a pot. It’s in the style Ismena favored, it is the way Mat is grieving. Her hands work the clay, expertly smoothing its outer surface, convincing the earth into a pleasing shape. Exa never could do this well. Mat looks up, takes in Exa: her partially wet huipil, the mud on her feet, the bow slung around her back, and assumes her daughter has not been grieving as gracefully. She doesn’t blame her—it seems unjust to sit here and quietly make pots rather than howling, stomping around, making a scene. But what purpose could such sadness achieve?

*Where is Itzali?* Exa asks.

*Are you alright?* Mat asks.

Yes, Exa says, her right hand rubbing against her shoulder, which aches from Ome’s rough hands. Her whole body does, especially her arms. *Do you know where he is?*

*He was talking to your tat, not far from the sixteenth King’s stellae.*

*Thank you,* Exa says and turns her back.

*You should not walk around Tikal with a bow. It is not proper for a lady,* Mat says.

Exa walks away, and doesn’t listen. She is long past proper. She heads south to find Itzali.
It isn’t difficult to find him, a welcomed gift. Not long after she sets out she find Itzali, alone, walking toward her. She runs to him and embraces him.

*What is wrong?* he asks, but she shakes her head. *I need your help.* She leads him to a quiet place, where there are no buildings and no one is around.

She says, *I am seeing things, I know they are from the gods. But I cannot see anything solid, only glimpses. I need something to help me focus. Something strong.*

And he nods. He understands what she means. A hallucinogen, a mushroom, to help paint the thoughts of the gods for her. He is honored she would come to him for help—that she thought him rebellious and strong enough to break the rules and help her locate one.

*It is dangerous,* he says. Use of such hallucinogens is reserved only for ceremonial purposes and then only for the right people: high nobles, the priesthood. It is likely he could find one in the jungle, he knows plants, knows what to look for, how to differentiate the lethal from the correct ones. He could guess how much she should take. But if he were caught?

*You are asking a lot,* he says to her.

*I know,* she says. *I am sorry. But I ask much less than what Tat already has.* What she doesn’t say: Tat didn’t ask, but demanded.

He nods his head, says, *I will try to find one tomorrow.*

*Thank you,* she says, her stomach leaping like a fish, a warm, tense anticipation hovering all about her.

He agrees not because of what Exa said, but because he knows she would do this unthinkingly for him. He agrees because in five days time he will leave to the north, where he will be in far more danger.
Does he do this because he has faith in Exa and believes she can speak to the gods?

**What We Don’t Know**

We must allow evidence to form conclusions, and not the reverse, a sort of inverted science, that will only lead to a false story. If anthropologists, storytellers, anyone who turns thought into language, has a certain narrative in mind, we might take the evidence and interpret it so that it fits that desired story.

Is that what storytellers do? Do we simply illuminate the connections, the cause and effect, or do we create them ourselves?

We can only speculate about whether or not the Ancient Maya used hallucinogens. It certainly is possible, many argue, likely. Hallucinogens, such as mushrooms: the Amanita mascara and Psilocybin, as well as toad venom, would have been available from the landscape.

The Dresden codex, one of the four surviving hieroglyphic books written by the Maya, shows four men falling through space. They have leaves on their body and some have interpreted these as symbolic mushrooms. That passage through space, that falling, is easily reminiscent of passing through hallucinogenic time. And there are images of men in dream-like states with a mushroom on their feet. Pottery is adorned with mushrooms, and mushroom stones, little sculptures of a man standing beneath a tall mushroom, have been found across Maya excavations. That art was made of these mushrooms suggests their importance. Because art is significant, this making of art, an important cultural ritual.

But there are other arguments. That these mushroom stones were pottery molds used to shape bowls. Mushrooms as sacred or as practical? Does one preclude the other?
How to interpret the symbolism of dead civilizations? There are no clear answers. Perhaps the only way is to follow a narrative, and like the four men of the Dresden codex, to simply jump, and to fall wildly, dreaming, through space.

II.

The next day, Itzali and Exa venture into the jungle, walk and walk until it grows thick and dense. It takes a very long time. They both carry their bows, though Itzali’s eyes are on the ground. Once they reach dense tree cover, he crouches, walks almost on hands and knees.

Exa keeps watch, for animals, for other people. Until they have the mushroom, there are in no danger. They are allowed to walk here. They have yet to do anything wrong.

They slow to a crawl. Itzali runs his hands through the dense fern cover, through the soil, tests it for moistness.

*Thank you,* Exa says.

*Do not thank me yet,* Itzali says. He peels back fern fronds, finds nothing. *And this keeps my mind off other things.*

*I wish I could go in your place,* Exa says, the thought only occurring to her now.

*If I did not love you, I would be offended by that,* he says.

It feels cool and wonderful here in the jungle, protected by the thick, humid shade. Exa’s skin has grown leathery, crisp, from being in direct sun in Tikal.

Itzali says, *Yesterday Ome volunteered to go with us. He will join his uncle to learn war tactics and to fight.*

Exa stops, tenses, holds her sharp arrowhead when Itzali says his name. *Ome is leaving with you?* she asks.
Yes, it is a relief to have someone I know to fight alongside, Itzali says.

Exa is unsure, because she wonders if Ome has other motives for leaving with her brother. Could he in a fit of guilt after yesterday, decided to sign up, to protect Itzali, to protect Tikal to atone for his guilt? Or does he have more sinister intentions?

She cannot know that it is the former, that Ome is brooding and hates that he let himself slip. That he cannot come to terms with the truth that he is the sort of man who is violent, who would take pleasure in knocking a woman down, in violating her. This is not the man he wants to be and so he needs to remove himself from Exa, needs to channel his dark violence into more productive areas.

Itzali has all but disappeared beneath some dense, green vegetation. Plants Exa doesn’t know the names of.

Any luck? Exa asks.

No, Itzali says, voice muffled by plants.

Exa turns in a circle, scans the area for movement. Nothing.

And then, Yes, Itzali says, and her heart lifts, her fingers shivery and excited and she dares to hope.

He crawls from the plants, stands, opens his palm to reveal a small, capped mushroom the color of dry, clean rock.

The flesh of the gods, he says.

What a perfect name, Exa thinks. This is exactly what I need.

Itzali puts the mushroom in his leather satchel and begins to retread the path they came. Exa says, Wait. Let me carry it. She stretches out her arm. Let it be on my head.

Itzali hesitates, his hand flickering, a ghost of a movement toward the satchel. He wants
to give the flesh of the gods to her, to relieve himself of the chance of being found out. But he doesn’t want to be the sort of man who allows his younger sister to endanger herself.

*Please,* Exa says. She could never forgive herself if Itzali were discovered, punished for doing her a favor. *Please.*

He wants to, but hates what that desire says about him. He is also touched by her persistence, touched that his assessment of her was correct. She would throw herself in danger for him. His hand is on the satchel, but he cannot move it.

He says, *No. I will carry it.*

Tikal is larger than his single person. If Exa can speak to the gods, this sacrifice is far worth it. He is happy to make it. Revision: not happy, but terrified, but still, he will bear it.

They arrive to Muluc’s palapa with no problem. Itzali stores the satchel beneath his withie. He breathes, the tension in his stomach dissipating and he feels good and whole and alive.

The day after, Itzali and Exa venture into the jungle, and try to find a clearing. It isn’t hard. So much of the jungle around has been cut and burned, the trees turning to thick, acrid smoke. When Exa sees the ashy clearings she covers her eyes. Sometimes it feels as if the burning limbs are her own. Even when she is home, where her family lives in the thick jungle, if she strays too far, she loses the jungle, to clear cut, dry, dirt paths or land for agriculture, like the plantations that Tat oversees.

His plantations where his workers whisper to the ground in the mornings to convince it to grow more maize. They lament Tat’s absence. It has been so long since they have seen him, though they know he is in Tikal, though the lead villager is overseeing the field in his
stead. Though in this dryness, there is nothing to oversee, nothing to do. The workers scoop handfuls of dry dirt into their palms and weep. But they do this only when they are alone. When it is just them and the gods.

Now, especially now, Exa needs to join the priesthood, so she can help Tikal, help herself. Now that she has lost Ismena, is losing Itzali, has lost something she cannot name in herself. When Ome held her down, as she fought helpless against him.

She believes she can speak to the gods. Believes she can convince the priesthood of it. She has to, because if she loses faith in that, she has nothing else.

*When in doubt you can always kill yourself.*

Her tough skin, her beating heart. She and Itzali sit in the clearing they come to.

Itzali brings with him the leather satchel, which still has the flesh of the gods. He puts the satchel down between them.

Exa brings with her a bundle of fresh cedar leaves and dried copal wood. She strikes two stones to create a spark to light the bundle. It smokes furiously. She sits, her legs crossed one over the other. She imagines a god above her pulling the thread of her spine, yanking it still and bone-straight. Itzali takes the smoking cedar and says, *Breathe* as he moves the cleansing smoke over Exa. The smoke will absorb any impurities both inside and outside her skin. The smoke will then rise toward the gods, the imperfections vanishing before they reach the gods.

When the smoke has exhausted itself from burning, Itzali extracts the mushroom, the teonancatl, the flesh of the gods. He takes only a piece of it and hands it to Exa. His hands shake, twittering like young, anxious birds. He worries that he chose the wrong mushroom, that this will do nothing, or else do something worse.
Exa doesn’t even hesitate, but merely takes the piece and chews it. She trusts him, she has to, because she is done with doubt. The mushroom tastes like earth with a sting. Itzali is quiet.

Exa sits and settles deep inside herself, plunges into that well of darkness to try to find the otherness that is there. Vibrations, of her lungs, on the expansion and contraction, her heart rattling her ribs, of her spine as she moves ever so slightly, of the air as the smoke slides through, pushes its peppery scent into nostrils. The whole world vibrating, the threads stretched taut and connecting all. She could pluck the threads like strings, which would ring, solid and pure. Maybe straight to the gods. Maybe straight through time.

The flesh of the gods opens her up, makes her suddenly aware of the wind on her skin, of Itzali’s fluttering breaths. Her skin feels tight and she sees it splitting open and revealing something dark and wonderful beneath.

Every color intensifies, the green of the trees in the distance so fierce she almost has to shield her eyes from it. She turns to the sky, and its blueness becomes her, fills every hollow of her body. Images begin lingering in her eye. The blue overlays on the trees in the distance, so the world looks underwater. She looks at her palm and when she looks up at Itzali, her palm floats above her face like a mask. Tikal. Its temples rise before her and she walks their steps. She climbs the highest temple, where only special priests can go to commune. She opens her throat and vibrates, her body loses itself, becomes smoke, fine tendrils entering gods’ nostrils.

She looks at Itzali, whose body distorts, shrinks then grows, hair lengthening and then vanishing. She looks to the trees, and Itzali is up there, but then he changes, he is someone else. No, he is many people all hiding, only their heads and bows and arrows protruding from
the canopy. There are arrows all around her, in her skin, her blood coming out and becoming a pool around her. She reaches into her chest, but it is hollow, her heart on the ground, quivering like a fish trying to find oxygen. Her hand becomes her heart and there are men in her trees. One wave, of obsidian-tipped arrows becomes snakes, becomes feathered. They begin to fly. And then another wave, these ones on fire. There are men below, men being pierced by arrows, being lit on fire and they scream. Maize fields surround them, catch fire and disappear and there is Tat with dry dirt in his hand.

Exa?

Her body is slick with sweat. Exa? The noise like an echo, exa, exa. Energy swelling inside her, the feeling of expelling fire from her fingers. There was so much flame and smoke. The copal smoke hot and sweet in her nose.

Exa?

She begins to pull out of it. The flesh of the gods releases her. Her heart beats like the war drums, its force pounding in her fingers. She sits up, her vision almost focused, the effects ebbing out of her.

We are going to be attacked, she says and Itzali’s eyes widen and he tries not to look afraid. But he is afraid, and it’s like acid inside him. Exa says, We will have two stands against our enemies but they will come in two and strike by air. She is struck by how quickly she made sense of these vivid, disconnected images, but once she says them, they sit and become solid and she believes them. By saying them, they become true.

Where? Itzali asks.

In the north, she says, knowing how this implicates him in all of this, how she has perhaps seen his death. She is perhaps used to seeing her own dead body, but seeing his is
different. Somehow more real and strange.

She steadies her body and tries to remember what she saw. But some of it is more feeling than vision. She remembers Tat with all that dirt in his hand. *Our defense in the north will fall, and they will try to come to Tikal.*
Exa has to wait until the sky begins to darken to talk to Tat. She worries she will see Ome, but he is off with his uncle, preparing to leave for battle in a few days. He is too ashamed to come close to Exa.

When Tat returns, she rushes to him and he says, *What is it?*

*I need to talk to the priesthood. I am seeing things, warnings from, I think the gods.* Tat bends down to reposition the wood in the fire pit in the middle of Muluc’s buildings. It is almost dark now and they will need fire soon.

*How long have you been seeing things?* he asks.

*For years. It started as blurs, brief flashes. Then I found if I closed my eyes and focused, I could dig deeper into it, solidify it.* She has been hiding for so long, keeping it close to her chest, that releasing it makes her feel off balance, light, but also heavier, like voicing it has made it more real.

*What did you see?* Tat asks.

She tells him.

Tat breaths out, the sound of it reminding her of the noise creatures make when they have been hit by an arrow. The air rushes out of them, their last exhale.

Exa wonders if using the flesh of the gods means she cheated, that none of it was real. But it is what the shamans use. It is only supposed to open your mind. It got her past seeing only herself, her body.

Tat strikes two stones to start the fire, to give him a moment to think. Does he believe his daughter has spoken with the gods? Yes, because he knows her and believes. Also his
desperation has opened him a little, made him more willing to believe what he wants. *That is vague,* he says. *I am not sure it will be enough for the priesthood.* The fire begins with a small crackle, only the smallest twig catching.

*I can do more,* she says. *When I focus on the dark inside of me I get this energy and I can shoot arrows farther and faster than any woman could.* She doesn’t mention how sometimes when she does this, she sees her own heart. She sees her body crumpled on the stone, bleeding.

This explains something he has been wondering for a long time. He has seen the way Ome looks at Exa, the way Emeta looks at her too. He wonders if they have witnessed this, because they look at her with something between reverence and fear. He has not noticed how Ome looks at her with hate. He doesn’t know the violence brewing beneath.

*It might be enough,* he says. The fire grows larger, a thick log catching, the flame dancing on its feathery bark.

*There is more news,* Tat says. *We know now the King’s brother has been sacrificed.*

To capture the King’s brother was offense enough, but to kill him is another matter entirely. *What does this mean?* Exa says.

*We are not sure,* Tat says. *It means Calakmul is desperate.*

He stokes the fire, allows its warmth to settle over them.

*It also means there might be more credence to your prophecy. There might be more attacks.*

She hates that the King’s misfortune might be her own. Her own emotions are muddled, too thoroughly entwined in each other for her to know exactly how she feels. Excitement and terror at the prospect of testing for the priesthood, scared for Tikal, for Itzali, for herself, and
so sad about Ismena, about the King’s brother.

*Our enemies are growing stronger and closer*, Tat says, his voice so low, Exa almost doesn’t hear it.

Like Exa, Tat is also in turmoil. He is thrilled for his daughter, he feels she might be finding her rightful place, but he is scared for his King. His brother’s death marks his own weakness. If he were closer to the gods, Tikal would be thriving.

Mat and Muluc’s wife, Kisa, come from the palapa and carry a plate full of uncooked tamales for steaming.

Tat says, *Exa and I will speak to the priesthood tomorrow.* Mat gives him that look and he knows she is displeased and he will pay for this displeasure later. But he does not wish to tell his wife what Exa saw. Mat once believed she was special too, believed she was destined for a life beyond a family, but such a path ended poorly. Mat comes from a long heritage of wild women, but Mat was unable to put her wildness to use.

But that isn’t correct either. She has used it for this family, and Tat could not be more thankful. Though he feels cracks forming elsewhere, his love for her, his faith in her, has not wavered. But still, he wishes to ask forgiveness, if Exa doesn’t get chosen. If Exa does get her heart broken.

He has so much fear within him.

*Please do not ask questions*, he says.

*I overheard you*, Mat says, because like Exa she has a fondness for eavesdropping. She ignores Tat putting his hand to his brow and his grimace. She turns instead to her daughter.

*What have you been seeing?* Tat’s raised hand encourages Exa to remain silent. He says, *We will let the priesthood decide. It is their right.*
Mat says, *We need to talk*, and he nods and joins her in the palapa. He is not up for a fight tonight, but if he must, he’ll muster the strength. He has no control over his dry fields, over the faceless forces that sacrificed the King’s brother. But this, he can control.

And Exa is left, already a little broken-hearted. She thought her parents would be happy for her. She has been chosen, even though it is not yet official until the priesthood declares.

She is left already feeling unsettled, like what she had wished will only lead to more pain.

She is left watching the fire grow larger, the water beginning to boil. When it is seething, bubbles fringing the top, she puts the tamales in. The fire is too hot. The water boils over, dousing some of the flame. For a moment, water vapor and smoke. But still the fire burns.

She is in the heart of Tikal, in the east plaza. She holds a bow and arrow. The tip of the Temples of the Masks lurks just in front of her, a small speck in the far distance.

The five leaders of the priesthood stand in front of her, Kukulcan, the main priest is at the center. And the leading priestesses stand behind her, all except Princess Mahaway, the leader of the priestesses, who stands with the other men. To the sides, are less important members, mostly men, mostly arranged by rank: older wiser, people in the front, the younger closer to the women. Exa recognizes no one, but Chiccan, Black West Chacs. He stands next to the five leaders, and though he tries to be stoic and professional, he cannot rid his face of a small smile. This young woman intrigues him. How just days before this she asked to talk to him, and instead he found her with Ome, witnessed her lying for the man. And now here she is claiming a connection to the gods.
Tat stands outside the circle, just to the right of the five leading men. As a noble and a chief of a small city state, he is regarded as important, though he is not a member of the priesthood, so he cannot stand in the circle.

The man directly in front of Exa asks, *Your Tat, Yochi B’alam, said the gods have sent you messages, have given you power?*

Exa stands straight so as to appear humble, but confident. *I can see things, call upon energy. Who else would it be from but the gods?* Tat told her there should be no personal certainty in such matters. She must let the priesthood determine what gifts she has, if any.

*Show us,* he says. Tat advised to start with the bow and arrow, to give them something indisputable and visible. He said it would help solidify the certainty of the prediction. Usually people are called to the priesthood by appearing in other members’ dreams or visions. Without this, she will only be able to petition once.

