

Well of Sky

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Yaxchilan, by Désiré Charnay, 1885; Wikipedia.
This lintel sculpture depicts a sacred blood-letting ritual which took place on 26 October 709. King "Shield Jaguar" is shown holding a torch, while Queen "Lady Xoc" draws a barbed rope through her pierced tongue.

A black jaguar crouched above, muscles coiled to pounce. In the meager shade, his eyes glowed as golden as the glaring sun.

Ignoring him, Lady Jade Mirror walked beneath the ceiba. Fire ants marched up and down her spine, stinging her scalp, but she kept her gaze

locked to the dusty path. If she refused to acknowledge him, he couldn't speak.

:Do you think so, Lady?:

Wincing, she quickened her step and concentrated on building mental stone walls taller than Kukulcan's Pyramid. Dust kicked up beneath her sandals, and she sneezed. In all the years she'd made this solitary trek from her hut in the jungle to Itza's Well, it had never been so dry.

The ceiba's barren branches clacked like Lord Itzam's ceremonial belt of finger bones. Stomach fluttering, she shivered as if those icy bones trailed over her skin.

It's only an eclipse, she told herself. The sun will emerge triumphant.

Yet in her mind, she saw a monstrous black snake swallowing the precious sun, demons feasting on her people, and eternal darkness engulfing the dying jungles. The land was so terribly dry, and with an eclipse...

The gods required sacrifice.

Her stomach cramped harder and her hands trembled as she smoothed her hair back from her face. The people already thought she was crazy. Running across the plaza flashing her strange jade eyes and babbling about the eclipse would do little to alleviate their fear. She took several deep breaths, painted a wide smile on her lips, and stepped out of the surrounding jungle.

Huts crowded the low wall of the city's perimeter; within, man-made mountains touched the sky. Once a major and powerful city, Itza's Well had faded in the last year. Several huts stood empty, thatched roofs caved, doors ajar. A tapir squealed and ran into the dark, abandoned depths of a hut. Carefully tended gardens baked in the unending heat, maize stalks brittle and as empty as the cloudless sky. The black rows of fertile dirt were cracked and dry. So very dry.

As Lady Jade Mirror entered the village, solemn dark-brown eyes watched her, heavy with silent hope and fear. People lined the path, their whispers trailing her, prodding like a pointed stick. A sick heaviness

settled in her stomach. Her feet slowed, stumbled, until she stood at the White Road.

The road which lead to the Sacred Cenote of Sacrifice.

Heart racing and lungs burning for air, she struggled to push away the black, cold memory. Water closing over her head. Sinking, sinking, so cold. So dark. So alone. She couldn't breathe. She would never see the sun again.

In her mind, something brushed that horrible memory, nudging it aside like a warm muzzle in the palm of her hand. Slinking away, the jaguar growled softly, claws clicking on the stone walls she'd built to keep her sanity. Walls which these people demolished with a glance.

As a child, she'd brought the rain. That she still lived was nothing short of a miracle, the change in her eye color proclaiming she'd been touched by the gods. *If they try to sacrifice me again...*

Lifting her chin, she walked slowly and proudly toward the plaza. She refused to run from the White Road, from the stares and whispers. She'd made the sacrifice ten years ago. She'd paid the price for rain with her innocence, her safe brown eyes, and the final breath of her body.

I will not risk my life ever again. Not even for them.

#

In the House of the Sorcerer, the air was thick with burning copal and sweet, heavy incense. With heart-felt emotion, Lady Jade Mirror smiled at Lord Itzam. Despite the master sorcerer's awesome power, she wasn't afraid. They had more in common than any two people in all of Itza's Well. They'd seen the gods, and lived to tell of it.

He was the only other person with all-seeing jade eyes.

Eyes she hated.

Eyes she deliberately blinded.

Lord Itzam inclined his head to the mighty warrior at his side. "Lady Jade Mirror, this is our player today, Lord Five Shield."

Stiffly, she inclined her head. She was suddenly very aware of the stone, the walls, the clamor of people. Forcing a deep breath, she gave her future husband a brittle smile.

As warriors went, Five Shield was impressive: tall, muscular, strong. Yet she met his flat gaze, noted the stone-carved, empty expression on his face, and disappointment welled in her heart. Of course he would not be thrilled to win the village crazy as his bride. Struggling to keep her face smooth, she dropped her gaze and surreptitiously scrubbed her damp palms on her cotton tunic.

“Do you have any questions for this warrior?”

