



ONE

The girl was small, but she ran faster than anyone in her village. And when the ships appeared on the horizon, she was the one called to the fire.

“It is time,” the girl’s grandmother said. She lifted a bundle, wrapped in cotton cloth.

The girl could tell it was heavy. She knew what it was.

She stared at the cloaked treasure in the old woman’s gnarled hands, and her heart raced. She thought this moment would come later, after she had come of age. But it was happening now, and that could mean only one thing.

She was needed. It was time.

Her grandmother unwrapped the bundle carefully, as if she were handling the most delicate baby bird. But the creatures that appeared, glimmering

gold when the worn cloth fell away, were the fiercest known in the forest.

A jaguar, all teeth and muscle and fire-filled eyes, stared out from one side of a smooth drinking cup.

A serpent rose from the other side, with thick, powerful coils and fangs that appeared to drip venom, though the polished gold surface was dry.

“They come. Soon – before the sun is gone – we will leave the village. We must travel quickly and will bring only water and food for today. Nothing more. Not even that which we hold most sacred.” The old woman held the cup high so the girl could see brown glimmers of her own skin in its reflection. “This will not be safe with us. You must hide it so it cannot be found. You know the place.”

The girl nodded. She knew. She reached for the cup, but her grandmother pulled it back. “First,” she said, “you must drink.”

Her grandmother turned, lifted a gourd from beside the fire, and poured its contents into the glowing cup. She held it out. “From this moment on, you shall be a sworn protector of the gifts of Ixchel, treasures of beauty and hope made by your people.”

With trembling hands, the girl raised the cup. The horrible serpent faced away from her, but the eyes of the jaguar burned into her own as she brought it to her lips. The liquid inside was milky and sour. It

warmed her throat, and though she knew it to be the fermented sap of the agave plant, somehow, as it filled her, it was more. The spirit of her ancestors spread from a place deep in her chest, through every part of her body. Her legs, her legs especially, felt as if they were made of the burning energy of the sun.

Her grandmother nodded slowly and reached for the cup. Carefully, she wiped the last drops from its rim, wrapped it back in the cloth, and placed it in the girl's hands. "You must go now. Be swift."

Clutching the cup to her chest, the girl ran the worn path from the village to the graves where her ancestors slept. She heard their whispers over the thump of her heart, urging her. *Go . . . Go . . . Go . . .*

She raced to the end of the path and beyond, into the thick brush, where branches tugged at her hair. Butterflies and birds erupted into color and squawks, startling from limbs and logs as she passed. Howler monkeys roared at her from above until finally she burst from the trees onto the sand and turned toward the cave. The tide was coming in, the water perhaps too high already.

She would have to be fast. She would have to be brave.

Waves rushed through the narrow channel to meet her, but she sprinted on, into the tunnel as if the light on the other side were all that she could see. It was bright, beckoning.

She made herself as tall as she could and splashed with strong steps into the darkness. The ocean's roar filled not only her ears but her whole body, down to her toes, gripping the sand even as it slipped out from under her.

Halfway through the tunnel, she stopped. Where was the foothold she needed? Already underwater? She wrapped one arm tightly around the cup and used her other hand to feel along the wall. Every wave surged more powerfully than the one before. Salt water splashed her eyes and licked at her face. But she held on.

There! She found the crevice at the waterline, jammed her foot into the narrow space, and reached up with one hand to pull herself higher.

Another wave struck her legs, and her toes slipped. She pushed them farther into the scratching rocks and found a narrow ledge for her second foot, just above the first.

The cup was heavy, and she was small. But she had made a promise.

In order to climb, she would have to let go of the handhold that kept her snug against the ledge, above the raging waves. She would not let go of the cup. She *could* not let go.

Instead, she let go of her safety — and for a breathless moment released her grip on one rock so she could grasp for another. In that heartbeat, she lurched

backward, flailing. But then she touched rock again, dug her fingers into the crevice until she felt the slippery warmth of blood in her hand.

But she had to climb higher — well above the tide line of even the highest waters of the full moon — or the cup would not be protected in the darkness but lost forever to the sea.

She climbed — and let go — and clutched — and pulled — until finally her hand found the flat, smooth surface she'd imagined all through her struggles. It was here, in this crevice, she'd hidden the crystal-dimpled rock from her brother in a game of keep-away. It was here he'd been afraid to climb, and she had enjoyed his bellowing for a good long while before she climbed up again to toss the rock back down to her older sibling, who would not let his feet leave the sand.

Now, she pushed the cup from underneath, higher. Into the dark, empty space while the waves screamed below.

“Be well,” she whispered. It was what her father told her whenever he left on a journey and would not be back for some time. “Be well.”

She clambered down quickly — so much easier with two hands free — and landed in the rising waves. They pushed her back toward the beach, reclaiming their dark hideout. She nearly lost her footing with every staggering step.

When she stumbled into the light, she lifted her gaze. The approaching ships were larger. Soon, they would spit out smaller boats full of men with fair skin and hairy faces. They would land on the beach before dark.

But it was done. Clouds swirled above, reflected in the waves, and the rain began. Warm drops mingled with the salty air, tears from the sky.

The girl started back to the village, the home she would soon leave. When she reached the edge of the forest, she turned back to the cave and looked hard, as if she could still see the cup hidden high in its shadows.

“Be well,” she whispered. “Stay safe.”

And it would. For the next five hundred years.