Exa says, *If I concentrate I can focus energy within me, energy I believe comes from the gods. To prove this, I would like to shoot against your best shooter. In both power and accuracy.*

The leader says, *Chiccan, you go.* And Chiccan bows and a servant retrieves a bow and arrow for him. Then he joins Exa in the circle.

And perhaps it isn’t Chiccan, but some stranger we have never met. A stranger to Exa too. That’s probably closer to the truth.

But sometimes the world has a way of circling us. Sometimes once an idea, a fear, a face, enters our minds, it never leaves. Like when you learn a new word, and suddenly you encounter it everywhere, in the book you’re reading, in the newspaper, on pamphlets blowing in the streets. And you could have sworn you had never seen that word before you learned it.
But you must have and simply forgotten.

Sometimes the world is like that.

Maybe Chiccan is Exa’s new word.

Maybe Exa is ours.

And so Chiccan, or the man who is not Chiccan, stands next to Exa. They both have bows, though Chiccan’s is larger. She bows her head.

*Please select a target, farther and more difficult than you think you can hit,* she asks him.

He has eyes like the quetzal, powerful and kind as they look at her, full of a new pity but also respect for her. He looks at her and then far into the distance. *The point of the temple,* he says, because he is curious about this young woman, and the Temple of the Masks. He is curious if she knows its story. But he sees no fear or recognition as he picks the target. Exa must not know her own history. She has been so focused on the future that she has forgotten to investigate the past.

But she will. Not now, but later. Because now she nods her head and keeps her face blank. The target is far: farther ever than she has tried to shoot. Her hand holding her bow shakes, but she steadies it.

*You first,* she says and he nods. He loads his arrow and aims, closing one eye and focusing on the target. He pulls back, his muscles stretching, readying to shoot as hard and as fast as he can, because anything less would be an insult, to his people, his beliefs, but most of all, to Exa. Because he believes in her, this young woman he wishes to know even more about.

It is a clear shot with nothing but long, empty space between him and the temple.
This is impossibly far, he says and then breathes in, holds his breath, and then shoots. His arrow whizzes through the air, so much faster than Ome’s arrow traveled the day Exa outshot him. Faster even than Tat’s arrows when he hunts.

But of course the temple is too far, the arrow loses speed, falls short, hits nothing but air.

Mark it, Chiccan says to the servant. And then in a whisper, so softly only Exa can hear it, please. The servant walks off. Now you, Chiccan says.

Exa feels a curious calm as she focuses on the target. She has spent so long in fits of anxiety, of steel-cold fear, and fiery hope. And here is her chance, possibly, her only chance, to do right for her community and for herself. The alternative? Being held down by Ome, screaming, and unable to move.

The voice from the Temple of the Masks whispers to her now, and she allows it to enter her, because there is strength in it. The same strength when she focuses inside herself and ventures to the elsewhere, to what she so hopes are the gods.

She focuses on the Temple, the voice, the inner darkness. She aims, holds the target deep in her mind’s eye and then closes her eyes.

Will you blindfold me? she asks Chiccan. He nods, and unwraps the fabric band on his arm and pulls it over her eyes. As he does this, she lowers her bow, though her arrow is loaded. He ties the knot, secure, but not tight, and when he is by her ear he whispers I believe, but so little noise leaves his lips that she doesn’t hear.

Chiccan takes a step from her as she raises her bow and aims again, this time without the aid of sight. He watches her small body—thin arms and short frame. But there is energy about her and fierceness as she pulls the arrow back, noticeably inhales and releases.
No, Chiccan says and laughs, deep and soft. Her arrow shoots with a precision and a speed unrivaled. Even the noise of it, as it rushes through the air is rougher, more impressive than Chiccan’s. Only good marksmen might notice, but all the priesthood are adept shooters.

The arrow is losing height, it’s not going to make it to the temple. But it’s close. It is much closer than Chiccan’s and he is a grown man, the best shot in the priesthood. And Exa’s arms are thin as spider webs.

Is this enough?

There is a noticeable intake of breath as her arrow finally vanishes from sight, and silence falls on the onlookers.

Exa, unsure of how to interpret this, unsure of the men, says Are you convinced? May I continue?

She has my attention, Chiccan says.

The leader says, Let us wait for Chiccan’s servant to return.

Her stomach drops. Chiccan turns and winks and then returns to his place beside the leaders and she is left alone in the middle of the circle, with only doubt for company. But certainly they saw how her arrow traveled farther. Anyone can see that should not be possible. She is young, barely a woman, and Chiccan is full grown and strong.

She feels woozy as time lengthens around her, as if time has stopped. Her breaths grow longer and slower, and it is almost as if she can feel her heartbeat slow, the blood settling in her body. That body emptied, as it falls to the stone, as blood empties out of it. She shakes her head, temporarily frees herself of this image.

The servant returns to the leaders and there is a moment of hushed conversation, murmuring, the men nodding their heads and looking up at Exa in surprise.
The leader speaks. *What is your prediction?*

Exa inhales, allowing her chest to fill until it hurts. *As I am yet unlearned in decoding messages from the gods, I could only gather generalizations. But I hope it is still helpful.* Tat advised to say something like this. *I saw two attacks, one right after the other. In the north, two of our armies will fall, and our defense will be left with nothing but smoke and death.*

*When?* the leader asks.

*I do not know. I think soon.*

*Is that all?* he asks.

*The attacks will come from the sky,* she says.

There is more murmuring. The leaders bend their heads together. They motion for Tat to join them. All of the eyes in the circle are on Exa. Behind her the priestesses whisper, their eyes flitting all over her body. They are so beautiful and strong. The voice from the Temple of the Masks thrums.

Exa tries to be patient and to wait, but she feels like she has to jump out of her skin.

*Please,* she thinks.

*Please,* Chiccan thinks, because he feels something about her.

*Please,* she thinks again.

The leader walks toward her, his gait slow and deliberate.

And perhaps now, is when Exa fails. Perhaps they tell her that this is not enough and she falls into marriage and is unhappy and small. Or perhaps they tell that she must wait, and if such an attack happens, then they will consider her again.

Or perhaps Exa can talk to the gods, perhaps what she saw really was foretelling, and the mushroom, the flesh of the gods, lived up to its name and connected her completely.
Perhaps Kukulcan, the main priest, walks and then stops, and then says, *Today we got word that two of our forces in the north were attacked by men hiding in the tree canopy. They overpowered us and took two of our northern trading posts.*

Exa had so much doubt before whether or not she was connected to the gods. But now she feels so close to them that she shivers and can hardly dare to believe it. Can she save Tikal? Or else help?

Tikal, the city that we know fell sometime around 900 AD. The city that we know was empty and collapsed far before Landa conquered other Maya civilizations, forced his way in. But in Exa, the hope returns that this is not their end.

Kukulcan says, *Welcome to the priesthood. We are honored to have you with us.*

She feels ghosts of every emotion she has ever felt.

It is like the moment when you awake from an awful or wonderful dream. How when you begin to surface back into your own life, you’re unsure of whether the dream has happened. Residual fear or joy still clings to you and you’re uncertain of your own past. The ramifications of your dream or not-dream on your future.

She feels her heart being ripped from her body, the crowd around her chanting, screaming or celebrating, she cannot tell. The gods: right there under the surface with her. She is growing confident that she is beginning to find her path.

After the ceremony, Princess Mahaway walks toward Exa and says, *You have impressed us. Are you ready to enter our folds?*

And Exa nods her head. *It is an honor and a weight to bear,* Exa says. The other priestesses surround her in a semi-circle. She is close to them, close enough to see the
wrinkles in a few. There are about twenty women.

Mahaway says, *Yes, the gods are heavy. Especially on a day like today.* She looks to the other women and smooths her huipil’s skirt. *Are you prepared to take on more weight?*

*Yes,* Exa says.

*The gods have proven it so,* Mahaway says. *We are ready to welcome you into the priesthood.*

Again, she has the feeling as if she has just come from a dream, and she isn’t yet sure if she is fully awake. There’s happiness, but also responsibility. Tikal is not preparing for a long, drawn out, full-scale war. No, what it needs to prepare for is something sneakier. Calakmul’s men have not yet attacked the city, did not come with brute strength. They came in secret and were looking for food. They killed the King’s brother to prove their desperation and their willingness to perform the extreme. This warfare will be subtle and will require divine guidance. They must believe harder and more completely than Calakmul and Tulum if they wish to be victorious.

Tat comes to Exa and Princess Mahaway before he leaves. He bows her head at her and says, *It is a pleasure to meet you.* He has had no direct interaction with any of the absolute royals, the King and his children. He feels humbled in her presence. Princess Mahaway greets him, and then leaves, to give him space with his daughter.

He kneels in front of Exa, takes her hand in his and says, *I am so proud that you are my daughter.* She bows her head, her heart large and happy, because here she is, she has arrived where she always wanted.

She had never thought the stakes would be so high: the King’s brother dead, Itzali leaving for war.
I must go, Tat says, because he needs to talk to the other nobles, to receive directions from the King about how Tikal will next proceed. He imagines he will have to call his villagers to war. Demand that all the eligible men join.

He says, I will return when I can. I will tell Mat that good news, and she will be very pleased.

It is surreal, being told that she is special, that the gods have chosen her to talk to and protect a city she loves. And somehow she is not as thrilled as she suspected. When she closes her eyes, she sees herself, her body up on a platform of the grand acropolis with the King, and with someone else besides her, she can’t make out who, and then tension and fear that knots in her stomach is something fierce. Far fiercer than she is.

She has such doubt. She keeps remembering how weak she was as she struggled against Ome. How she almost couldn’t breathe and no matter how hard she fought she couldn’t do anything. How screaming became her only option. How there was no escape.

Princess Mahaway returns beside Exa and asks, Are you ready?

Today the ceremony to initiate her into the priesthood is short. This is only the beginning, a ceremony to mark that she has begun to enter their folds. There will be other ceremonies, other steps, other ways she must prove herself.

Today the priestesses take Exa to their meditation temple, which is not far from the main acropolis. In the middle of the room stands a large clay basin that is filled with cool water. Exa must step in it, as others burn copal smoke and Princess Mahaway chants. Exa must enter the water, be cleansed, allow the water and the smoke to whisk away her impurities. Several priestesses shake gourds full of dry cacao husks and one blows a clay flute shaped like a toad. The low wail of it echoes off the walls and surrounds them in this
cocoon of noise and smoke.

Like when she came of age, she feels no different, but she feels confident that soon she will.
The following day, Itzali will leave from Tikal and from there he’ll join other forces that are heading toward Calakmul. There are already men in the north stationed to protect various trading posts.

Ome is leaving too, a relief. Exa keeps thinking she sees him from the corner of her eyes, although it always is someone else. Someone with the same hulking figure. She hasn’t seen him since he attacked her. He has been keeping his distance, though Exa doesn’t know his intentions. She would like to hope that now she is a priestess he wouldn’t dare hurt her again.

She has bruises ringed around each wrist. She covers them with thick, jade bracelets. As they move on her wrists they touch those tender bruises and sometimes she cannot help but wince. At night she still relives the memory of it. How fiercely he shook her.

The men leave early, when the sun has just risen. They carry leather packs and slaves follow them with more supplies. Exa watches this departure from the terrace of one of the many rooms where the priestesses sleep. She isn’t allowed on the ground, only the men are, but from up here she spots Itzali. She burns some copal wood for him, to wish him luck. She locates Pacal, Chiccan’s brother, too.

She does not try to locate Ome, and instead returns indoors and begins praying for the safe return of her brother.

After the sun finally rises and she has eaten some soft-cooked corn maize with the other lower priestesses for breakfast, Princess Mahaway approaches her.
They are outside, the sun striking their shoulders and skin slicking with sweat.

Mahaway says, *I will show you around until you learn your way here. You will have some freedom each day, but remember there are rules we must all follow.* Exa nods. *It is to my authority you must bend. Above me are the priests, but only the lead priest, Kukulcan, can contradict my authority.* She leads Exa to the north, to Temple III, but it is a long walk from the main acropolis. *The other priests might think they can tell you what to do,* she laughs, *but ignore them.*

She walks a little faster.

Mahaway says, *It is important to keep yourself pure, so that the gods may enter you more fully.* They begin to climb the slope that will lead them to Temple III. *You are not to leave the Tikal compound,* she says. *At least for one Haab year, this will be your full and complete home.*

Exa’s stomach twinges. She didn’t realize she wouldn’t be able to visit home. And it has been so long since she has been in the thick jungle. Still Mat and Tat can come here, will likely be spending more time in Tikal anyway. What she will miss most is the jungle. All the hot stone here feels powerful and wonderful, but also strange. She feels it doesn’t belong. She misses the soft spring of the jungle’s soil.

She walks around with Mahaway like that all day. The Princess takes Exa around Tikal, showing her its secrets. Where the priests meditate, where the priestesses meditate. Where Exa is allowed to go, where she is not.

She is allowed nearly free reign. There are certain areas like the north acropolis that are reserved for the Noble politicians, and a few areas where only the K’ul Ahua, the King and his closest council can go. A few of the priesthood areas are reserved only for the men. An
area in the southern acropolis is reserved only for the women. A place they go when the bleeding comes, so they can rest and meditate until the blood leaves. And of course the top of Temple IV, the Two-Headed Snake Temple, is reserved only for the highest rank of priests.

Princess Mahaway says, *Tomorrow is a ceremonial pitz game to send off the warriors and to predict if they will be victorious. You are required to attend in priestess attire, though you will only watch.*

Exa nods her head, and is glad that she needs only to watch. She has never attended a pitz game in Tikal. She is not quite sure what it entails.

The next morning she awakes at dawn with the other priestesses. They do not eat breakfast, but rather keep their stomachs clean and empty for the upcoming game. Instead they walk, single file, to a circular room, where they prepare themselves for the ceremony. Being with them, trying to copy their movements, feels strange to Exa, who has grown used to setting her own pace and doing things alone. It feels nice though, to feel good about following others, about being part of a large group she believes in. She is surrounded by all of these strong, unmarried women, and it feels to her such a blessing.

They cleanse their bodies first with water, and then smoke. Then they paint their skin blue. Exa doesn’t know the proper strokes, which glyphs to use, how to draw the gods, and so she merely watches. Nila, who joined the priestesses three seasons ago, paints Exa.

*I will show you,* she says, as she picks up a fine brush made of pulled rodent hairs. The paint is cool on Exa’s skin and brings goose bumps to her arms. It tingles, as Nila runs the paint up and down her arms.

*The most important god always goes just beneath this bone,* Nila says as she touches
Exa’s collarbone. She paints the glyph of Buluc Chabtan.

Nila says, *For this pitz game, the god of war and violence will best ensure our warriors victory.*

Exa nods, it makes sense. But what Nila doesn’t say is that Buluc Chabtan is also the god of sacrifice.

When Exa is properly blue, she waits for the paint to dry and then wraps herself with a blue and white embroidered huipil. She does as the other women do and braids her hair and places white conch shells and quetzal feathers in it. She feels powerful and beautiful.

_Are you ready?_ Nila says. *Follow me.* And so Exa does, and tries to walk with the same confidence as Nila. She walks with her hips thrust forward, a slink in her step, her back straight, chin up. A priestess needn’t lower her gaze. She almost bows for no one.

They gather at the edge of the main pitz court in the center of Tikal. People are already filing in the stands to watch the game. Exa cranes her neck but does not yet see her parents or her uncle.

Right now Itzali and Pacal and three-hundred other men march north.

Exa’s stomach growls. From hunger or from fear? Perhaps both.

People continue to pile into the stadium seats, the noise level rising with the sound of feet and conversation. Gourds full of balche pass from hand to hand, the alcohol making the men louder, and also more antsy. Many of the men are older, Tat’s age, too old to have joined the men to fight in the north. There are some noble women too, but more men than anything, either too young or too old to fight. Finally, the crowd settles a little, people stop filing in.

The King, the K’ul Ahau appears from a small room behind the seats and walks to the
middle of the court. His face is painted red and white and his headdress of bright blue and mango yellow mot-mot feathers towers on his head. The crowd is perfectly quiet. Exa loves that headdress, how its height impresses silence.

Princess Mahaway leads a small group, maybe six or seven priestesses to the middle of the court. Like Exa, their faces, shoulders, and arms are painted with looping blue. They move like jaguars, strong but lithe. She cannot wait to look like that. To fully benefit from the privileges acknowledged to her now. She will learn the stars better, learn more math, and more of their stories. She yearns for a life where she can help save Tikal by learning about the stars, by conversing with the gods. She thinks about which gods she would like to speak to most. And Ixtab, the goddess of childbirth, comes to mind, because of Ismena. Exa would like to know how Ismena is. Ixtab must have the most wonderful, sad stories.

The priestesses kneel in prayer to the gods, to Chacs for his rain, to Yumil Kaxob for his maize, to Kinich Ahau for his sun. And finally to the god of war; they plead for Tikal’s victory. Such beautiful and pure women pleading to such power. Perhaps even gods have their weaknesses.

They stop praying then stand and move off the field. The King shouts, And so we begin, and the players rush onto the field to a wave of applause.

Exa’s mind is on the gods and of Itzali when she feels a knife to her chest. She sees a fleeting flash of red. She looks down but is unharmed.

The red team will win, she says in a whisper to Nila, who turns to her.

You saw something?

Exa nods, and Nila bites her bottom lip, a habit from before she was a priestess. But the red team represents Calakmul and their victory.
Exa knows. She thinks of Itzali and hopes that her vision is wrong.

The players run to the center of the field. They wear only loincloths and their shoulders are painted with the team colors. Nine blue players, nine red. The whole team is on the field today.

The leader of the red team brings out the ball. This one is hollow, with a human skull inside. It is about the size of a dead, coiled armadillo. The red leader hits the ball with his elbow and the game begins.

The men in the crowd are all shouting and cheering. Balche makes the men grow louder, more wild. Exa finally spots Mat and Tat, to her far left. They both are silent and sober. Mat leans into Tat and says, Exa looks beautiful down there, and Tat nods distractedly, his mind pulled in too many directions. Worry for his son, his city, his fallow fields. Pride for his daughter. And Mat hesitates, wonders if she should speak these words, but they are past her lips before she has fully decided. The K’ul Ahau looks so tired. And Tat turns, seething that she would say this. But he doesn’t know what to say. Because he has seen it too. How the rings under the King’s eyes grow darker, how his eyes look red, as if he is drunk, too tired, or perhaps has just cried. Tat doesn’t know which option is worse.