She couldn't pretend silent acceptance. Not when she must give up her life of solitude in the jungle to live among people in this city she'd once called home. “Why have you agreed to this?”

The warrior blinked and a small spark gleamed in his dark eyes for a moment. Surprise? Or dislike? She couldn't be sure. “You are Itza. Marriage to you will increase my honor.”

She tried to swallow the hard lump of tears strangling her throat. *I will not cry, not for him, not for any of them.* “Of course.”

Five Shield inclined his head and left. Heart aching, she stared down at the floor, afraid to meet the sorcerer's all-knowing eyes.

“Come, child, sit with me awhile. I want you to sample a new brew I made for the celebration of the sun's rebirth.” Lord Itzam guided her deeper into his private lair. Skulls lined the walls, painted a brilliant blue-green like the sacred bird. Unfortunately, the queztl abandoned them long ago when the rains ceased. Another sign of coming doom.

For all his fearsome reputation and magics, Lord Itzam had always been kind. Even now he gave her time to compose herself, sipping his new brew from a hand-carved wooden cup. Marked with a jaguar glyph, it was the cup she always used when she came to visit him.

“Are you sure you wish to marry?”

She studied his face a moment. Ageless, unlined except for the crinkles about his eyes, skin as dark as tanned leather, his face was as much a mystery and a testament to his power as the man himself. Lord Itzam alone conversed with their ancestors. He knew the gods' will. He told the king when to go to war against neighboring tribes, and when the people should plant. He healed the sick, helped resolve disputes, and even named each new baby's spirit companion.

His ears were tattered, thick with old white scars, bearing witness to the many sacrifices he'd made over the years. Yet even Lord Iztam could not tell when the rains would return.

Despite the drink in her hand, her mouth was dry. "I will marry Lord Five Shield if he wins the ballgame."

"Why?"

She respected him too much to not tell him the truth. Lord Itzam had pulled her from death to life. "I want to be normal. I want to marry, have children, and live in the city. I'm tired of living alone. I'm tired of the fearful stares, the whispers as I walk by, mothers drawing their children away as though I am some terrible monster."

"Marriage to Lord Five Shield will not change how the people see you, child. You touched death and lived to tell of it. They will not soon forget."

"They..." Her voice cracked, but she forced the words out. "I fear they contemplate sending me back."

"In these dark times, with the eclipse coming, I'm sure they do. The people are afraid. They do terrible things when they're afraid."

Yes. Like throw children to their death in a bottomless well.

"I won't." Her face hot and furious, she raised her gaze to the sorcerer's. "I won't go into the Cenote again!"

"Of course not." He smiled mildly, immediately diffusing her rage and fear. He was the only person who could sanction such a sacrifice. "However, I ask that you look closer at Lord Five Shield's proposal. In many ways, marriage to him will be like leaping into the Sacred Cenote with no hope of climbing out again."

"What do you mean?"

"Only you can decide." He reached out and lightly touched the jaguar on her cup. She felt an echo in her heart, like a pebble tossed into the sacred pool. "Will you leap for love? Or will you leap for duty?"

"Duty? I don't marry for duty. I won't leap at all."

"You believe that if you lead a normal, simple life, the people will no longer fear you. But they will remember a year from now or ten. Jade eyes tell all, child. You are Itza, which is why Lord Five Shield considers you for

wife. Whether you like it or not, whether you deny it or not, the gods have touched you. You feel. You *see*.”

Itza, sorcerer of water. Suddenly, she found herself staring into her cup. Swirling shadows formed. A warrior, holding a spear over a kneeling figure. A woman, her hands bound. The warrior grasped a hank of the captive’s hair in one hand and prepared to sacrifice her. Her jade eyes glowed in the dark liquid. *Me*. The vision woman allowed the sacrifice with a calm, distant look of beatific peace on her face.

A peace Lady Jade Mirror had not known since she’d drowned ten years ago.

Snarling, tail lashing, the jaguar paced the walls she’d built to keep him out of her mind. *:Don’t let them sacrifice your spirit!:*

Chills crept down her arms so viciously she felt as though a knife flayed her skin. Suffocating waters closed over her head. She shoved the cup away so hard that liquid sloshed on her hand. Trembling, she set the cup on the mat and refused to look at it. No water was safe, not for a child of Itza.

“You can be more, more than you ever imagined. More than the honored yet imprisoned wife of Lord Five Shield, subject to his whim. Will you let him sacrifice you if he makes such a decision? Will you sacrifice everything you are in a futile attempt to make him happy?”