I trust our King, our city, Tat says.

Mat nods, wrings her hands together. Of course, she says. She is glad her daughter is in the priesthood. She trusts Exa more than she does these men.

On the court, the red team dominates the ball. They bounce it from elbow to elbow, they almost score, but then the leader of the blue team hits the ball with his head. Before this, his head had been turned to Exa, so she hadn’t noticed who it is. But as he hits the ball, and winces a little from its heaviness, light catches the man’s face, and beneath all that paint is
Chiccan.

Of course. It has to be him: the man who appears everywhere in this story. Who is, after all, as important as Exa, our heroine, or perhaps she is our anti-hero, depending on which way you squint.

Of course now, as the leader of the blue team, Chiccan’s life is in danger. The stakes have been raised. Exa’s fear for him is difficult to contain. She tries to steady her hands. Tries not to look. Tries not to think of her vision, all the red that predicts the wrong team will win. And isn’t this the sort of dilemma times of stress, of war, put us into? If the blue team wins, Chiccan might be voted to die. If the red team wins, that predicts the victory of Calakmul, the potential death of Itzali and Chiccan’s brother. Both options provide doubt; the unthinkable might happen. And though Exa feels so guilty, she doesn’t want the blue team to win. Because Chiccan’s potential death is present here, this instant, whereas the others loom at some future date. It is small and unwise, but in this moment she chooses present happiness and future discontent.

Don’t we all?

The blue team takes the ball. A player kicks it to the air and it touches a hoop, and then bounces back. Red takes the ball and Exa’s stomach clenches. With the drought, the people’s restlessness mounting, the King’s tiredness, the leader of the winning team will likely be sentenced to death. The gods need blood. They must appease them.

This is the way of things. What Tikal has grown used to. A sacrifice so others may thrive. We’re all familiar with this, though it takes various forms.

The sun strikes down and turns Exa’s skin hot. Watching the game distresses her, and so she allows herself to fall into that other place. That other realm where she is always dying,
where she always sees herself: being, about to be, already sacrificed.

She assumes this is how it is, communing with the gods. To reach them, they must always remind you of your mortality. Humble you in their grand presence. Even now she cannot imagine it predicts her own future. Even now she cannot believe she is so fragile.

A red team member hits the ball with his knee and again it touches a hoop. It almost goes in.

Itzali walks north through the jungle. He tries to make small talk with the other men. There is nervous laughter, false boasting about their skill with a bow. Itzali does not boast, but instead says nothing about his own skills. Ome too is silent. He walks in the front with his uncle and he is still too angry at himself to be properly afraid or to brag with the other men.

In the court the spectators yell, a sound of stone-scraped enthusiasm. But beneath this, also anger, also fear. The fate of Tikal, in some small way, relies on this game. If red wins, as Exa predicted, it spells Tikal’s defeat. Perhaps only a small one, perhaps one large enough to kill her brother.

The sky above is dry blue, the crop remnants desiccate in their fields. In the north shadowed armies gather and prepare for something larger.

Chiccan tries to score again, but his ball is too low. His lips curve in a whispered curse. It is a strange thing to wish so strongly for a victory, even though it could spell his own demise. Is Tikal worth it?

He does not think of this, or anything, only the physicality of the game. If he focuses on that, then the world turns clean and simple. He allows the past and the future to fall from him and he lives in the present only. At least for this moment.
Exa admires him, but that reckless selflessness scares her too.

The red team picks up Chiccan’s rebounded ball. Two men bounce it between each other, one elbow spiking the ball high. They are close to a hoop. The shorter man hits it to the taller one, who takes a brief moment to aim. But a member of the red team intervenes. And then whap, the ball rises, arches through the hoop.

That is it: game over. Red team winning, just as Exa predicted. Also: Tikal’s defeat. Also: Chiccan lives. Also: maybe the other leader dies. Maybe Itzali, Chiccan’s brother, Pacal, maybe Ome. Would she be sad at Ome’s death? No, perhaps not.

You were right, Nila says to Exa. She envies her; she is young and already so skilled at discerning the future.

The crowd groans. The red team celebrates, but they are only pretending. On the inside they know what this means. There was talk of losing on purpose, but they couldn’t, because the gods would know. It would mean nothing. But they thought about it. Because the perception of the people matters now too.

The red leader’s brow creases at the stern base of his nose. His lips full around his mouth open in an O of shock. Oh, how he pretends to celebrate. He moves his arms up and down, but he cannot shake that look from his face. He cannot help but begin to see his own body heartless.

Is Tikal worth it?

The K’ul Ahau walks to the center of the court and clasps the red leader’s hand. The K’ul Ahau is pretending too, something he has grown too accustomed to lately. Lying tires him so. Our winner, he says, his voice a bellow that echoes around the court. His voice sounds like water, like the howler monkey’s whooping call. A sound that, like a scream,
evokes a memory of fear.


*People of Tikal,* the ruler says, *we must decide this man's fate.* The court, silent. *Do the gods need winning blood? Shall we give it to them?* He raises the man’s arm high into the air. The man grimaces, catches himself and then smiles, his thin, pointed teeth making him look all the more frightened.

*Can we participate?* Exa asks Nila.

*No, it is for the people to decide,* Nila says.

The crowd resounds with the word *yes.* Mat and Tat remain silent.

*A vote,* the ruler says. *Yes?* Most of the crowd raises their hands. Some raise two hands. K’ul Ahau turns and surveys his people and he is ashamed they have been moved so quickly to kill. He doesn’t want death, and believes strongly none of them do. But perhaps he is right. Perhaps this is what the gods need.

The red leader looks at the ground. He tells himself over and over, that his death will be honorable. That after life he will be rewarded. He believes this fully, but faced with his future, how could he not question it? Not wonder for a moment?

Chiccan, at the side of the court, shakes his head, his body half hidden in shadow from the court’s towering walls. That should be him. He has let Tikal and his people down.

*It is decided,* the ruler says. *At the next sunrise we shall give this man to the gods. We thank him for his winning sacrifice.*

Nila says to Exa, *What do you think? Are you ready to see a sacrifice up close?*

*I am happy and I am sad,* Exa says, because this comes closest to everything. And
within both emotions is a raging panic that grows in everyone in this city. They are too afraid to voice it yet, but the fear grows.

Princess Mahaway stands, and the priestesses follow her one by one. Exa is last. They exit the court into the now empty main acropolis. The other priestesses filter back home to rest. But Exa stays there for a very long time, the voice from the Temple of the Masks screaming at her.

The main acropolis is eerily still and empty.

And at its base, with that masked voice blaring in her ears, Exa crouches, crumples into a ball, so her thighs touch her forehead. She folds like a flower at night to protect itself from that dark, cooling temperature. She compresses herself more and more tightly until she loses track of time, and finally, she isn’t sure if she exists.

What We Might Know

The Maya looked to the sky and measured its stars—the movement of constellations, and so predicted the nature of the passing of time. With this knowledge they created a highly accurate calendar system, one that far surpassed any others at the time. This system was created of many components working together—a long count, a short count, the Haab, the Tzolkin, and the Calendar Round.

The Haab most closely resembles our understanding of time. A solar year made of 365 days. They divided this year into nineteen months, eighteen months with twenty days, one month, the Wayeb, made of five days. The Maya kept diligent time; certain ceremonies would always occur on the same day of the same month.

The Tzolkin also called the Chol Q’ij, comprises a series of twenty day glyphs matched
with the numbers one through thirteen, thus creating 260 unique days. Each day was marked by a certain god, or belief. Some days were lucky. Others were not. The Tzolkin marks nine cycles of the moon and the approximate gestation time for humans.

Their system of time, their sense of passing, was nuanced in a way that our Gregorian system is not. It was rooted in human biology, in the moon’s passing.

The Calendar Round—now often reprinted and sold as mementos for tourists to ancient Maya sites—stitches together both the Haab and the Tzolkin. This intermingling creates a distinct day for a cycle of fifty-two years. At fifty-two, the Maya believed a person attained wisdom and became an elder.

This is the short count system, nine cycles of the moon, a stay in the womb, what we think of as one year, as fifty-two. But the Long Count is what more recently has given the Ancient Maya so much fame.

For any event longer than fifty-two years, the long count measures time passing. It counts five cycles at a time and counts by twenties (not tens as we are so accustomed). The Long Count doesn’t exit in a realm separate from the short count, but rather it incorporates it, and counts up from the mythical creation date, August 11, 3114 BCE.

When the long count cycle completes, the Maya believes it foretells the bringing in of a new world, a new system. They believed the world made and re-made itself. Time cycling. Matter neither being created nor destroyed, but in constant change.

In modern times, the long count ended on December 21, 2012. We called it an apocalypse. Perhaps the Maya would have just seen it as change. They never marked the world’s end; that was our doing. An example of how we take, interpret wrongly, and remake. Use something for our own ends: a little excitement, the drama of an expected apocalypse.
And yet we know Tikal’s world will end. Perhaps the Maya would just see this as change.

Perhaps not.

II.

Exa wakes the following morning with a start, her heart fluttering like butterfly wings. It is silent around her, the sun not yet even up. It must have been a dream leaving her with this cloudy feeling of danger. A dream from the gods?

She rises, walks the short distance to the room where they usually pray and asks the gods to protect Itzali.

Today is the sacrifice of the red leader, the victor from the pitz game. She will not have to assist, but she will have to watch as a member of the priesthood. First she watches, and later she will help.

She is glad to help, happy that she can be useful, but still that nervous and cloudy ache in her stomach persists.

This time, when she and the other priestesses cover themselves with color, that brilliant morpho blue, Nila allows her to paint a few glyphs on her body. The boxy glyphs don’t have the elegance that some of the others have, but Exa is pleased. Thank you, she says to Nila, who shakes her head as if to say, It is nothing.

The priestesses and priests must arrive to the site of sacrifice far before anyone else. The men sweep the stone dais while the women bless the water and store it in intricately decorated clay pots. When the stone is swept, the priestesses pour the water over the site. Then comes the smoke. The ritual burning of a feather, this one from a quetzal, because the
man they will sacrifice is one of their own. He is family and so deserves the highest honor.

Exa mostly watches, mentally takes note. She wonders where Chiccan is. Not all the men are here, but most of them are.

She will learn later Chiccan is with the man to be sacrificed, a friend of his named Nadal. As the other leader of a team for the game, it is Chiccan’s duty to comfort his friend. He feels guilty. If Chiccan’s team had won, Nadal would not be sacrificed, Tikal would be victorious.

Nadal sits in a small holding room, with a nice withie and a small window, but he is still tied, with soft fabric, so that he cannot escape. He can move about the room, but no farther than the leather covering the door. Chiccan sits with him, mutters prayers of comfort and of duty.

_You are doing a great service for us_, Chiccan says and Nadal nods, but this does little to comfort the clench of his stomach. He is putting on a good face. He is calm and stoic. But this whole time he has been biting back a scream.

Chiccan has too. He is afraid if he loses his composure, once he opens his mouth he won’t stop howling. He should be used to this, but the sacrifices have increased. Never has he lost someone he is as close to as Nadal. At the start of the pitz game he knew one of them could have died. He only wishes it were him.

Or does he? Is part of his guilt wrapped up in the relief he feels that he will keep breathing after all of this?

_It is time_, Chiccan says finally and places a hand on his shoulder, which already feels so cold.
Exa stands on the dais, but in the back, out of the way. Here she will see everything, all the fine details, so that she can learn.

A crowd gathers in the main acropolis. Many of the same people who roared and jeered at the game, who lost themselves in balche and voted for this man’s death. They aren’t so sure of their decision now, as Nadal walks alongside Chiccan, as Nadal walks shackled, his hands and feet tied with rope, and Chiccan walks free and strong. Nadal is painted red, the color of his team, and wears the attire of the priesthood: the small headdress, the elaborately embroidered cloth. A jade spike pierces through his nose.

The crowd looks down. They understand the role they played here, and they do not like it, but they also know what their gods demand and respect this. Now that the gods have stopped delivering, that they haven’t seen rain in too long, they begin to wonder about these prices they must pay, keep paying. And for nothing in return.

No one likes this.

Kukulcan, the main priest, enters and stands tall and proud on the platform. He will remove the heart today. It is his job, because this is a ceremonial sacrifice. The king will not be in attendance. Normally, he would sit above them, on a higher platform of the temple, but the King has fallen ill. They have decided it is better for him to be absent than to appear in his current state—green and weak. His absence will be noticed, already has been among the people in the crowd, who begin to whisper. Who would never dare whisper as the person to be sacrificed walks through them. They wonder and speculate. Chiccan tries to ignore them.

When the talk has grown too loud to ignore, Kukulcan booms, Silence, and so quiet descends on them.

Exa tries not to fidget, but Kukulcan’s voice panics her. She hears her own heartbeat.
Or at least she thinks so. She feels a little displaced, like all of this is familiar somehow, and she isn’t quite sure where she is physically. She has heard the other priestesses talk of out-of-body experiences, but this doesn’t feel exactly like what they described. This just feels familiar somehow, as if she has been here already.

How elusive time is. How quick.

Nadal and Chiccan walk closer to the platform. They reach its steps and begin climbing. The steps that are so tall even after all these years of climbing them, their legs still burning as they stretch them and pull their bodies up. They both are sweating, the moisture pearling on their skin and then streaking down like tears on a cheek. When they reach the top, reach Kukulcan and the other priests and priestesses, Chiccan kneels and bows his head to Nadal. He says a silent prayer.

And then his job is done. Due to his closeness with Nadal, he will not be one of the Chacs who will hold a limb. Today he is just an observer, like Exa. They catch eyes only briefly before Chiccan takes his place with the other men and Exa loses sight of him.

Four men, who are unknown to Exa, step forward. They are painted Chac’s four cardinal colors, and they hold Nadal, one securing each limb. Nadal’s face is blank, his cheeks stiff and hallowed. He holds the inner skin of his cheeks between his teeth. It’s the only way he can keep his face steady. The Chacs spread his limbs, he feels that stretch of strained muscle. He bites the inside of his cheeks a little harder.

The priestesses chant, their voices like birds, echoing and gorgeous. Also, eerie, as if dredged up from stone, from a cave’s mouth. Some men from the priesthood pound drums, a simple, steady beat.

Kukulcan cleanses his obsidian dagger with smoke. He looks straight into Nadal’s eyes
and so communicates his apology, his thanks. Words aren’t necessary, could never convey
the multitudes of his thoughts. Kukulcan bows his head at Nadal, a great honor, but hardly a
comfort.

Kukulcan raises the dagger and its oily, glass-like surface glints in the too dry sun.
Nadal bites harder on the inside of his cheeks, so hard he can feel his skin giving way to
blood. The salt of it, sharp and powerful after a full day with no food. It is the last taste he
will remember. Kukulcan plunges the dagger down, and the pain is so overwhelming, that
even though he expects it, it sends him into shock. He tries to fight it, but his limbs will not
budge. He gasps, his lungs expanding just beneath where the wound opens and the blood
flows from him.

Exa watches all of this from behind. She doesn’t yet see the blood, though she can
smell it, coppery and distinct. Of course she has no concept of copper, or even metal, and so
the blood smells to her purely distinct. The iron in his blood purely his own, found nowhere
else in her natural world.

The priestesses chant beside Nadal. They light incense, cloud the air with sweet smoke.
She watches the way the muscles in his limbs tense, how he throws himself stiffly, and
fights against his tight holds. She is so sorry.

She feels culpable in his death, because she saw that flash of red. She wonders if her
visions predict the future, or else determine it. If she saw nothing, would this have happened?

She has begun to wonder what implications this has for her. Her body that she keeps
seeing, dead on this very stone. Or else dying. Or else moments from that final breath.

It is so much worse to watch sacrifice from this close. To hear all the sounds, the snap
of the ribcage, as Kukulcan pries the heart from its grasp. Right before his heart is ripped
from his body, he leans back, and she can just make out his eyes, and the pupils are so wide
his corneas have vanished, replaced by a desperate fire that burns there, that begs to be saved.
And then a noise like a tree bough snapping, and Kukulcan holds his heart. The fire in
Nadal’s eye cracks gone, his head lolls, empty.

A drip, drip of blood on the stone, which coincides with Exa’s heartbeat, with the blink
of her eyes.

Nila turns to her. *The first one is always the hardest.* But judging from the whiteness of
Nila’s face, it doesn’t get much easier.

Indeed, perhaps it gets harder, Chiccan thinks. The sacrifices of those he knew, who he
perhaps loved, remind him only of all the sacrifices of strangers he has helped with. of this as
an honor, when the smell and pain of it is so close.

When the blood stops draining from Nadal’s body, the priesthood takes their leave.
Those who helped directly remain behind, to properly dispose of the body. To clean the stone,
with the little water they have.
I.

After the sacrifice, life settles for Exa in Tikal. Time stretches and she fills her mind with knowledge of Tikal’s rules, its history, of math, and the stars. Mat and Tat return to their palapa. There is no further news of attacks in the north. They have been offered, at least for now, some relief.

What Exa likes best about Tikal is how easy it is to overhear news. Everything is common knowledge here, and the range of her information expands easily.

The King, the K’ul Ahau, is sick, but recovering. No one knows what befell his body, but the priesthood hopes his sickness has been hidden from the peasants. They hope their cures have saved him.

Nila says, *I hear K’ul Ahau considers making a truce with Calakmul.* She has nervous eyes that move everywhere as she speaks. *A strange thing to do. When I meditate I see fire. We need to fight our enemies,* she says, her voice lilting up at the end, as if this were a question.

*An truce will seem like a weakness on our part,* Exa says, *especially after they killed his brother. But I think it is the smart choice.* She is thinking of Itzali and his safety.

*You are soft-hearted,* Nila says.

*I cannot vilify men for needing food,* Exa says. *With our own scarce resources it seems unwise to waste resources on war.*

Mahaway bends over them and says, *It would be unwise for K’ul Ahau to seem weak at this point.* Exa hadn’t even seen her. She is quiet as a jaguar. *There are complexities here that neither you nor I can understand,* she says and her eyes are sharp but kind. *Do not believe all*
that you hear. She walks off and carries her breakfast, a corn tamale, with her.

Mahaway is right. Exa realizes there is so much she doesn’t know.

Life here is much better than it was when Exa feared marriage. But better is not perfect and still she feels off balance. Here she is with her dream, the path laid out for her by the gods, and still restlessness settles within her.

The knowledge of the stars, of Tikal’s history, is pure and a comfort for her. But when Exa looks around all of Tikal and sees nothing but stone, she wonders why there is no jungle here. When she learns more about agriculture, she laments the plants they burned to clear the fields. She suddenly becomes aware of how much stone there is. How little jungle.

As a child, she knew Tat would burn patches of land for his fields, but now as she thinks of every farm burning this land, she pictures the whole jungle on fire. When she walked in the jungle as a child she saw how the trees held water. How the roots clutched tightly to the soil. But here in Tikal it is dry and crispy. Even through the drought, the jungle has a moistness to it.

There was a light rain, just once, in the three weeks Exa has been here. It came early in the morning, before most were up. She couldn’t sleep. When the pit patter began, she raced out of her domicile and onto the open stone of the courtyard. She pointed her face to the sky and allowed the rain to fall on her skin. Then she scrambled up the steps of the priestess’ domicile, a small pyramid but with a flat top, and she watched the rain from there. The Temple of the Masks, just a speck in the distance, turned from its bright painted orange, to a burnt umber, as the rain coated it, as the sky grew darker.

The water rushed along the stone. It followed the slopes so that it channeled into their
canals, where it would flow to certain cenotes or flow to nearby villages. The water picked up dirt as it did. It flowed so quickly, like a serpent in pursuit. In the jungle, the water flowed like a slug, the soil absorbed part of it, so it was captured and kept safe. Here it flew elsewhere, as if it wanted nothing to do with this place.

By the time the morning meal began, it was over. As they ate, they rejoiced. A priest said that this foretold good news. That the gods were shining on Tikal again. *We will advise for fewer sacrifices*, he says, with seriousness. They all understand the weight of death. There have been too many sacrifices for everyone’s tastes. But the food is vanishing. The crops are dry. What else is K’ul Ahau to do?

By the time they are done eating, the sun burns brightly. The ground is already dry.

There must be something else.

Without the jungle, Exa begins to lose focus. She tries to meditate, but all she sees are trees, familiar ones from the jungle around her home. She hears howlers and quetzals, though there are none here. No creatures, only people. She wants nothing more than to follow Mahaway’s rules, but she is no good at it. She needs the jungle, an escape from the heavy scent of people and the thick sun. The jungle opens her connection to the gods, to herself, and allows her to better help Tikal.

And so, in the dark of night, she begins sneaking out of the city. She must walk far to the jungle, and so these visits begin to replace most of her sleep. She visits the jungle most nights, though sometimes she must stay in her withie, because tiredness sweeps over her and her bones ache. Dark circles develop beneath her eyes, but she feels strong and whole with this secret life.
Sometimes, on her occasional day off, she wanders the city, walks to the very edges and then flees to the jungle when it is still light.

Today is her day off, and she plans once more to return to the jungle. She leaves after breakfast. Nila follows her. *I was going to make some pots today. Do you want to join me?* She has thick palms but slim fingers and makes excellent pots.

*I cannot make pots*, Exa says. She likes Nila, but finds her a little obtuse. Why would Exa want to make pots when there is so much else to do? When Tikal is crumbling and she feels this duty to help it, to keep it standing. *And I feel like meditating, I am going to try to find a quiet place.*

Exa walks to the western edge of the city. The jungle begins to encroach upon the stone at this edge, so it is easier to slip from the city and wander in the jungle. The jungle is thinner here as well, which makes her feel a little safer. Jaguars like thick, dense jungle. She has hidden a small bow behind a thick cedar tree.

She passes the Two-Headed Serpent Temple. She cannot see the Temple of the Masks here, though the woman still whispers to her. Here in Tikal, her voice is a constantly rings, one note, a sad quivering shout.

It is usually quiet here at the western edge. Sometimes men use this acropolis for small meetings, usually about trade and usually with small political men from other, smaller cities. Since Exa has arrived, she has never seen anyone meet here. It feels like Tikal is shrinking. Though slaves keep building the temples higher, soon, they will stop, their bodies too desperate to continue. For now, they keep building.

Though the western acropolis, like always, is empty, Exa feels watched, like when she
is hunting and an animal is close. She turns, a full circle, but sees no one. She thinks of Ome who surprised her and attacked her, and the panic of that rages deep within her, so that suddenly it is hard, almost impossible to breathe. But now she is a priestess and she has power. Now she is close to her bow. She calms, little by little.

She takes a few steps, makes her footsteps light, like when she hunts. She hears nothing. Still that feeling at the nape of her neck. A tingle, like her feet feel sometimes where she crouches and waits for an animal too long. When she rises both feet tingle like thread-needles pierced through her skin. A lack of blood flow, her heart not strong enough to pump it to her feet.

She walks a little farther. She is still well within the city limits, so she has not yet broken any rules. But she is scared. There is no reason for anyone to hide themselves from her, unless they’re an enemy or they are following her, because they are suspicious. She has been so careful to hide her walks in the jungle.

She looks to the sky, pretends she has nothing planned here, that she is looking for a spot to meditate. She’s scared it’s Ome. She remembers the heaviness of his body on her, the horrible leathery grate of his hands. Ome is gone, she reminds herself.

She walks again and hears the softest set of footsteps. Exa doesn’t think Tikal’s largest concern lies outside its walls in other cities. It’s here. Distrust of the people, who like Ome, can hide darkness well. K’ul Ahau failing to protect his people. This lack of rain that will be their downfall.

There is someone following her, but of course it isn’t Ome. Ome has never learned to walk that softly. And anyway he is far away with Itzali in battle. Sometimes logic evades her.

The person following her is a skilled hunter. She continues to walk toward the edge.
She walks faster, toward her bow. She wants to be close to it in case it comes to that.

It won’t.

She throws her head left and right. She walks between structures. There are so many places to hide here, so many shadows. She is two steps from the end of the stone, where it fades and turns to dry dirt. Her bow is close, at the edge of the jungle. After that, the jungle thickens. She stops walking but doesn’t yet turn around.

Who is there? she asks, her voice echoing off the stone. For a moment silence. For a moment, she is all taut muscle and panic. How familiar that sensation has become to her.

And then, You heard me? A familiar voice, though she doesn’t immediately place it. She turns and there is Chiccan walking behind a stellae of some ruler whose glyph Exa doesn’t recognize.

You are following me? she says, trying not to sound too scared or guilty.

I wanted to see if I could. He has an impish grin. He says, I knew you were a good shot with a bow, but I was curious if you possessed other skills needed for hunting. He runs his hand down his thighs to flatten the cloth that covers his lower body. The fabric is blue as the sky and embroidered with black Chacs on it. Exa too is wearing a blue huipil, an honor now that she is a member of the priesthood. She says nothing, and the silence hangs thickly between them. She is still unsure of his intentions.

Where were you going? he asks.

She stiffens. I wanted to see how far to the outskirts I could drag you, she says, hoping this doesn’t come across as disrespectful. But Chiccan doesn’t seem like the type of person who cares much about formalities. He behaves when he needs to, but he has rough edges too.

Oh? he says and takes a step closer. He smells like incense, smoky and spicy. When did
you hear me? he asks.

Back by Temple IV, she says, though this is a lie. She only heard his footsteps in this acropolis, though she suspected someone’s presence sooner. She wishes to impress him. He intrigues her, in a way few people ever have. And she feels vulnerable with him. She suspects he knows what Ome was doing to her, was trying to do, when Chiccan saw them. This makes her feel small and inconsequential. Ome saw her as a small, weak thing, to be played with. But she isn’t. She has proved this now. Hasn’t she?

I heard you tell Nila that you wanted a place to meditate, he says.

Are you eavesdropping on me? she says and feels less panicked now. He is being too light-hearted to have dark intentions. He sees how nervous he is making her, and is trying to read her, to learn her true character. He has thought for some time, that she is like him. That they both are struggling.

He says, You know as well as I how hard it is not to hear things sometimes. He walks a little closer still. I am sorry. I did not mean to intrude.

Thank you, she says. She itches to have a bow and arrow in hand, though it isn’t because she feels threatened by Chiccan. It’s the memory of Ome and his body that makes her nervous.

He says, But you are lying to me. And Exa stiffens again, almost goes to grab her bow. Almost, but she doesn’t. Maybe she misread Chiccan, but maybe not.

You are here to hunt, he says. Exa laughs, or tries to, but it sounds like a baby bird. Or at least to explore the jungle, he says.

I am not allowed to leave Tikal, Exa says.

And yet, he says. He grins, as if he still means well. He walks to Tikal’s edge and
begins looking at the bases of trees. For a moment, Exa considers running, deep into the jungle and never coming back.

But then, her bow and arrow is in his hand.

_I wonder whose this is_, he says. His smile turns dark when he realizes how tense she is, when he recognizes that trapped deer look in her eyes. _Do not worry_, he says. _I am sorry._

Exa still worries. _How did you know?_ she asks, and immediately regrets it, because this is as good as a confession.

He laughs. He has a kind face when he does this and it reminds her of the way Ismena would laugh when she was young.

_Because I do something similar_, he says and walks a little to his left and ducks behind another tree. He withdraws a bow. An old one, beat up, with a large scratch down its side. Nothing like the sleek bow he used when he shot against her in front of the priesthood.

_Of course I am allowed to leave the city_, he says. _Do not worry_, he says again, when her mouth opens to talk. _I understand_, he says. _I grew up in the jungle too. When I am supposed to be meditating I walk through the jungle. Sometimes I hunt. It clears my mind more than anything._

_There is so much stone here_, Exa says as the panic begins to leave her.

_Perhaps too much_, he says. _We build and build, trying to show Tikal’s prestige and wealth. Trying to prove we are the most important. But it is all human. Why would the gods care about stone?_

He hands Exa her bow and asks, _Do you want to hunt with me? It would be an honor._

He is very close to her now, so close she can see herself in the black slit of his pupils. _I should not leave Tikal_, she says, because she is still afraid he will report her. Because she is
still afraid of being alone, this close to another man. But she trusts Chiccan and knows he is nothing like Ome. He is in fact Ome’s opposite, his inverse image in every way. Kind and playful, with nothing to prove. Genuine, unmasked.

If she were caught doing something forbidden, the consequences would be dire. She would be banished from the priesthood, be disgraced, shame her family name. In these unsure times, maybe worse. Disobeying would be an insult to the gods.

*Listen*, Chiccan says and takes her hands. He sits and she sits with him, the hot stone touching her bare skin where her huipil skirt has folded upward on her thigh. The stone, like a hot thumb, pressing. Chiccan says, *What feels right to you? Where do you feel closest to the gods?*

*Among the trees*, she says.

*Exactly*, he says. *Now more than ever Tikal needs us to listen to our bodies, to the jungle, to follow what we think is right.*

*What do you know?* Exa says. A test, to see what he will tell her. Also, to see what he knows.

*People are leaving the city*, he says. Her hand grips the upper limb of her bow. He grips the lower limb. The bows form a circle between them.

He says, *People see the King as weak. Calakmul does too. Their move to kill the King’s brother was meant to test his fortitude.*

*And?* Exa says.

*In their eyes he has proven himself vulnerable.* He loosens his grip of the bow and then allows her to have it. It drops to her side.

*Will you hunt with me?* he asks. And still she hesitates and so he says, *Sometimes rules*
do not make sense for everyone. The sun burns hot between them. We must be kind and careful and good. We must also follow our instincts. He stands, breaking the circle. He doesn’t look back but strides to the jungle, his feet silent, almost.

She follows him, of course she does. Those words could be her own.

Of course she follows him, because this is the beginning, where she feels like her life runs its own course, that she is only a passenger. Perhaps she has always felt that way. Perhaps everyone feels like this.

It is peculiar walking through this jungle, her bow only half raised, with someone so respected in the priesthood. This should feel taboo to Exa, but instead it feels comfortable, like the way walking in the jungle with Tat felt when she was smaller. Only a little different too. Like her skin is a little more sensitive to everything, like there’s a small, quiet heat inside of her. Just walking is nice. She doesn’t really want to hunt or kill a creature, because how would she eat it?

There are fewer creatures here than at home, she says.

Chiccan nods. The animals do not come near the city, he says. I think they are scared of it. It makes me wonder if we should be too.

After this they walk in silence, both of their footsteps muffled by the soft earth. The jungle is unusually quiet. Exa has grown used to the sounds of night, when the jungle’s real noise comes alive.

There is a beautiful ceiba, just north of here, Exa says. Do you know it?

Chiccan thinks, his eyes squinting. He has a beautifully flat forehead and a strong, angular nose. He looks like the men do on the carvings of the temples.
Is it large? he asks.

No, small. Not yet too old.

No I have never seen it. He follows her to it. They walk until the sun begins to slant through the thin layers of the canopy. It’s so much warmer here than in the jungle Exa is used to. She feels a little dizzy, the same groundlessness when the gods are inside her, when she sees herself losing all that blood.

They walk to the small ceiba. Exa has learned about these trees, how to tell their ages from their height and girth. The tree is about her age, about eighteen Haab years.

She sees glimpses, first soft light, then strange shapes from that other life, from the gods. The K’ul Ahau is close to her and his mouth forms the sort of grin that comes from deep regret. His teeth are as sharp as a needle’s point.

She is beautiful, Chiccan says. Just like any ceiba, this one is gray and thorned with a green crown at its top. But unlike the larger ceibas this one has a fragility to it, its trunk no fatter than an arm, and leaves sweep in lower, so when Exa extends her arms she feels their dull cold.

Chiccan puts a hand to one leaf. He runs his palm down the trunk, at the base, where there are no thorns. Exa touches as high as she can. She keeps reaching but can never get enough.

Here in the jungle, the gods’ voices are the strongest and the lure of them is in the warm, spicy air. There she is, in the main acropolis, slicked with sweat. People swarming on the stone, her blood swarming in her body. Her heart pumps as hard as it can, muscle contracting as if it knows in moments, minutes or seconds, this will end.

Not many get to view their own death. Exa has seen it many times. Has always thought
(or is it hope?) that it is only a vision from the gods. That this is what must accompany the
divine. Graphic blood, a reminder of how fragile skin and bone are.

_ Exa? _ Chiccan asks. _ Exa._

She pulls her hand from the tree and hot blood flows from her palm. It must have
strayed to close to the thorns of the ceiba. The blood falls from her hand to Chiccan’s and he
takes it, carefully. Unties a cloth from his head and wraps her hand.

_ Where were you just now? _ His eyes are dark, clouded. He shakes his head, trying to
drive his thoughts out, because the gods dance thickly here, their presence hangs in the air.
He feels woozy. Exa does too.

_ Where I always go, _ she says. _ That elsewhere, in the dark. _ What she doesn’t mention:
her blood, her body. She doesn’t mention how her skin tingles, how she is overflowing with
energy. She once wanted to share her visions with Chiccan, to tell him how she kept seeing
her body. But now that she is a priestess she questions this, at least for now. It seems like too
much to share.

Exa and Chiccan hunt together at night every eighteenth day of the _ uinal._ It’s a day of
serious meditation, so the priests are less likely to catch them, and their presence less likely
to be missed. Anyone who notices, their absence would assume they were meditating
somewhere.

Exa begins living for those moments she spends with Chiccan in the jungle. She wishes
they could meet more often, but after all Chiccan is busy. With no rain returning, the men
pore over the sacred calendars, try to discern what they have done wrong, how best they can
appease the gods. Exa yearns for the jungle, especially when the King recovers more or less,
when the rain still doesn’t come, when the sacrifices begin again.

Exa learns voraciously. Learns the proper curls for every glyph of every god, what it means when the stars align their certain ways, how to predict good days from bad ones. She learns of the cycle of gods that carry them, how now a good, kind time god should carry them.

What has happened to him? Has he grown too tired?

Exa prays to this time god. Vows she will give him her strength if it means saving her people. But she hears only silence.

From what she gathers from the other priestesses, there have been no real battles yet in the north. Only some threats, some small stand offs. Tikal took back one of its trading posts without any loss of life. On their side, anyway.

But Exa worries.

She worries for herself too, because when Tikal took back its post, men from Calakmul were captured, have come here to be imprisoned. The first will be sacrificed tomorrow, and it is her turn now to help. To be right up close to the body. It was difficult enough to stand behind, where she couldn’t see much. She is worried how her body might react.

But she tells herself this is helping Tikal. She tells herself she believes in her city, their right to continue to exist. It is difficult though: continued existence. As a child she never thought much of time, of waking up each day, and the tasks that lay ahead for her. Now rising in the morning is bone-heavy. Some days she just wants to stay asleep.

Some days she just wishes all she could do was walk in the jungle with Chiccan.

The morning of the sacrifice, she gathers with the priestesses in the cleansing room. She has grown used to this ritual. Cleansing with water, then smoke, then covering her body
in fine blue paint. She knows the markings, helps Nila fully cover her body in glyphs. She paints Chacs on her collarbone.

As they walk into the main acropolis, Exa tries to turn off her thoughts, to merely exist. Together the priestesses burn incense and begin a chant to clean the air, to urge the smoke to carry higher to the gods. The noise of it, pure and open and desperate. It calms Exa. She can follow into its soft words, its elongated vowels.

When the cleansing is done, the other priestesses fade to the back. But Exa and Nila and two other more senior members stay forward. Four Chacs from the priesthood, four main priestesses. Symmetry, simple and pure. Chiccan is Black West Chacs again, back to direct contact with the person’s limb. He nods at Exa, to comfort and to confirm that the two of them, all of Tikal, is in this together.

And so they stand, backs straight and stiff, their eyes nothing but stoic, which to Exa means empty and lifeless. They stand tall and strong as the crowd fills the main acropolis. The tone is different here than it was at the sacrifice of one of their own. Though doubt and concern still undercuts the energy, doubt for Tikal, for this man’s life, there is less respect and guilt coloring the noise with sharpness. People talk more freely, with less shadow in the sound. No one likes to watch a sacrifice, but it is easier when it isn’t someone you know. When it is someone you can target as the enemy.

Exa wonders if Mat and Tat will come, but she doesn’t see their faces. Tat perhaps is needed at home. The rainy season comes soon, and even though there has been no rain in a very long time, they will begin planting soon. Tat must help his workers prepare the land as best they can.

The King appears behind her. Exa knows only from the silence that descends on the
ground, as instant and quick as an arrow’s release.

He claps his hand and the noise echoes around the temples, magnifying and changing shape, to the quetzal’s call.