“What do you want of me?” She retorted, her cheeks blazing and her chest banded with fire. Trapped, she felt trapped, suffocating, lungs full of water. She lurched to her feet and paced the small chamber, just as the jaguar padded, growling in the depths of her mind. “I don’t want to be alone!”

“No one said you had to live outside the walls, child. I begged you to come live with me.”

“Walls.” She choked, waving her hand at the stone. “Trapped.”

“Yes. And you would trap yourself even further in marriage.” Lord Itzam stood and patted her shoulder gently. “You must look into the mirror unflinchingly before you can expect others to do the same.”

He paused at the doorway and gave her a warm, loving smile that clenched her heart. Her hated eyes burned, as hot and dry as the sun. How

she yearned to daily feel such love, to belong with a family where she would never be alone again.

“Dress for the ballgame. Don’t rush to a decision, child. Even if Lord Five Shield is victorious today, you are under no obligation to wed him. The choice is always yours, but you must see, child. See, and then make your choice.”

Always, his words were more riddles than advice. See what? After a simple cup of liquid proved so unsettling, she dared not look into a mirror. What magics would she see then? What horrors?

The walls of the building marched inward, looming shadows. She felt every press of stone weighing on her chest until she could barely draw breath. Whispers and laughter echoed in her mind, grating on her bones. *Can I honestly live inside the city, even to belong?*

Despair twisted in her stomach. Woodenly, she donned the scarlet and green woven huipil over her plain white cotton. She plaited her hair and settled the heavy shell and jade headdress on her head. She slipped the jaguar claw necklace around her neck.

And every item was another link of chain dragging her down once more into the cold, dark depths of the Cenote of Sacrifice.

#

The crowd roared with approval. Five Shield seized his defeated opponent by a shank of hair and dragged him up the pyramid steps. Cheering, stomping, the crowd was hungry for blood. Lady Jade Mirror could well imagine the noise shaking the very earth, disturbing the gods of Xibalba.

Head splintering, she wished she could silence the entire crowd. She longed for the solitude of her hut, the secret dark places of the jungle, and her haunting jaguar.

At the top of the pyramid, Five Shield and his brother bound the defeated warrior foot to bent knee, knee to chest, hands wrapped around himself, bending him tightly into a man-sized ball.

And then they tossed him down the steps.

She made herself watch. Sacrifice, blood, death--it was all crucial. Enough blood might persuade the sun to shine again after the eclipse.

Enough sacrifice might bring the rains. The captive's head smashed open, splattering brains and blood down the final steps, and at last, she looked away, swallowing the bile rising up in her throat.

Please, don't ask me to jump.

Light-headed and fingertips tingling with cold, she stood with Lord Itzam and bowed to her future husband. Five Shield held out the severed, very battered head of his opponent, dripping blood onto the obsidian mirror at their feet. "Tell us of the eclipse, great sorcerer. Tell us of the coming rains."

Lord Itzam took her hand. "Sit, child, and see with me."

Dread rolled in her stomach, seizing her lungs. Her breath turned to ash in her mouth; her blood thick and heavy like tar. Knees trembling, she collapsed on the mat opposite Lord Itzam with the mirror between them.

Chanting softly, he took a cup--her jaguar cup--of water and filled the mirror. Blood stained the water, a pink cloud of sacrifice.

I don't want to look. I don't want to see.

Swirling clouds of blood began to coalesce. Itza's Well. The Pyramid of Kukulcan, reaching to the sky. The smaller yet still impressive buildings: the House of the Sorcerer, the Temple of the Jaguar, the Temple of the Warriors, the Great Ballcourt. Yet there were no people clamoring and betting in the court.

The city in the vision was deserted.

Weeds and saplings grew in the courtyard. Fire pits long burned out. Buildings crumbling to nothing. The proud display of skulls along the Great Ballcourt were scattered, mixed with more bones.

Her people were dead.

The mirror darkened, and a fearsome pressure built. A rolling weight of rock crushed her mind, a mountain of stone on her chest. Her ears echoed, blood rushing and pumping through her body as if eager for sacrifice. Her lungs felt too full, as though she had no right to breathe.

In the vision, she stood at the edge of the Sacred Cenote. A bottomless pool of water waited fifty paces below. Shadow crept across the land. She glanced up at the sun in time to see it swallowed by the black maw.

Pain stabbed her tongue, so badly it was surely severed. She couldn't speak. Blood choked her, metallic and thick and hot.