*Let us thank the gods, for this blessing,* the King says. And the war prisoner, led and held by three men of the priesthood, enters the acropolis, begins the long procession down through the crowd. The King steps in front of his priesthood. The four Chacs play the drums, the same rhythm of a heartbeat. Chiccan tries not to think of Nadal, his friend, who was so recently sacrificed here.

The imprisoned man fights against his binding ropes. He scowls, grunts, thrashes his body as he walks. Yes, sacrifice is an honor, but he is being killed to honor his enemies. Also, he doesn’t want to die.

The man jerks his arms, sends the three men that lead him this way and that. They are strong men and tall, and they carry daggers, just in case. They drag him onwards and the crowd rumbles disapproval. The fight, this struggle and the light in his eyes, isn’t what they want to see. They like compliance, that false simplicity.

As they reach the steps of the temple, the man fights more. He refuses to lift his legs and the three men leading him pull and pull on his ropes, until they send him splashing forward, his hands barely having time to reach out and prevent his skull from cracking into the stone steps. They drag him on, for a few moments he scrambles and crawls up, until he can steady himself on two feet. He glowers and grits his teeth and grunts as he reaches the smooth platform.

He curses, *Tz’is aw’t* and makes sure the sound is loud enough to rise higher than the heartbeat of drums. *This is meaningless,* he screams, and the King hits him across the face to
silence him. The King leans in closer and whispers, *I can make this hurt more than it needs to.*

From this close Exa can hear these words, can see the yellow tinge about the King’s face. The waxen quality of his skin.

The man spits in the King’s face. The King flinches, and the four Chacs race up, grab the man’s limbs and wrestle him down. They pull his limbs too tightly. Chiccan, who is distracted by memories of his sacrificed friend, pulls the man’s right arm so hard it cracks, the joint dislocating. The man screams. And Chiccan, face pinched and surprised, never meant to do this much harm to this strange man. He understands, finds his rebellion valiant. The man is misguided, but loyal to his city. Chiccan would do the same. Wouldn’t he?

He wonders. As he holds the man’s dislocated arm and the man screams in pain, Chiccan must funnel all of his concentration into keeping his own face impassive.

Exa is so close she can smell the sweat, bitter and sharp like cacao beans, like dirt. This man reminds her too much of her brother. This man is taller, but his nose is sharp at the base, rounder at the end, so much like Itzali’s. As he writhes and cries and groans, she cannot help but think of Itzali fighting to his death. Writhing into his last breaths.

Exa lights more incense, walks around the man, the Chacs, the King, and covers them with her smoke. She chants, allowing her voice to funnel up with the smoke, to join that echo from the Temple of the Masks. She rejoins the priestesses. The eldest washes the obsidian dagger in a ceremonial clay-washing basin. She hands the blade to the King.

The man to be sacrificed howls now. He jerks his body, beyond the point of caring about pain. His desperation has become a spectacle, one that unsettles everyone. People in the crowd shout with only half of their hearts. They just want this to be over.
Exa locks hands with Nila, on the King’s left, while the two other priestesses join his right side. They hum, chant Chac’s name, his prayer, a call for more rain. She expels her voice as loudly as she can, does this until her throat burns.

The man screams. He lists curses, throws Tikal’s name into the dirt. The four Chacs can barely keep him steady. All this, with a dislocated shoulder.

The King raises the dagger, plunges it fast and deep. But with the man’s movement, or perhaps because the King is keeping his promise, the blade misses, hits the rib cage. The man’s voice grows louder, echoes off all the stone. The King plunges again, again, until he finds the soft center, where he can cut through the skin, crack through the sternum, peel back the layers of ribs. All to get to the heart. All while the man is still alive. His body is shaking, entering a state of full shock, his mouth still bellowing, his bowels releasing a torrent that hits the stone with thick splashes. Exa wants to vomit, the bile rising in her throat as she watches this man’s destruction. This man who looks too much like Itzali. She has never seen a sacrifice as violent as this. The King hacking away at his chest, the soft, spongy plunge of the dagger each time it meets flesh, the abrasive scrape when it hits bone. The liquid pouring from too much of this man’s body: blood, sweat, tears, shit. As the man continues to writhe, his blood beats from his chest. The King is covered with it. Drops land on Exa’s face, on her hands. She tries so hard not to lick her lips, but when she can’t help it—feeling that thick liquid on them is so invasive and threatening—she licks her lips and tastes the salt of his blood. She cannot vomit, not now, not here in front of everyone, at the first sacrifice she plays a part in. But it is so hard to keep the bile from rising in her throat. She swallows and swallows.

The four Chacs struggle, especially Chiccan who holds the dislocated arm that flaps
uselessly and awfully as the man jerks. But it is almost over now, the man slows, all of his blood almost out. Now the King grasps the heart, still warm, and strangely alive as it shutters its last beats. He pulls, dislodges it from the open, bleeding cavity of the man’s chest. He raises it, blood still spurting from the aorta, that pulmonary valve, the heat dissipating from it quickly. The four Chacs drop the man.

*For our gods!* the King yells. But everyone’s eyes are on the fallen man, on the stone whose body is almost in pieces, his arm splayed at a very wrong angle. He lies in a pool of blood and shit and piss.

And of course this image is uncomfortable for everyone. Especially the King.

Exa wonders why the gods demand this. Why even after all this struggle, this literal heart-break, the gods aren’t providing water. She shakes, and the bile rushes into her, and she manages to turn away, to prevent anyone except the other priestesses from seeing, as she empties her stomach onto the stone. It is good she hasn’t eaten much. Good that she has fasted for this ceremony.

But it isn’t good how hollow she feels, how empty.

**What We Don’t Know**

What we know about the Maya comes from archeological clues, only four codices, and the accounts of the sixteenth century Franciscan monk, Diego de Landa. So much of the information comes from this final source, and without Landa’s detailed description of the Maya writing system in his book, *Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*, most of the Maya glyphs may have not been deciphered. In this book he wrote not only about the Maya’s writing but their culture, religion, and every day life.
And so Landa is responsible, in many ways, for preserving information about the ancient Maya. He also, is responsible for destroying so much of it. He ordered that all the codices burn. Only four escaped his flames.

How awful, that the preserver is also the destroyer. How problematic. How might we believe anything that comes from his hands?

Landa, like most zealots, saw the world in strict black and white, and perhaps he couldn’t fathom a world that existed outside of Christianity. In Guatemala he made it his work to teach the Maya his religion, to tame their savageness from them in any and every way he could.

He was highly effective, but with this efficiency came true savageness. And so this is how one man destroyed so much.

First Landa befriended the Maya. Diligently learned their language, lived with them in remote areas in the sloping highlands, and the lowlands of the jungle. His accounts reveal that the Maya treated him with honor and respect, as if he were their guest. They were eager to learn from him and share their wisdom.

He learned all he could about them, so that he might destroy them more fully.

When any Maya resisted his attempts to Christianize them, he slaughtered them, or perhaps worse, tortured them, purportedly using a technique called garrucha.

Let’s imagine. In his hooded brown robe, his brown tunic with small buttons in a line down his chest, Landa stood in Maya villages. He stood as he watched his men torture a Maya man, whose wrists were bound and hoisted in the air. Strung like this, the man was
lashed. They would attach heavy stones to the man’s feet, to make him less comfortable, and
to limit his movement. Then they would pour hot wax down his body.

I wonder how Landa felt to know he had caused such brutality. Did it make him feel
powerful? Did he ever regret it?

There is no evidence of his regret. None, even after he ordered the burning of all the
Maya texts. Hundreds, maybe thousands of codices.

In his journal he wrote:

*We burned them all, which [the Maya] regretted to an amazing degree, and which
caused them much affliction.*

I imagine Landa thinking about those flames that consumed all those precious works.
Perhaps years later, when he would close his eyes, he could still see them, the strange
movement of orange and red. How fire seems to defy time; the bright flames appearing and
reappearing, with no evidence of movement between places. Merely a burst of light here. A
burst of light there. And then gone. I imagine Landa closing his eyes and still feeling the heat
from all those flames.

I cannot imagine how he could sleep at night.

Am I wrong to vilify Landa so completely? Have I also fallen to black and white
thinking? The Maya, after all, did practice human sacrifice. They were no strangers to
violence. Was he a product of his culture, his time, just as the Maya were? Was Landa in any
way justified?

I don’t know.
CHAPTER 12

I.

*I am worried,* Chiccan says, on one of their nightly forays into the jungle. This surprises her, because she has come to see Chiccan as an older brother, as someone who always seems steady and has the answers.

*About Tikal?* Exa says. She had heard the priests talking, about how if they venture outside of Tikal, they can begin smelling bodies. Peasants withering away slowly, or even quickly from the lack of food. Here in the priesthood, among the nobles, they haven’t felt empty stomachs, but the peasants have been suffering for too long.

*Yes,* Chiccan says. *But also my brother, Pacal, at war. I keep having these visions of his dead body.* He threads his arrow into his bow, although the jungle is mostly quiet tonight. The toads bellow their aching yell, and the howlers scream, but that is distant, someplace very far from here, so their voices become only echoes ghosts of the original sounds.

*I worry there will be more attacks,* Chiccan says. *I think it is unwise to extend our power too thinly.*

Exa nods. This makes sense. She has never enjoyed the idea of war, but now it seems they need to direct their attention to growing food, somehow. She keeps thinking if only Itzali were here. He found food so easily in the jungle. Though they do gather some food for the jungle, the majority of their diet comes from agriculture. If Itzali were around certainly he could teach others how to gather smarter, and faster.

*When I close my eyes I see a body too,* she says. Now the time feels right to share this vision she has held so close to her chest. She has never told anyone this, and saying it aloud makes it feel more sinister. As if she is slowly realizing what this vision predicts.
Your brother? Chiccan says.

No, Exa says, my own.

Chiccan unthreads his arrow, puts it back into his sheath.

I see my body sometimes too.

They are silent for a very long time after this. Bat wings patter overhead, bat mouths inhaling insect after insect. Their small bodies crunching, being converted from life to food.

I have known I will be sacrificed for a very long time, he says.

They stop near a ceiba tree. He runs his palms against its spiky trunk, but is careful not to push too hard. It is almost a comfort, when I help with the sacrifice of others. It makes it feel more cyclic. More just.

This calm side of Chiccan frightens Exa a little. He seems so resigned. She says, I always thought my vision was only a reminder of my own fragility. The price I had to pay to communicate with the gods.

Chiccan nods, brushes back his long hair. Perhaps, he says. You are very young and optimistic. He is not yet old, but feels the weight of his years upon him.

I am not optimistic about much, she says. The gods have already put me through too much. She thinks of Ismena and Ome.

Together they sit at the base of the ceiba, and look up at its bulbous canopy, through which a smattering of stars glow.

Yes, Chiccan says. I have always wondered why you said nothing about Ome.

He did nothing, Exa says, and hates the sound of those words, hates to minimalize something so vast and violent.

He would have, Chiccan says.
It would disgrace my sister, Exa says.

Perhaps, he says. Exa tries to make out the movements of the stars above, but the ceiba obscures too much so she can’t make out constellations.

She says, Also I was afraid what my Tat might do. She was also afraid of what her Tat wouldn’t do. She had warned him of Ome’s darkness, and still he insisted that Ismena marry him. If she had told Tat and he didn’t believe her, or he believed but did nothing, that would be worse than silence.

I do not like Ome, Chiccan says, and they both fall silent, lost in recollecting the image of their dead bodies, of remembering that day Ome attacked her. The day Ome lost himself to his wildness.

And isn’t life like that? There’s mounting pressure, and then a sudden snap. Then, change, instant and quick. Gould’s punctuated equilibrium, the belief that evolution occurs so slowly, and then, all at once. New species everywhere. Speed gathering, like a wave as it builds and then breaks. There’s evidence of this in the earth. Just as there is evidence of Exa, her body, once tossed in a cenote, heart ripped out. Her sacrifice happens slowly, and then all at once.

Do you ever hear a voice from the Temple of the Masks? Exa asks. She has been afraid to ask, because she knows this is a peculiar thing, this is perhaps not quite the gods, but perhaps a darkness in herself. But now seems like the time for confessions.

Chiccan shakes his head. No. But I can guess why you do. He stands, stretches his arms. And looking down on her, his eyes clouded with the jungle’s nightly shadows, he says, I imagine you have never heard the story of Lady Twelve Macaw?
Stories

King Ah Cacao and Lady Twelve Macaw were not happily married. Like all marriages they were paired for political reasons and her mercurial strong headedness always rubbed him raw. War with Calakmul raged and Ah Cacao needed all the allegiance he could get. But Lady Twelve Macaw was as headstrong as a snake. She followed the customs, but not quietly. She was always questioning Ah Cacao, always wondering. He allowed her access to the priesthood library, to learn the stars, to understand time, and so she read and learned.

An unkind god carried them then. Ah Cacao poured more men into the war. She advised him against it. She said that they needed to protect their own walls and stop worrying about expanding and growth. She believed they had enough people, that there was something more valuable than progress.

She predicted the unrest before it happened. No one believed her.

It was that simple. She saw something that no one did, or too few did.

This is maybe what happened.

She woke one morning, and it was like every morning, with the sun high and the humidity heavy. Except today she woke and the world seemed clear and she felt impulsive and tired of waiting for disaster. She thought the waiting was worse than anything. And if she couldn’t prevent the disaster, why not create it, so at least then she could stop waiting. At least then she’d have a chance of making a point.

She got up that morning and spun some lie that got her from the nobility ground to the edge of Tikal, to the jungle, that perhaps she knew well. Perhaps not. She did not grow up in Tikal, but in another grand city.

And she thought there was something beautiful, alluring about the jungle, about leaving
Tikal and her husband and her life behind. She thought maybe if she did this, then others would see that something was wrong. Maybe then there would be action.

She brought no food, no water. She simply walked into the jungle until she could walk no more.

They never found her body. Not even a single bone.

Did she desert and flee to another city? Could she have walked that far unharmed? Did a jaguar attack her and did it consume every fiber of her being? Flesh and bone, fat and muscle? Did the gods whisk her away? Or did she suddenly disappear?

This was her version of chaos. She predicted the fall and this was the only way she could see to prevent it. She didn’t want to see the city’s fall. She knew what it felt like to watch your Tat bite back tears, to lose a sister, to run from peasants whose bones bulged from skin.

It was a scandal. The rift between Ah Cacao and Lady Twelve Macaw was well known, and so rumors of murder began. Ah Cacao had to quell them. The alliance their wedding forged was in peril, and if he lost the power of his wife’s tribe, then he could lose his war.

But she predicted the downfall too soon. Ah Cacao erected the Temple of the Masks to honor her. He spoke publicly of his love of her. Perhaps he did love her and her impertinence. His grief moved his people, made them see him as something real again, something human. And so he earned their trust again. The gods turned in his favor. He won against Calakmul. Did her death avert Tikal’s own demise? Or had she underestimated Tikal’s resiliency?

She believed in her inability to watch a collapse so strongly that she doomed herself to a dishonorable death. She believed that giving her life was the boldest statement she could
make. The only one that might make people see. Maybe she knew she had to break some of
the rules to keep everyone safe.

II.

Chiccan’s story of Lady Twelve Macaw clouds Exa’s every waking thought. She
wonders at the Queen’s impulse, that reasoning that was so strong it drove her to death. Exa
thinks of what it would mean to abandon her family, even though no longer sees them as she
used to.

Exa sees Tat in Tikal often enough. Sometimes they just wave, but other times they
walk the city together. He never brings good news. He says, *Our crops are still failing. It is a
disgrace to our family.*

*But they are failing everywhere,* she says. They walk past the Temple of the Masks, and
her song fills Exa, and again this nagging doubt returns in her.

*It is a disgrace on us all,* he says.

This is the moment for disgrace. Exa stumbles to this finding during one of her long
meditations. She is tired of watching herself die. No one should be asked to do this, she
thinks. Not again and again. She thought it was the gods’ way of giving her a mark, a sign
that she could see visions. But now it is all she sees. Now she cannot stop hearing Chiccan’s
interpretation. How he has known for so long his life will end in sacrifice.

And then the news comes. Warriors will return from the north, wounded, their numbers
shrunken. Calakmul launched a full-scale attack, piled Tikal’s forces with men. Men whose
bodies bulged with bones, whole skeletons beginning to ridge from the skin. But still men
with bows and arrows, who were desperate enough to plunge their full selves into battle.

Tikal’s men return broken, defeated, though there was bloodshed on both sides. Too much.

*Fewer mouths to feed,* some of the priesthood members mumble darkly, when the news first arrives. A distraction from the panic the news creates. Most, if not all of the members had family in the north. They won’t know who is alive until the whole contingent returns, in the next day or two.

That night Exa walks with Chiccan, and the skin beneath his eyes furrows like buttressed tree roots in the jungle. Shadows cling to the crevices made by his skin, and Exa crawls right into that darkness, burrows deep, as if she is an armadillo and she is rooting through dirt.

There is enormous comfort with just having his body beside her.

She doesn’t sleep until the men return.

When the men arrive, all of the nobles gather in Tikal’s heart. One man of high nobility marks men’s names off a list. Counts who has returned.

From Exa’s perch on the balcony outside of the priestesses’ domiciles, she looks and looks for Itzali.

From his perch on the balcony outside of the priesthood’s domiciles, Chiccan looks and looks for Pacal.

Though they look, their eyes never find those familiar faces. Instead Ome returns. He has a bit of a limp, a shallow wound in the leg, though that will heal in time. He is also missing his left hand, his arm a stump. He won’t be able to shoot a bow and arrow anymore. Will not be able to fight.
Emetaly, who has returned, like many others to Tikal to greet the warriors, rushes to him, embraces her brother. But when she realizes who is missing, she crumples. Pacal, her husband.

Elsewhere others are falling into their loved ones arms, mourning those they have lost. Exa and Chiccan walk slowly to the acropolis, their feet like solid rock.

When she enters, she greets Mat and Tat, but no one says anything else. Exa doesn’t crumple, but instead stands tall. She hates that Ome survived, that worthless brute, but that her good, kind brother is dead. She blames him for it, somehow. She has to blame him, because that is easier than blaming the gods or the King’s weakness. Emetaly and her parents join them, and together they bow their heads, united in their loss.

Later, Chiccan and Exa meet in the acropolis. They do this by pure accident, one passing by the other, but as they do so, they both stop, acknowledge the other’s existence.

*How are you?* Chiccan asks.

And Exa doesn’t answer and instead says, *When will the memorial be for all the lost men?*

Chiccan shakes his head, his oiled hair uncurling from his back. *I do not know. Soon. We are trying to plan a ceremony that makes the King look strong.*

Exa nods, is about the leave, when she sees Ome’s looming figure. She stiffens, and Chiccan takes note, and sees Ome too, his large figure still limping.