People lined the Sacred Cenote. Terror clawed her heart from her chest.

Don't throw me in again!

Instead, someone jumped. Tears poured down her face, and she was so ashamed. So terribly relieved.

It wasn't me.

A ragged, shrill sound like a dying animal's cry penetrated the vision. She whimpered, a horrible mewling sound of pain and terror. Scrabbling back from the mirror, she looked at Lord Itzam. His face was reverent and calm, with such hope and love as he stared into the vision waters.

Her gaze darted among the onlookers. Five Shield, his mouth even tighter than usual, pale around his lips. He flinched when she looked at him. Others backed away, dropping their eyes, hands rising up to block her gaze.

No. No, she couldn't bear it.

She staggered to her feet and fled, ripping the heavy ornaments from her body and dropping them on the ground. Down the steps of the Temple of the Jaguar, across the plaza in the opposite direction of the Sacred Cenote, through the stretching sinuous shadow of Kukulcan's Pyramid, down the rows of quiet huts, she raced. Yet she saw it all as in the vision: abandoned, overgrown, dead.

Sobbing, she fled into the trees. She ran where the people feared to go alone, so deep into the heart of jungle that she found hints of green. Lush, cool, a balm for her terror.

In this great time of need, why am I such a coward?

#

Shaded by a canopy of trees, Lady Jade Mirror sat atop a crumbling pyramid so old no one remembered when or who built it. Birds called and sang; insects hummed in accompaniment. The beasts of the jungle knew her better than the people of Itza's Well.

The black jaguar lay beside her. Many times he'd followed her here. She'd always refused to acknowledge him. She refused to see him.

Heart heavy with shame even while fear shredded her belly with talons, she turned her gaze upon her jaguar companion. She looked into his golden eyes. She saw him, really saw him.

Stretching, growing, the jaguar became... a man.

Still dark skinned with hints of blacker spots down his arms, his shining black hair fell down his shoulders. Black spots tattooed his cheeks. His eyes glowed like lamps in the night, still jaguar eyes, and his teeth were sharp, white and gleaming against the shadows of his face.

"Lady," he breathed, his voice low, growling with jaguar undertones. "I'm B'alam, your wayob and your guardian."

She'd always known he wasn't a real jaguar. That's why she feared him so much. That's why she'd refused to see him as anything more than a beast.

"Why me?" Her throat ached so badly she could barely speak. "Why do you follow me, stay with me even when I'm rude and blind?"

"All people have wayobs, but few see us. You, Lady, have seen the Otherworld, the home I sacrificed to guard our people."

His rumbling voice was soothing and so familiar. How often he must have come in dreams, whispering to her, trying to lure her into seeing him and allowing him to speak. All these years, she'd worked so hard at forgetting. She'd blinded herself to magic, as if she could gouge out her own hated jade eyes and avoid the visions. She'd made herself mute and deaf and dumb. "Why did you make such a sacrifice?"

"Someone must guard the portals." His lips curved and he lowered his head, staring up at her through a curtain of dusky hair. "Then I found you, and I knew."

She couldn't catch her breath. Such emotion gleamed in his eyes: admiration, longing, pain, fear, respect, chiding, and love. Open love, gleaming in those golden orbs. Her chest ached, and she could only muster a whisper. "Knew what?"

“You were too young to recognize me, but I knew. I guarded your dreams and trailed your steps in the hope that someday, you would see me and call me to you. I’m yours, Lady.”

She could drown in the molten gold of his eyes. “Portals? What portals?”

“You saw. You passed through.”

Heart hammering against her ribs, she jerked her gaze away and studied her hands clenched in her lap. White knuckled, fingers clamped into claws. “I don’t remember.”

“That’s why I’m here.” He leaned closer, enveloping her in his scent. Verdant jungles, fertile loam, and cacao. “You must remember, else our people will die.”

Shivering, she gripped her hands so hard they hurt. “I’ll explode into thousands of tiny pieces. I can’t, B’alam, I can’t bear it. So much pain and fear. Such--”

“Betrayal. You were a child, and you were betrayed.” He touched the back of her hand and a shudder ripped through her body. Muscles eased until her shoulders sagged and her chin rested on her chest. “Until you accept the pain of your abandonment and betrayal, you won’t remember the true message from the gods.”

“Help me,” she whispered, tears dripping onto her hands. “Help me remember.”

Gently, he pushed her back on the cool stone. He leaned over her, his shoulders blocking the sun trailing through the canopy of green. “Does this form frighten you? Would you rather receive my help as the jaguar?”

Staring up into his proud, chiseled face, she felt a lump in her throat. He was just as strong and handsome as Five Shield, but the tenderness and honesty in his eyes undid her. She swallowed that lump and a sweet warmth melted in her belly. “Like this. Please.”

Smiling, he stretched out beside her, his hair trailing over her face, her neck, her arm. Breathing in the scent of his hair, she smelled cacao, dark and bitter and rich, mixed with the deepest heart of the jungle. Her muscles unclenched. Her breathing steadied.

He touched her forehead lightly. “Close your eyes, Lady.”

She obeyed. Immediately, she stood at the edge of the Sacred Cenote with her parents. They bound her hands and feet, their gazes skittering away. They ignored her cries and flinched away from her clutching hands. One took her arms, the other her feet, and they tossed her in a wide flying arc, only to sink like a stone into the cold, dark water.

She shrieked, choked, flailed in the water. Alone. She was utterly alone.

:I'm here, Lady. I'm with you, always. Remember, and let the emotions roll through you, away, far away, never to hurt you again.:

She felt the child's rage and fear. Her own parents had killed her. They had left her to drown, a horrible death. She'd loved them, trusted them, and they killed her!

Darkness claimed her, but she felt B'alam, the jaguar pacing, tail lashing her mind.

She sank deeper, and the blackness lightened until it was so bright she shielded her eyes with bound hands. A pyramid unlike any she'd ever seen before pierced the sky. The sun blazed at the peak, and the foundation blocks were as black as night, yet full of light, reflecting the sun in a multitude of rainbows.

A figure glided down from the sun, part serpent, part bird, brilliant quetzl plumage trailing against the black. Her heart stuttered with awe and terror and fearsome joy. Kukulcan, the Great Feathered Serpent, our god above all gods. Why would he come speak to her?

And then she realized something crucial. *I must be dead.*

This was nothing like she'd imagined Xibalba, the Place of Fear. No foul stench and twisted demons. The jaguar stretched out on the ground, head on his paws, and she matched his posture, bowing before the god.

"The time will come when the Great Serpent will be cut. Raised-Up Sky will wither, its roots hacked and destroyed, its branches broken and abandoned. Our cities will lie as ruins, our people dispersed to the four corners, our civilization nothing but dust on the winds of time. I will be forgotten, and no blood will be offered. No blood, no vision. No vision, no future."

She didn't know she cried until the jaguar licked dampness from her cheeks.

"When the sun is eaten and the once-dead offers sacrifice, the Well of Sky will open. Send them home, child of Itza. Send them to me with the blood of your body. Else they will travail on the Road through Xibalba and the Great Serpent will never rise again.

"Open the Well of Sky."

#

She stared up at the broad leaves of the canopy. Cool stone, slightly damp, pressed against her back. B'alam's solid warmth stretched out along her side, the weight of his thigh and arm across her. She turned her head and met his steady gaze locked on her face.

"I know what I must do."

He stroked his thumb down the curve of her jaw, smiling slightly. Yet his eyes were so solemn. It made her heart ache to look at him. She knew him beyond thought, as though the unseeing, unhearing part of her soul were made from the same breath of the gods. A great and fearsome magic tied them together.

"No magic, Lady." He stroked her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb, and her belly tightened with heat. "Love."

"But--"

Replacing his thumb with his lips, he rubbed his mouth against the curve of her jaw, lower, until he whispered against her lips. An obsidian curtain of hair slid over his shoulder to pool on her breasts. "I love you, Lady. I walk this life beside you."

Her heart swelled with hope. *I will never be alone again.* "And the next life?"

Pain flinched across his face, his eyes hollowed with sorrow. "As guardian, I'm bound to this portal. As long as mankind walks this earth, until this age ends and a new creation begins, I will prowl the jungles and guard the Well of Sky from those who might misuse its magic."

She cupped his face with both hands, memorizing the planes and chasms, the bridge of his nose, the curve of his lips. Glancing up at the sun and the dark maw slowly rising to swallow it, she made a decision. They

had few precious moments left before this fragile world must end. “Then let us make the most of this life.”

And she drew him down to her.

#

Although she carried B’alam’s essence, his spirit, inside her., Lady Jade Mirror returned to the city alone. Fresh tears trailed down her cheeks, for if she was successful, they would not walk side by side again until this age ended.