*Leave,* Chiccan shouts at him. Ome is close enough that they both can see the roughness of his stumped arm, where his hand was severed. Ome was nearly killed or captured, but he escaped.
Ome bows his head. *My apologies*, he says. *But I’ve been looking for you two. I know the story of Itzali’s and Pacal’s death. They died honorably. I thought you might want to know.*

Exa isn’t sure what to think. Would she trust anything from Ome’s mouth? She forgets that Ismena once judged him to be kind, once loved him.

But Chiccan is certain of what he thinks of Ome. He says, *I bet you hid and watched them die.*

Ome clenches his single fist. *The enemy surprised us. The man who was keeping look out during the night had been killed quickly and quietly. The morning was just breaking, there was light enough only to see shadows. They were on us, all over. Not many of us got to our bows, but I did. So I ran to higher ground, to try to get the best vantage point. My main purpose? To protect your brother*, he says to Exa. *I know you might not believe me, but I am very sorry*, Ome says the words, which hurt him as they come out. Because he still hates being around Exa, hates how now that she is a priestess it is even worse. How small he feels around her. But he hates the dark thing he tried to do to her. That could never be justified.

*So you watched over him?* Exa prompts.

*Yes*, Ome says. *I felled three men who might have killed him.* He turns to Chiccan. *I tried to protect Pacal too. Emetaly’s husband is family of mine.*

Chiccan steps closer to Ome. Ome might be taller and wider, but Chiccan knows Ome is a weaker fighter. And now, he is missing a hand, and so he is an easy opponent. And Chiccan is angry at so much and here is an easy target, right in front of him.

*But you failed*, Chiccan said, and he is in Ome’s face. *Because you were scared and small and weak.*
Ome has been trying to expel his darkness, to be a better person than he is. But though he tries, he doesn’t always succeed. *I lost my hand*, he shouts. *Two men snuck up on me, took my bow, and then severed my hand.* He takes a step back, spits on the ground. *There was nothing I could do.*

*Yet your fellow warriors lost their lives. And you are lamenting a lost hand?* Chiccan says. He pushes Ome, palm on pectoral. Ome stumbles backward.

*I tried to protect them,* Ome yells. *I could have run, could have alerted others we were being attacked, but I could not leave them.* Ome’s voice shakes. Chiccan throws himself at the man and pins him to the ground.

*I don’t want to see you again,* Chiccan says. Chiccan kicks Ome in the chest and he grunts.

Chiccan stalks off, his chest heaving, his hands shaking. He hates what he has done, but he couldn’t have done anything less. Instinct took over.

Exa is always shocked by the impulses of men. Her own impulsive nature scares her, makes her wonder if some part of her is a man. It is as if at any moment anyone could do something that would prove fatal. Or perhaps worse.

Ome gets up slowly. He shakes his hair out his face and stares at Exa for a long time.

*And you?* he says.

*How did he die?* she says, her voice soft. *Was it quick?*

Ome nods. *I didn't see it, but the arrow wound was close to his heart. It would have been almost instant. Almost painless. My hand was bleeding, I had to get it wrapped, but before that I made sure that he was dead. That there was nothing I could do.*

Exa still isn’t sure if she can trust him, but still she says, *Thank you.*
And she is afraid to walk past him, but he is in her way, and so she does. When she passes him, Ome reaches out and touches her with his stumped arm. She jerks but their eyes lock.

*I am not a bad man,* Ome says, his anger rising again, his need to prove this to her, turning him mean again.

Exa steps away from him. *Touch me again and I will kill you,* she says. And Ome screams, a voice of gravel and fire and Exa runs and runs and runs.

He doesn’t follow her.

It feels almost like the whole city has gathered to mourn the lost men. They gather in the northern acropolis and the priesthood resides in the center with only the most top-ranked nobility, the King and his family, and a few other key political men. Ome’s uncle is among them.

In a circle around them are the other nobles, including Mat and Tat. And then on the periphery are all the peasants. They leave a wide berth between the nobles, although they crave to be closer, to be able to see the ceremony better. They stand with nervousness, their feet shuffling, and with anger, their palms fisted and eyebrows heavy and slanted.

The King raises his hands and the drummers begin to play, the flautists shrieking high notes, and the rest of the priesthood beginning to chant the names of those who have fallen. Whenever they come to Itzali, Exa’s voice falters, she must take in an extra breath, and so she misses the name that follows his. Every time this happens. Though she prepares for Itzali’s coming name, it continues to shock her. Shock, gasp, pause: missing of a fallen man’s name. They chant softly, allow their voices to join with the drums and the flutes, and the
gentle rattle of gourds filled with dry cacao husks. The priestesses join hands and circle the King. The men follow suit and circle around the priestesses. The King who stands on a slightly raised wood platform, and who wears a magnificently towering headdress of green and yellow feathers, quetzal and mot-mot, still reigns high above them.

With his hands still raised, he says, *I have seen a message from the gods.* His voice a bellow that echoes with finality to it. It is so loud that Exa wishes she could cover her ears. It feels rough and haunting with more edge and violence than the voice from the Temple of the Masks ever has. Maybe that’s the difference between men and women: men are rough and violent, and women are sad and stubborn. Exa is somehow both.

The King says, *The gods have shown me a quetzal bird on fire. But as the bird was engulfed in flame and heat, it suddenly burst and from it a newer and stronger bird appeared.* He claps his hands together and the call of the quetzal sounds. *We are like this quetzal. We must burn a little, but we will rise.*

The nobles begin clapping. They have been instructed to do this. The peasants do nothing, but look at their feet.

The King says, *Today we honor our men who have given their lives for this great city. Who have given so that soon we may rise even stronger.*

Exa stops with the other priestesses and applauds and then ducks behind the priests and steps to the back. The men begin doing a victory dance, their feet pounding, bodies hunched and shaking with the rhythm. As Chiccan dances, a small prick of tears begins to run through his blue face paint. But the violence and energy of his movements distracts from this small weakness. Only Exa notices and understands the paint is running not from sweat but from sadness. She feels it too.
Tomorrow more men will gather and will march north. The King will not declare an official war, but he is building up Tikal’s defense. He is planning an attack and has ordered the men to burn Calakmul’s remaining fields. He hopes to starve them, to conquer them through hunger.

What he doesn’t know is that Calakmul is making similar arrangements. That already some of Tikal’s fields farther in the north, fields that are only producing a fraction of the food they once did, are burning. It’s so easy to light fires when the land is so dry, when moisture has left long ago.

It is more difficult to put these fires out.

The city bows their head for the lost men. The King says his final prayer. They give their thanks for the lost lives, and then it is done. There are no bodies to bury, and so this memorial is all there is. The peasants leave first, their voices loud and discontent, but they leave peacefully.

But a few days later, when news breaks of Tikal’s burning fields, the peasants grow more restless. The prospect of their fields on fire is what breaks them, and so two men lead the others to storm Tikal’s heart. They carry weapons, wood farming implements, some bows and arrows, stone cut daggers. They bring rocks in satchels. They bring anything they can get.

Exa first hears them, from the room her and the other priestesses are meditating in. First it is a rumble, and then the shouts echo through the city. Princess Mahaway pulls herself from her thoughts and stands, runs to the balcony and sees their bodies come toward them. They are still far off but coming closer.

She races from the room, finds Kukulcan, who also has heard these protests, who runs
to alert the King’s warriors and the other men of the priesthood.

The priestesses run to the balcony, where they should be safe enough, so they can watch and pray. They all stay, except Exa, who runs to the priesthood’s rooms, disregards all of the rules about how she is not allowed to enter, and grabs a bow and a quiver of arrows. She acts on instinct only, this pressing need to protect the King. And she cannot just stand by and watch. She must do something.

The peasants come with fire, sticks lit and angry. They have no real plan. Only they know they are hungry, know that there is no food for them, that all of it is being channeled to the nobility, to a King who is not protecting them.

Exa finds Chiccan, and he shouts, *Follow me!* They scale the outer edge of the stone structure, climb down its backside, so they still are on raised ground, still have the advantage, but are closer to where the peasants will soon be.

Chiccan is with four other men, the other four Chacs, upper-ranked priests, nobility, and good marksmen. They have all seen Exa shoot. None of them protest her presence. They crouch on the outer step of the building, their backs touching the slanted, stone wall. Exa and Chiccan, who are side by side, lock eyes for a moment. They both pull back the strings of their bows.

A contingent of men, the King’s warriors, are below them, are ready to meet the peasants head on. When the first line of the protest comes into sight, one of the warriors yells, *Stop or we will shoot.* The peasants keep coming. Exa’s heart is a drum. Now that she is here she questions the choice, because she doesn’t want to witness this, doesn’t want to be culpable. But isn’t this what she wanted? To have the power of a man? To be allowed to use her god-given skills?
Chiccan leans over to her and says, *You see the two men, up front, with the burning wood?* She nods. *My guess would be they are the leaders of this. If we can kill them, shoot them cleanly and easily, that might be enough to stop the others, to convince them this is unwise.* Exa shakes her head, because he is asking her to kill a man. But for what other reason would she be here?

The peasants are still very far away. A shot from here would be difficult.

*Are you with me?* Chiccan asks, and she nods, because she knows this is the only way to spare the others’ lives. The King’s warriors will obliterate them all. They have better weapons, more training, and are on higher ground. She nods because she feels swept up in chaos and adrenaline and she doesn’t know what else to do. She doesn’t have time to think.

*You take the left man,* he says. *Three, two,* he counts.

Exa draws back her arrow. She loses herself in that dark space, where she sees her own body dying. This is the only way she summons strength, as if she’s pulling it from her last breaths. She feels that surge of power, as she once did with Ome, as she did before as she proved herself to the priesthood. But can she do this? Kill a man? She has threatened Ome, but to this point, it was all theoretical. She never believed she could do it. She feels nothing, allows stone-stoicism to wash over her and she just thinks of these men as animals. She thanks them for their lives, breathes in and gives in to Chiccan’s plan.

*One.*

They release their arrows, both shooting strong. The arrows pierce the two leaders’ chests. Almost perfectly in the heart. Enough to kill in almost an instant. The men fall, their burning sticks crashing to the ground. This sudden death is enough to make the peasants stop, for a moment, and Exa seizes this opportunity.
We are not your enemy, she booms. She had no idea her voice could be so loud. Her entire body is shaking, but from afar she looks menacing. A woman, who just shot one of their leaders and from so far. A woman who has just made her first kill.

And we are backed by our gods. Do not mistake our power, she says. Chiccan stands as do the other four Chacs. And in their beautiful blue huipils, with the quetzal feathers in their hair they appear almost invincible to the peasants. We can kill you, Exa says, but we do not want to. Please, do not make us.

And these men, angry and ready for blood, are softened by this female voice. If this had come from a man, it would perhaps have done nothing. But that Please is believable from a woman, that regret. They stop. The King’s warriors get ready to attack, to kill them anyway, but Chiccan shouts, Desist. They crane their necks upward, see who is talking, so they stop.

Lay down your weapons, Chiccan says, and all will be forgiven.

The peasants hesitate, but then they do. They decide a slow death in the future is preferable to a violent one now. Or else they decide to hope for a little while longer. Their faith is not quite yet spent.

But remember our strength, Exa says. Even though now all she feels is sadness. Even though she too lost her last bit of hope, as she let loose that arrow. She is a killer. She killed a man, one of Tikal’s own.

There is no coming back from that. Chiccan feels it too. Though he feels comfort that they just perhaps saved all the other peasants’ lives, it was his own hand that killed one of his own people. One of the people he so wishes to protect.
CHAPTER 13

I.

*How is the priesthood?* Mat asks. She has come to Tikal and brought Ismena’s daughter, Nai. Mat had to carry her all the way here, and her bones are tired. They rest in the shade behind the Temple of the Masks.

Exa doesn’t know what to say, except, *I killed a man.* She wants to crumple and fall into her mat’s embrace, but she doesn’t. The time to be comforted has passed.

*You protected your King,* Mat says. Word of Chiccan’s and Exa’s actions have spread quickly among the nobles. Tat swelled with pride when he heard the news. Word has spread quickly among the peasants too. There is admiration for Exa and Chiccan, but also fear and anger. They killed one of their own.

*It seems unwise to celebrate murder,* Exa says. Nai plays beside them. She has a small rattle toy, which she shakes vigorously. It reminds Exa of the sound of rain.

Exa asks, *Do you know the story of Lady Twelve Macaw?*

Mat looks to the Temple of the Masks and smooths the fabric of her huipil against her sweat-soaked skin. *Yes,* she says. *Her story inspired me to believe I had been chosen.*

*You never told me,* Exa says, and wonders if it matters.

*My belief did not do me much good,* Mat says. *I knew you would find her story if you needed to.*

*What happened?* Exa asks. *Why do you not like it here?*

Mat looks to the temple, which is screaming now, as it always is. Now it is calmer, but higher pitched than normal.

*You hear it too?* Mat asks, though she has already guessed the answer. Exa nods.
Long ago, Mat says, when I heard the voice I thought it meant I had been chosen. It sounded to me like a baby’s cry, and I thought I was destined to be a midwife. My aunt was also a midwife, and I begged and begged her to allow me to join. She laughs, the sound of it hollowed. I think I pushed so hard, made her imagine me as a midwife, that finally she did dream me as one. And they accepted me with open arms.

Exa wonders why Mat never speaks of this.

It is dangerous to feel special, Mat says. I thought I was invincible, chosen as I was to yield the god’s power and help deliver children. I trained very hard. She ruffles her fingers through Nai’s hair, who is young enough to be oblivious to their conversation. I was very happy then, Mat says. And then came my first delivery alone. It was here in Tikal, and the Temple’s voice was very strong that day. I would like to say that it distracted me, but I know the faults are my own.

She was a nice, young woman. Her first child. She was a peasant, which is why she had me as a midwife. No noble ever is put with a midwife who is so new. I remember the way her cheeks curved. She had a baby face. She wasn’t much older than Ismena when she died.

Mat looks to the ground. She hasn’t told anyone this in a very long time. Tat knows, but they never speak of it. I killed her, Mat says. The cord was wrapped around the baby’s neck, and I panicked. When I saw the blood, when I saw the cord. Had I been calm, I could have unwrapped the cord, likely saved both the mother and child. I did neither. I panicked and cut and tried to help, but all I did was make the bleeding worse. The baby was born blue.

Exa doesn’t know what to say. She knows what it is like to see life rush from a person and know that you played a part in it. She knows it too well.

I left in shame. With a guilt so heavy upon me. And then I was arranged to be married
to your tat. The whole story was kept quiet. And so the atanzahab believed me to be a good enough match. I was lucky in ways that woman was not. Mat is crying now, but the tears are silent and steady. I wonder constantly if that is why Ismena died. The gods balancing retribution.

Exa thoughts had just turned the same direction. And she is so angry at these gods that can be so cruel that she wants to scream. Mat is a good person, they all are, and no one deserves this.

Mat says, Before your tat and I married, I ran away. I remembered Lady Twelve Macaw and thought maybe I interpreted my connection to her wrong. I wasn’t special, but I was chosen to leave this place, to remove myself. I had no plan, but I ran into the jungle. But your tat came after me. He found me weak and starved. He saved me.

Nai screams with joy at the rattle. Exa misses how simple her life was as a child.

Mat says, I am very grateful. She pauses, strokes Nai’s short hair. But now with so much death around us, I sometimes wish he had never found me. She clasps her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide, because she cannot believe she admitted to this.

You mustn’t judge me, Mat says. I am not strong like you.

Exa wants to cry. If only Mat knew. Exa thinks again of Mat’s words, When in doubt, you can always kill yourself. They take on more meaning now.

Do you think there is hope? Mat asks.

No, Exa says. She thinks of killing the man, in some ways how easy that was. Her darkness scares her. She thinks of Ome on top of her, of how savage the peasants looked as they ran. The King’s yellowed skin, deep ringed eyes. Of Tat’s dry fields, other fields on fire. She thinks of Nai, so absent from it all. She thinks of how Ismena made her promise to teach
Nai how to be wild.

But then she thinks of Temple IV. How as a child she so wanted to ascend its stairs so she could be close to the gods.

*Maybe*, she says. At times she feels the gods as whispers, someone walking behind her. Perhaps if she could get closer, she could hear them. After killing the man, she thought there was no hope left within her. But now here is a string, a flimsy thread, but she will follow it.

Mat has given her too much to think about. She comes from a family with women forging their own independence, of trying and failing to help Tikal as a whole. Perhaps Exa’s future has long ago been decided.

Nothing gets better, only worse.

As they walk through the jungle at night Chiccan says, *The King wants to perform a mass sacrifice. He wants to make a spectacle of the peasants who were protesting.*

*The ones we saved?* Exa asks, though she knows the answer. *Why?* she says.

*He is afraid of appearing weak.* Chiccan spits. *I told him that killing so many would only weaken us further. That these are our people and we need to encourage unity.*

Exa cannot imagine speaking to the King in this way. Or can she?

Chiccan says, *I know the peasants stepped far out of line. But perhaps it was deserved.*

*We need to consider their needs now, more than ever. Not kill them for being hungry.*

Exa agrees, full-heartedly. *Did the King listen?*

*No,* Chiccan says. *I told him I would not assist in the sacrifices.*

Above, the stars shine so brightly tonight. The constellation above them is Ah Puch, the god of death.
He threatened me with treason. My own sacrifice. Chiccan laughs. Kukulcan and the others would not stand behind me. He kicks the base of a tall tree.

What will you do? Exa asks, though she is beginning to come to an answer.

The men will be sacrificed in one week, Chiccan says. I must do something before then.

Two nights pass, and then Exa and Chiccan are in the jungle, together again.

I have been thinking, Exa says, of Lady Twelve Macaw. Chiccan nods and says, I have too. Exa thinks also of her mat, flinging her body into the jungle’s grasps.

She understood the need for drastic measures, Exa says. What we are doing now is not working.

Chiccan agrees. The death of so many faceless men, Tikal’s own, is too much for him. With the death of his brother, he has lost a lot of hope. Though they have sent more men north, even the King doesn’t seem hopeful. How could he? Times have been bad before, but never quite like this. Never have they had such a prolonged draught.

Exa’s body feels like a piece of fabric flapping in the wind. She is frayed, her skin’s threads breaking slowly but constantly. She is unraveling, they all are. Chiccan recognizes the slow, intangibility of it, like the way the stars move. Though he can’t see them shift, every night their position is a little different. As seasons pass, so do the stars. They make the same slow loop.

They have always believed that the world cycles. It creates and then destroys. It remakes itself. So many years from Exa’s life, Westerners will flock to Tikal, readying for the Maya’s supposed predicted world’s end: December 21, 2012, the Maya’s end of the thirteenth bak tun. When the world doesn’t end, tourists will pose in Tikal, and they will hold
newspapers dated December 22, 2012. They will stand with Temple IV in the background and will grin as if this is somehow their accomplishment. The world not ending.

But Exa and Chiccan do not have Westerner’s conceptions of “end” and “beginning.” The Maya’s end of the world is not an apocalypse, but merely a renewal. They would not fear the end of a bak tun, but they do fear this, this slow crumble around them when it is not time for an end. The cycle has been thrown off course. This is what instills fear in Tikal.

Finally, Exa says what she has been thinking ever since she talked to Mat. 

*I think I need to meditate on the Temple of the Two-Headed Serpent, she says.* *I have no answers here, but perhaps there?* 

Chiccan thinks. He is allowed up there, he could escort her. If they got caught, the reprimand would be smaller. At least, he thinks so. But in these troubled times, digressions are risky. Given his recent sharp tongue to the King, he isn’t sure where he stands.

*What else can we do?* she asks.

*But if we get caught,* he says. And then he says, *Alright.* He trusts her instincts. And anyway, it’s better than no plan. *Perhaps together we can speak to the gods more clearly.*

*Thank you,* she says.

They both feel it: an inching toward the end. Exa would rather slip through time, compress the distance between now and the end. She doesn’t care to linger. At least that’s what she thinks now that they are in the jungle and safe.

The next day, Exa and Chiccan meet just a breath after the sun sets. There is still light, but it is thickening, and it gives the stone, Chiccan’s skin, the Temple, a grainy quality. This is the best time, when they will still be able to see the Temple to climb it, but when they are
less likely to be seen. They can descend as the sun begins to rise. This is their best chance: this rosy, crepuscular time.

Chiccan’s thoughts are full and buzz like bees. Today he overheard Kukulcan the King discussing him. Chiccan was just behind the leather flap covering the entrance to the King’s private quarters, when he heard his name in the King’s mouth. *We should perhaps sacrifice Chiccan*, the King said.

Kukulcan said, *He is too valuable to us.*

The King said, *He has forgotten his place. The gods need precious blood.*

Now: as they begin climbing its steps, Exa cranes her head right and left, in search of other bodies. But Tikal is quiet. Chiccan turns his head, insists he heard someone, but there is no one there. Maybe it’s just voices in his head. He wishes he hadn’t overheard the King.

Exa hears nothing but her own ragged breaths, her body struggling to maintain its existence. Her legs ache with every steep step. Each step is a mountain, as high as her stomach, some even higher. Just placing her foot on them feels like a victory. Good: this is as it should be. The gods require strength and sacrifice to be reached.

There is no air left in her body by the time she reaches the top. She clutches her chest. But even breathlessness isn’t strong enough to distract her from the view up here. Even in the gritty light she can see everything up here, all of Tikal, the Temple of the Masks in its center, but also so far past that. Farther than the jungle she grew up in, farther than she can imagine.

This view, even so many hundreds of years later will shock those who see it. Will be re-imagined as the alien landscape of Yavin 4 in *Star Wars*. Tikal still will be shrouded in power and mystery.

As the ache diffuses from her lungs, she takes in the full circle of landscape. She toes
each edge of the flat, rectangular platform. She isn’t quite at the top. The covered platform where the priests pray is set a little back and higher. But she wants to be outside, uncovered. This is where the power is, where gods might touch her.

_We are so small_, she says, to Chiccan, who already understands the extent of his smallness. He is already sitting, trying to meditate, to convince the gods to enter his body. This might be his last chance.

Exa joins him, wonders if by sheer force alone she can control the world. If she believes it, it will be true.

The darkness creeps upon Tikal, fingered shadows stretching onto its stone. The nocturnal noises begin to filter through the jungle, so far off, and yet so close. Exa believes if only she could reach out far enough, she would touch it, cup the canopy in her palms. The jungle isn’t dying the way Tikal is. They might have slashed and burned it, but it will persist. A resiliency she wished the city possessed.

They had planned their water channels to withstand strong drought. Though they had planned, it wasn’t enough.

She meditates and sees only the jungle and a woman, (Lady Twelve Macaw?) walking into it, allowing its shrouds to capture her. Ismena, those rough screams, and Nai, Exa floundering to try to teach her niece to be wild. The wildness in Exa rises. Tat burning his jungle, planting more fields. Itzali and Ismena, not even bodies now. Chiccan, so taut and alive beside her. She doesn’t know he might soon be sentenced to death.

No one in this city deserves the drought and panic that has been reaped on them. And yet here they are. All of them, each and every one is good and whole and full of small errors. And how could they know their mistakes? How could they have predicted this disaster? A
nature even larger than the gods? Nature as gods, but they’ve gotten it a little wrong.

Haven’t we all?

Exa finds no answers in the darkness. She sees nothing of use. The gods are still silent. This is not a place to look inward. It is the outer world that begs to be admired.

Chiccan is coming to the same conclusion, although his eyes are still closed, although he is still trying. He still has a little hope left.

Exa looks into the darkness, the jungle that lurks there. She thinks of Lady Twelve Macaw. *When in doubt, you can always kill yourself.* Mat’s voice echoing. Only Exa doesn’t want to die. She wants to live and persist.

There is nothing but the jungle.

*When in doubt, you can always kill yourself.* Chiccan thinks this very sentiment, except he wants to be the one who willingly gives his life. He needs that control and refuses to allow the King to demand his death. Chiccan would die willingly if he won a pitz game, if he thought the gods demanded his death. But his faith in the King wanes.

*What if,* Exa says to Chiccan, who is slowly drawing the same conclusion. *What if we left?*

They both wonder if it is the only way. Could their leaving show the King how wrong he is? Could it urge him to change his mind, to reconcile with the peasants and build a stronger, more unified front? Could then Tikal perhaps thrive once again? Could they withstand this persistent drought?

Or perhaps their leaving would just divide the city more. With the sacrifices, this seems inevitable. At least if they left, they wouldn’t have to witness it. Is there shame in fleeing, in continuing to exist if it’s the only option with a scrap of hope?
*The King perhaps wishes to sacrifice me*, Chiccan says, because he feels he must be honest with Exa. That she deserves to know. *I worry, soon, they will turn to you*, Chiccan says, because Exa was there with him, she helped save the peasants, and she has a strong, wild tongue she cannot always contain.

*If I am sacrificed*, Exa says, a strange heat flaring in her body, *I want it to be on my terms. My decision*. She feels this is the only way where there is honor, where her blood might save Tikal. She has to believe in it.

And so escape seems even more alluring. If they get caught and are sacrificed, it will be on their terms. If they don’t get caught, they are free.

Their leaving might save them, might not. But could they do it? Leave all of Tikal behind?

Chiccan has no one left but Kukulcan, a man who is family, but not by blood. A man who will not stand up for him to the King. Chiccan doesn’t blame him. And Exa has only her parents, Mat who has already fled into the jungle once before. At least a part of Mat still wishes she were there.

Could they do it? Pack up what little they would need and head to the jungle, to walk and not stop until they had distanced themselves as far as they could from this falling city?

Chiccan, who is tired of killing other men, who will die, but on his terms only, impulsively says, *Tomorrow. Meet me here at the base of this Temple and we will head west.*

*Promise*, Exa says. And Chiccan does, and she trusts him. Her body feels numb but pleasant. She isn’t sure she can believe they are doing this.
When they descend the temple, they both think they hear breathing. But they see no one. They assume it must be their own labored breaths from the impulse of this decision. Exa is breathless, skin flushed with her rapid heartbeat.

They will leave just as night falls. Exa packs little. She has her bow and arrows ready in the jungle. She brings a huipil, a thin clay pot (Ismena’s first one she made), some dried fruit, and not much else. She carries it all in a small, leather satchel, which she wears and deposits near the jungle during midday. She looks less suspicious that way, she could be meditating somewhere and need the proper incense and supplies to do it. At least she hopes that is what someone would assume.

She is wrong.

She hides the satchel near Temple IV. Her stomach is in coils the entire day. She wonders if she should leave a note for her parents, but she thinks Mat will understand. Will communicate this treason better to Tat than Exa ever could.

And yes, this is treason. Not only are they leaving the city, but they are members of its top nobility. Chiccan, especially. This is a betrayal of the largest kind. If they succeed, they will never be able to return.

That is, if this works, and there is something to return to.

On her way back from her meeting with Chiccan, she tries to remember everything about this city. The way the temples tower so tall and strong. But this place has never felt quite like home. She misses the palapa she grew up in, the jungle there.

She is mostly nervous, bone-toothed scared.
As night descends and the horizon lights up with pink and orange haze, Chiccan and Exa walk to Temple IV. They take different paths. They try to look nonchalant. It isn’t hard. They are both used to sneaking around, are both technically able to wander this part of the city, at this time.

Exa reaches Temple IV and retrieves her hidden leather satchel. She walks to the jungle’s edge and hopes she will find Chiccan there.

And there he is standing at the jungle’s edge, with his own small bag of goods to bring. *Are you ready?* he asks.

*I think so,* Exa says. It will be a long night. They will walk all night, as quickly as they can, so that if the King sends a search team out, they will be too long gone. They will rest only briefly in the morning, sleep somewhere high, and then continue on.

*I am sad to leave,* Exa says.

Chiccan nods his head and says, *It is difficult to say goodbye forever.*

They clasp each other’s hands, and like this, they enter the jungle, where small trees begin to sprout and then fall away to larger ones. They walk toward their bows, where they always hide them, at the base of the largest tree, very close to the edge.

When they reach the tree and they have their bows in their hands, they both breathe a sigh of relief. It feels like they’ve made it. Like they have this whole new life out there in the jungle just waiting for them. There is enormous relief in this, but also fear, because the jungle is a dangerous place, and they have no solid plan.

And so they walk, their chests feeling tight, the tips of their fingers tingly. The jungle air, hot and ripe with the sweat of leaves, comforts both of them. They walk, their footsteps almost inaudible, their eyes peeled open wide.
The jungle darkens, but the moon is full and bright tonight, and the jungle’s canopy allows some light to enter. Their eyes adjust to the dimming light. The air has a dusty quality to it. They walk.

Exa keeps thinking she hears something. A person tracking them? A jaguar? Exa isn’t sure which is worse. But if it comes to that, they both have their bows and arrows.

They walk deeper into the jungle.

Still, Exa keeps thinking she hears a crunch, a footstep on the moist leaves on the jungle floor. One in addition to hers and Chiccan’s. She listens, hears it distinctly.

Chiccan, she begins, but already he has stiffened, already he is craning his neck left. He is as still as a statue. And then, through the dusky light, Exa sees the face too, not too far away and mostly hidden by foliage. Even from this distance, she can tell it is Ome.

Run, Chiccan says.

Exa runs right and Chiccan runs straight north. They had planned for this. In case they were followed into the jungle, they would split up, and then both try to meet in the north in three days time. Exa runs and strings her arrow just in case. She holds the bow close to her chest. Somewhere she hears an arrow shoot through the air, but she cannot see it. She is unharmed, but her heart is so loud in her chest.

She runs and doesn’t care about the noise she makes until she grows too tired. And then she slows, ducks behind trees, tries to steady her breath and walk quietly. When she hears footsteps, she hides behind a tree and tries to silent her ragged inhale, exhale.

It is Kukulcan, the lead priest, and he is alone. Exa has no idea if there are other men hiding in the jungle and waiting to find them. It could just be him. She sees his profile, his prominent nose. She raises her bow, at first as a precaution, because he too has a bow.
Behind a tree, she is well hidden and silent.

As she holds her bow and aims it at Kukulcan, it occurs to her how easy it would be to shoot him. She has mostly a clean shot. He is a far easier target than the peasants who were racing toward her. She shot that man in the heart.

But Kukulcan is the leading member of the priesthood. He is almost as precious as the King. How could she kill this man who the gods have chosen to speak to?

From here, he seems so fragile. She could release her arrow and it would pierce through his flesh, just like any one. He is not sturdier than the peasants. He breathes deeply, his spine slumps. He looks so old and tired. Killing him might save herself. Might save Chiccan.

She pulls back the bowstring. She closes one eye and aims. She tries to ignore her thundering heart. She needs only to release the arrow, this small physical act. *Do it*, she thinks. Her breath comes in short, shuddering gasps. She can’t get enough air.

And then he turns and looks straight at her. She knows that he sees her, because his face changes, crumples. It looks as if every fear he has ever known appears as a wrinkled line on his face. He looks so old. His eyes are wide and brown.

She cannot shoot him. Not now and not like this. She lowers her bow.

He raises his. He is so quick. He does not hesitant and shoots her. He doesn’t aim for her heart, but her left shoulder. The arrow’s obsidian tip pierces through her bicep and the pain is so surprising and shocking that Exa’s vision tunnels. She gasps, rips the arrow straight out, but still, there is so much blood.

Kukulcan runs toward her. He is so fast, and Exa is so shocked, time rushes quickly, like a wave gathering force. He is right next to her now. She has no energy to run.
He is used to wrenching peoples’ hearts from their body and so his hands are strong. His grip is firm on her arm. He ties her wrists with rope and then wraps the wound, to stop the bleeding.

*As a traitor, you will die*, he says, *but not yet.* He leads her back to Tikal.

Not far, just north of here, Chiccan is surrounded by men. Ome is among them, and though he doesn’t like Chiccan, Ome doesn’t want to be here. Doesn’t want to see such a great man fall.

Like Exa, Chiccan doesn’t have the heart to shoot them and so he lays down his bow and arrow. Still, one of them shoots him in his upper thigh, just in case. Just so he cannot run. As the arrows pierces his skin, Chiccan looks long and hard at Ome.

Exa will not see Chiccan again until they are sacrificed together.

Exa’s arm burns from the arrow wound, as she paces her cell. It is all stone, with a leather flap at the door. Thick rope tied around both ankles and attached to the wall, keeps her from leaving these four walls. Also, there are the two guards standing just behind the leather flap. She hears them breathing.

She will be sacrificed in two days time.

Chiccan is held in the cell just across from hers. A slim hallway runs between her leather flap and his, so they can talk to each other, but cannot see each other. Still, they haven’t said much. It feels awful and too public with the guards between them, hearing every word. *I am sorry*, they say to each other, though neither knows what else they could have done differently.

The wound on her arm is hot and swollen.
On the first day of their imprisonment, Ome visits them. He does not enter through the
leather flap, but rather stands in the hallway where neither Exa nor Chiccan can see him.

*I am sorry*, Ome says. He doesn’t greet them, merely enters and allows his voice to
boom. He has come to prove to himself that he is a nice, kind man. He believes he can do this,
as long as he doesn’t have to look Exa in the eye.

Exa says, *Your apology makes me feel nothing.* She is seeing how far she can push him,
because what does she have to lose? She is also curious why he came here, what role he has
in all of this. She is sure he played a part.

Ome clenches his one good hand. *It was me*, he says. Exa doesn’t yet understand. He
says, *Your tat asked me to keep an eye on you, to keep you safe.* Exa laughs, her voice
echoing off the walls as he continues. *I noticed you sneaking away from Tikal and into the
jungle. I told my uncle, and he kept an eye on you too. It was he who saw you and Chiccan
climb the Temple of the Two-Headed Serpent.*

*And he told Kukulcan*, Chiccan says. Exa is still laughing, the noise of it so dark and
sad, like the sound Itzali made when he told her he was going to war.

*I did not want this to happen*, Ome says and he means it. He wanted to keep an eye on
her, to protect her and make up for hurting Exa. He never imagined it could have come to this.

Exa says, *First Ismena is married to you. Then she dies. And then you try to protect
Itzali. He dies too. And now me. You are a beast.*

*I am sorry*, Ome says. He so needs her forgiveness. He feels the weight of all these
deaths on him and he cannot breathe for the guilt. Why isn’t he a good, honorable man?

*You are not.* Exa says. *I know you Ome. And so do the gods. Leave.*
It was not my fault, Ome says and slams his good hand against the stone. The hard smear reverberates through the hallway.

I am not scared of death, Exa says. I have followed the gods and I know I have done no wrong. But you Ome? You should be terrified.

She hates him. And she is so scared and feels so small in this moment that she wants to hurt him, to make him understand what it feels like to be just moments from your death.

And she wishes that what she said were true, but she is scared of death. She is not convinced she understands the gods. All she knows is that her great city she loves is dying, and there is nothing she can do to save it.

You should be happy, Exa says. You beat me. You win.

Ome screams, slams his palm on the wall. He had always wanted to best Exa, but not like this. He is not a cruel man, except now he is.

He storms out and wishes he had never met this young woman, who has proven to him the sort of man he is.

Exa wishes she had not taunted him so. As a child, had she been kinder, perhaps she would still be with Chiccan in the jungle.

The next day, the King visits them. He too stands in the hallway. Exa has never spoken to the King, and it seems surreal to do so now, when her death is so close, when she cannot even see him.

I have never been so betrayed, the King says.

Chiccan, who is used to speaking to the king, speaks easily. We were trying only to follow what the gods were showing us. They were trying only to maintain hope.
The gods speak to me most directly, the King says, though as he says the words, he wonders. His city is falling and it is his fault. If he were a stronger king, he would have kept Tikal strong. He would be able to speak to the gods and convince them to stop this drought.

I love Tikal, Exa says. I wanted nothing more than to protect it.

The King knows he should be angry, but it is hard to see these two former members of his priesthood as the enemy. They will be sacrificed for treason, but he also respects them. He wanted to sacrifice Chiccan, because he saw the purity in the man’s blood and though that might appease the gods.

Exa says, What we are doing, is not working. Tikal is falling.

The King might agree. But what else is he to do? He, like all the citizens of Tikal, must do what tradition tells them, what the gods have laid forth.

He says, You will be sacrificed, but I will take no pleasure in it. And then he leaves, his tall, feathered headdress brushing the stone ceiling as he does so.
CHAPTER 14

I.

It is a peculiar thing to know she has awakened for the last time. When Exa opens her eyes, when the sun slants through the holding cell’s window and pierces her vision, she can only marvel at how bright the light is, how strange it is that she exists, that any of this is present. Sun and moon. Her body as it breathes, the constant in and out, that will soon stop. The shuddering of her ribcage as she tries not to cry, to suppress the impulse, because why waste any moments with sadness? She tries to whittle down herself, so she is only a body, so she needs only what her biology dictates: air, for now and that’s it. Eventually: water and food. An eventuality she may never come to. Her stomach is hollow, and it groans.

She hasn’t slept much. She couldn’t bear to fall into that darkness, to lose herself for such a stretch of time.

Her eyes are dry, grow dryer every second. She stared all night at the sliver of sky from her window. She counted each star and marveled at how bright they were. How close they seem, how far the gods.

The tears come, unexpected and forceful. It is difficult for her to know how she feels, why she feels. She only knows that she feels fiercely.

Chiccan? She whispers, but there is no answer. Chiccan still sleeps.

She has been told that sacrifice is an honor, even under such circumstances, because she will be dying to protect her people. But she also understands now that this belief might only be for public perception. She has seen too much sacrifice, seen too many go willingly to it. She has seen how messy it gets. How everyone, even in the last moment, has eyes that turn wild, that beg to continue existence. Honor is revered, but you cannot eat it, cannot use it to
save lives. Sacrifice is honorable, but she has not seen any deaths that result in happiness. Their water is dry. Their food, gone.

She has questioned everything.

She stands in her cell, her young bones stiff from sitting on the stone for so long. She cherishes that ache, that reminder that she is still her body. She is very hungry and very thirsty. Likely, they won’t give her food, but will give her water to dilute her blood, so that more can flow out of her for the gods.

She mustn’t yet think of this.

She sits and waits. She brings her knees to her chest, tries to coil her body so she can feel it all. Her stomach rumbles. Acid sits at the base of her throat, a soft irritating burn. And this feels good, and natural, and she wishes for it to take her over, cover her body in this fire so that all of her nerves will light up and she can feel what she deserves, for starting this, for being unable to do what she was told.

She slaps her palm on the stone, does it again, to hear that guttural slap again, to feel the instant pain as she puts more force into it. The pain feels like anger, hers, at herself, at the King, at Ome, at Tat, at all the nobility for letting Tikal fall like this. Does she grieve more for herself or her city?

She slaps her palm again on the stone. She wishes she knew.

She wishes to burrow deep into the stone, to escape from the cell and fly like the quetzal, to have the ability to forget about death.

The sun crawls up the sky. It must nearly be time.

Indeed she hears shuffling outside. It must be the people coming for Chiccan.
Princess Mahaway comes to her cell, her eyes wide asking, *Why? Why?* But Exa has no answers. The Princess does not like this. Exa is one of her own, and as Mahaway opens the leather door, she has half a mind to tell her, *Run,* to maybe join her, to fling their bodies to the jungle.

Princess Mahaway does none of this. She knows her place, the orders of her world. But more importantly, she still has hope, a commodity that has now run dry for Exa.

Princess Mahaway leads Exa to the bathing room and ceremoniously washes her. She is careful around the wound in Exa’s arm.

*This is horrible,* Mahaway says. The warm water still stings the wound and Exa tries not to grimace. Mahaway makes Exa clean, pristine, for the gods. During the bath, Exa opens her mouth, lets the water slide into her dry mouth. For this small pleasure she is thankful. Her throat was parched. Her stomach growls. This is the side of sacrifice Exa has never seen. She wonders where Chiccan is right now.

Mahaway’s fingers are soft and careful as they thread through the water, remove dirt and sweat from skin. Hers are the last fingers Exa will feel on her skin to touch her carefully, before she is held too stiffly. There is such an intimacy here, with Exa so barely together and vulnerable, naked, all her skin exposed and beginning to form goose bumps from the water. Vulnerable, with that aching wound in her arm.

It’s so warm, but still her skin prickles, shivers running everywhere water touches her body and then evaporates. Its leaving creates that cold.

Mahaway wants to speak, to say something, but she has no words, so instead she hums, the noise of it somehow comforting both to her and to Exa. The hum, creating more shivers throughout Exa’s body as she steps from the bath, as she dries herself with the soft fabric.
Exa hums with her, and Mahaway stiffens for a moment, looks Exa eye to eye. Together they inhale, and then both begin humming, the rumbling from each throat joining the other and mixing in the air. The humming is a pleasant distraction from death. Exa concentrates on making that noise, on the way it vibrates her palate, how it pushes through her pierced nose. If she concentrates she can forget for a moment or two what will happen next.

She still doesn’t quite believe she will die soon. Deep in her stomach, she feels the tightness of anxiety, the fierce fist clenched in her chest. Expectant and terrified. But her disbelief has muted these feelings. She cannot die, not her, because for so long she has told herself she is special. That she would save Tikal.

Mahaway and Exa hum, fall into the same simple rhythm: low, high, low, the simplest of priestess songs. The noise they make before they try to commune with the gods.

Elsewhere, in another cleaning room, Kukulcan washes Chiccan. If there were fight left in him, Chiccan would rebel, but a part of him still loves this man. A man he has for so long considered a father.

_I am sorry,_ Kukulcan says, though it is not enough. Neither dares to look the other in the eye. Kukulcan wonders if there is hope left. He starts to wonder if he trusts Chiccan and his judgment, this leaving, more than he trusts his King.

This is what destroys a great city. Doubt. The inability of its citizens to believe. But what else can there be when there is so much chaos? So much death?

As Kukulcan washes Chiccan’s body, he wants to punch him, free him, destroy him for ruining his faith. His beliefs are cloudy now, mysterious, tenuous smoke.
Next comes the smoke. Mahaway leads Exa outdoors, to a small roofless and square, stone building. Mahaway lights the incense-copal smoke and bathes Exa in it. Exa stretches out her arms, the left aching. She spreads herself, so that every bit of her skin might be covered with this spicy scent. The smoke purifies her and then drifts upward in wispy plumes, up to the gods. Why send up her impurities? Why must she rid herself of her dirt before she gives herself to the gods so fully?

Their throats have forgotten now to hum. Now, only silence, tension, as the moment grows closer, as the last of the smoke tendrils up.

Exa yearns to see Chiccan. To feel that strong physicality of him beside her, his scent like the jungle, but heavier, musky. He is the only one who can understand how she feels, numb, and on fire, as if every emotion she has ever had is now present with her, right under the surface of her skin.

She does not want to die. But she also can no longer live here.

Mahaway leads her from the open-aired building down a small stone path that will lead her to the Grand Plaza, to the Temple of the Jaguar where all of this will happen. They wait behind the Temple of the Masks, screaming. Lady Twelve Macaw’s voice rises over the noise of the spectators. It booms.

Chiccan is not far behind, but he moves more slowly, because of the wound in his leg. And when Exa sees him, she immediately wishes he wasn’t here. Because seeing his body, how alive, strong, makes her incredibly sad. He is bare chested, wears a serious face, none of the light left in his eyes. She thinks of stars, of counting them last night. She looks to the sky, clear, not a single cloud, all sun and bright.

The stars will return, but Exa and Chiccan won’t see them.
He puts his hand on her shoulder. Both are afraid to speak, because opening their mouths means letting out the fear, the tears that they have both been fighting back. They have both witnessed so many sacrifices, assisted with them. They both thought they knew what it would feel like.

The Temple of the Masks’ voice pierces through the air, embodies all of Exa’s anxiety and sadness. But Lady Twelve Macaw died on her own terms. Her body withering away in the jungle. At least she was surrounded by all the green, by all those animal noises.

The spectators, who are just out of sight, talk loudly. A nervous, but distinct rumble.

Exa puts her hand on top of Chiccan’s hand, so that her arm crosses her chest. So that her arm shields her heart.

Somewhere a quetzal calls, or does she just imagine this? The animals stay away from the city.

She could run. She wouldn’t make it far; there are men with bows and arrows all around them. But she could do it. Strip all the honor or shame, false or genuine, from her death, and just end it now.

She could do it. Any moment. Her calf muscles tense, readying for it. She can feel Chiccan tensing too, his legs bending, only slightly, as if preparing to pounce. She could do it, as the men with the ropes walk toward her. She could do it, as one grabs her arm, pauses and then, she can’t do it, because the rope is wrapped around her right wrist, and then the left, then her ankles.

This is the moment her body crumples, when it becomes real, and she lies like a puddle on the ground. Chiccan, who is tied now too, scoops her up and holds her. She is not crying, but she cannot seem to move her body. Her mind is panic. Despite his hurt leg, he bends over
her and when he opens his mouth, his warm breath brushes her cheeks. This does not help.

_We did all we could_, he whispers, though he isn’t sure he believes this. Isn’t sure if they were running away out of fear or to make a statement. _This is better_, he says. Than what? A slow death. Watching all those around them suffer. Starving.

Mahaway and Kukulcan stand around them and avert their eyes, shuffle their feet.

Chiccan’s words do not comfort Exa, but she likes his warmth and solidness as he holds her. He reminds her of Tat, of their relationship they once had, when they walked through the jungle and he taught her to hunt.

A slight breeze blows on the back of her neck. Ruffles her braided hair. Her body slumps, and though she is shorter than Chiccan he begins to sag under her weight. His leg aches. It feels good, the stretch, the pain in his spine, his leg.

Mahaway puts her hand to Exa’s back. _We must walk_, she says, and though she intends this to be matter of fact, so much sorrow and regret flows through these three words that Exa feels how hard this is for her too. How hard it was for Exa to watch the others being sacrificed. To imagine Itzali being shot with an arrow. His body falling in the dirt and abandoned.

Exa decides she will move, decides that she can still control her body. _I am fine_, she tells Chiccan and he lets her down, and she stands, stiffens her back straight. She decides she will try to meet this with dignity.

Her heart beats so fiercely she is afraid it will break from her chest. Her fingertips thrum with it. Every muscle tenses as she takes one step then another. Chiccan takes her hand. Mahaway and Kukulcan stand on either side. They hold the ropes that bind Exa and Chiccan here.
When they turn the corner of the temple, and the whole crowd comes into view, Exa tries instead to imagine the jungle. How the canopy creates soft shade, the air smells vaguely of honey and moist dirt. The jungle is good, and calm, but also thriving with the unknown. The ants under leaves, mosquitos in the air, beetles rummaging through shit.

The Grand Plaza is hot and sticky and swarming with people desperate to see these two fallen members of nobility. These two who so recently killed two peasants but spared the others. And they are not only nobles, but members of the priesthood. Their death promises that anyone is unsafe, that at any moment anything could happen. Tikal’s collapse, the buildings rippling like molten lava, settling into piles of dust.

Only we know it won’t be the buildings in ruin. Only people: killed, lost, left to flee into the jungle, to find any home they can. Even if they can run, find their homes, hundreds of years from now, the Spanish will come, and Landa’s arrival will be like a new kind of destruction.

It is sad business writing about the past. About lives that must come to an end.

Our own lives. How fragile.

Exa walks. Chiccan walks. Her right hand in his left. She thinks of armadillos, of the quetzal, and not of Mat and Tat who now crane their necks to see their daughter, but once they spot her, the image of her walking toward sacrifice is at once too awful and overwhelming for them to fathom. Mat turns her eyes to the ground, and Tat turns away, his back to the King. He so wants to leave.

Last night they both visited her.

*Why?* Tat kept asking.

When Exa said, *Chiccan and I were following what the gods showed us*, he wasn’t sure
how to take this information. His sadness overwhelmed his anger, but still he was hurt that
she could abandon them. More importantly, abandon her city.

But our city, he said. But our King.

I lost faith in him, Exa said. And Tat couldn’t take this. He couldn’t hear this treason,
because it sounded too much like truth and this unsettled him. Did he still trust the King?

Tat left because looking at Exa reminded him that he would outlive all of his children.
It reminded him how fully destroyed his family was. He left in a black cloud, all dark
emotion and panic. What have I done? he thought. He can’t stop thinking this.

Mat stayed with Exa for a very long time. She felt a little guilty, like perhaps her past
had driven Exa to this. But she also felt proud, that her daughter did something so daring.
Mat understood the impulse. Her joke from so long ago: when in doubt you can always kill
yourself.

She had hugged her daughter for a very long time.

Exa maintains her strength, focuses only on keeping her back straight, on not thinking
about so much. If she can concentrate on keeping her mind blank, then she can do this,
proceed forward. Chiccan’s hand is solid in her own.

As they walk forward, it is as if the crowd is engulfing them, as if they are being lost in
this sea of tangled bodies. Peasants who yearn to see the privileged fall, who regret this dark
desire. Peasants who feel torn and sad to see these two high figures go. The nobility, who feel
so scared and humbled.

The King, who will remove their hearts, stands straight ahead of them on a raised dais.
He has no desire to kill these two, but he must, because they have betrayed him. Because he
fears what weakness will bring. If only he knew, perhaps he would stop all this. Stop worrying about Tikal’s wealth and prestige, about building new temples, and controlling his peasants. He might instead focus on how beautiful the jungle is. How alive and thriving.

The jungle is what will persist. Once Tikal falls it will enter the city again. Creep between the stones. The plant and wildlife comes back if we let it. The rain will return, and the jungle’s soil will capture it, will feed and nourish its plants.

The city, the stone and the temples, will sit and degrade, the people long gone.

Fear slices through the King, because he knows this illustrates his own inability to speak with the gods. A king who loses his nobles, his chosen priesthood, is a symbol of disaster. Their deaths, the death of everyone who has come before this, are his responsibility. The city crumbling, ravaged by war and drought and foolish waste, this too will be his fault. And he knows it. Predicts its happening.

Would he have left too?

This sacrifice is his attempt at staying alive. Of protecting the people that he loves, that Exa and Chiccan love. They have already lost so many. He keeps trying to solve his problems with the same solutions. It no longer works.

Exa and Chiccan begin to climb the tall steps to the platform. Exa is dizzy. Her stomach yearns for food, this emptiness is too consuming, she is too close to no longer being a person. Each step strains her legs. She and Chiccan lose each other’s hands. Chiccan’s leg aches with every step. The wound opens and begins to bleed.

In this moment, Exa is alone, bereft.

The noise of the crowd, of the Temple of the Masks, of her banging heart is so loud, that it almost seems quiet. Her ears are overwhelmed and just give up. They stand on the dais
of the Temple of the Jaguar. The priestesses, all painted in delicate blue, dance for the gods. Exa so wanted to be a part of them, but she wasn’t made even for that. She looks to the sky, virulent blue and cloudless. No rain today. Please bring us rain, she thinks to Chacs. But does she still believe in her power? Or is belief nearly a relief, a comfort?

She needs a distraction.

Chiccan is smiling. Not his normal, impish smile, but one that makes him look crazed. He doesn’t mean it. He intends it to be stoic, to be brave.

The King steps forward with his obsidian knife. Four men, Chacs in the four cardinal directions, walk to him, and grab one limb per man. Black West Chacs, who has for so long been Chiccan, is now a young, stringy looking man whose mouth has cupped into an oblong O. He doesn’t quite have the stomach for this.

Exa refuses to look away. She must see what she has created. She tries to regret nothing, and all she can think of is her past. It is beside her, every wrong choice, every right.

She feels her former self’s desire to be something more. That young version of herself who saw her own body projected to the future. Now here she is, past catching up to present, to future. As she stands, it is almost as if she can feel the past versions of herself standing with her. All those times she saw glimpses of this very moment. She circles back to those visions. Sometimes the visions made her feel strong, sometimes curious, sometimes scared.

She is hunting with Tat, she is retrieving the lost arrow from the ceiba, cutting her hand on one of its thorns.

She is standing next to Ome. She is about to shoot. He is all over her. She has never felt so helpless.

What she knows: she is here. She is about to die.
What we know: Tikal will die too.

The four Chacs spread Chiccan, pull his limbs taut. The wound in his leg bleeds more fiercely. The King chants, the priestesses do too, but their eyes are on Exa. In her they see themselves. In Chiccan, Exa sees herself, or something like herself. She sees her own future. She has been seeing it all along.

Chiccan looks at Exa and they lock eyes for the final time. They acknowledge that for a moment more, they are both here. Both still alive.

The King raises his knife.

Chiccan closes his eyes.

Then the King bends his head, something Exa has never seen him do. A sign of respect? A momentary regret? Even the King doesn’t know. And then he plunges the dagger down, the sharp point easily parting that soft flesh.

The skin is easy, the sinew, muscle. What is difficult is the bone. Hard and resilient. Home to the blood cells. The King must pry Chiccan’s ribcage open. Chiccan’s body shakes, spirals into shock. He begins to lose himself. He opens his eyes but sees nothing. There is something so intimate and sinister about ripping open a ribcage while the heart is still beating. While the body pulses and writhes from the pain of it, the shock of it all. The King can hardly bear it, as he plunges the obsidian dagger deeper, as he pulls at those ribs with a strength coming only from desperation, he pulls the bones free and extracts that heart. Once removed from the body, for a moment, it still beats.

And Exa, stuck and held beside him. This man she has loved, how dark his body is. How basic and intense. As the white-tooth bone is pried apart, as that bloody fleshy organ is taken from this man who was so strong, she breaks. There is no strength left in keeping it
together in trying to appear strong. There is no honor left when his heart is pulled from his body and exposed. This is the moment of collapse. Where Exa sees how dark bodies are, how unknown and terrific, and her knees collapse and she cannot fathom her own humanity any longer, because this is it. The end.

She is on her hands and knees. And the other Chacs try to wrench her up, try to prepare her for her own death. But she is already there. Already at that final moment of terror, where she has seen it all. All around her great fires burn her and Chiccan’s belongings. To cleanse them, to rinse Chiccan and Exa’s existence from the Tikal’s history, from the world’s history completely.

She cannot get up, cannot remove her palms from Tikal’s warm stone. She has seen inside his body. Inside her own.

She opens her throat to scream, her voice joining the Temple of the Masks as it cries, joining Mat’s tears, and Tat’s shaking body. Chiccan’s body no longer moves. The blood settles at the base of him. This honorable man. Only a piece of what she once knew. No, nothing. Empty bone. Heartless.

Exa is pulled from the stone, by the four men pretending to be Chacs, her god. They can’t know what it’s like, just a moment from your death. At once nothing, at once all things. At the other sacrifices she felt a rush, a visceral awareness of life. But now, she feels the opposite. Energy ebbing from her, her muscles slowing, growing heavy.

The King raises his dagger again. The black, slick, surface of it, almost like glass. It catches the sun as he holds it.

And Exa knows she is next. But what of the crowd? Mat, Tat, Kukulcan, and Ome? The King? Could they know? Could we?


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