People lined the White Road, carrying small personal items to sacrifice in the Sacred Cenote. They were silent, grim, casting worried glances at the sky. The black maw was nearly ready to eat the sun.

She made her way to the edge where Lord Itzam waited in his elaborate headdress of quetzl feathers and jade. He inclined his head and gestured to the implements he’d prepared, but she knew him well enough to see the easing of strain about his mouth and the suspicious moisture gleaming in his eyes. Even with his all-seeing jade eyes, he had not known for sure that she’d return.

Although he fully understood what would happen if she had not.

She knelt on the jaguar pelt with the obsidian mirror before her. A coiled rope waited to her left; a stingray spine to her right. She wasn’t sure when to begin, or how long she could keep the Well open, so she waited what seemed an eternity, trembling, fighting waves of nausea.

For my people, for the gods, I can do this.

But it was B’alam she held in her mind.

At Lord Itzam’s touch on her shoulder, she blindly reached out and fumbled for the spine.

“While the sun is eaten, Lady Jade Mirror will make a sacrifice to open the Well of Sky. All who desire to live at the feet of the gods and bypass death’s journey may leap. Leap and join Kukulcan, Great Feathered Serpent. You must decide and act quickly. The Well will not be open for long.”

Whispers and cries echoed, but she ignored them. She heard only B’alam whispering words of love in her mind, his body over hers.

Lord Itzam touched her shoulder again. She opened her mouth, stretched out her tongue with her left hand, and stabbed the spine through the tender flesh.

Agony blazed through her. But with B'alam's scent enveloping her, the memory of his arms, she endured. Lord Itzam helped her start the rope through the hole in her tongue. Bit by bit, she drew the rope through her own body, coating it with her blood. It coiled in the mirror like a bloody serpent.

Inside, she felt an opening, a deep, resonate gong ringing through her soul.

“Leap through the Well of Sky!”

Silence, then a scream. Someone leaped--or was pushed. Splashing, cries. And then--

“I see it! A great black pyramid!”

Others jumped. Laughter, glad voices, splashing. In her mind, the obsidian pyramid rose up, the sun gleaming at the peak. People walked toward it, their faces full of wonder. She felt them pass through the portal one by one, even as she drew another length of rope through her body.

Her tongue was on fire, her jaw, her throat cramping with pain. She couldn't go quickly, for as soon as she ran out of rope, the portal would close. Yet she could not linger, either, for she must finish as the sun emerged from the maw. Each moment ticked by like a stone dropped on her chest. Her arms trembled. Her vision, gone.

How will I know it's enough?

:I will tell you.:

B'alam, dearest jaguar. He wound in and out of her mind and heart, trailing through her, sleek and black, until the pain receded.

:All are safe, Lady. Leap into the god's embrace, but never forget mine. I will join you at Kukulcan's Pyramid when my duty is finished.:

With one hard tug, she pulled the last of the rope through her lacerated tongue. Or maybe her tongue simply split open. Swollen and hot, it blocked her mouth, trailing blood down her throat. She blinked heavily, trying to see beyond the blackness sucking her under.

Did I fall into the Cenote?

No. Rock. Hard and cold beneath her cheek.

Struggling to lift her head, she pushed up, arms trembling.

Kukulcan rose over her, coiled sinuous scales and spreading wings of jade. She tried to bow but flopped forward awkwardly. He caught her, taloned hands firm and sure on her shoulders. His magnificent feathers were soft against her face, smelling of fresh air, sunshine, and pure magic.

“Well done, child of Itza. How may I reward you?”

Feathers lifted her, and she soared through a night sky, whizzing through a trail of milky white stars. She tried to see, to remember, but she couldn't hold her eyes open any longer. She couldn't force her poor tongue to move.

She thought of B'alam, his unfailing love all these years, his gentle nature, his tender touch, his undying loyalty. The scent of his body, the thick, sleek pelt of his shining hair, his heat and weight against her. And she yearned with all her soul to stay with him. To run the wilds of the jungle, to explore the secret forgotten places that called to her heart. With him. Forever.

“It is finished.”

Numb at last, she fell into the waiting black maw.

#

She opened her eyes to both rain and sun. Shining down through crystal raindrops, sunlight sparked rainbows in the air. Carefully, she stretched, moving her jaw and tongue to see how badly it was mangled. The pain was gone.

“Thank you, Lady Jade Mirror.”

She jerked upright. Lord Itzam smiled, jade eyes shining. “The sun is triumphant, the rains have come, and the people who chose to brave the Well of Sky are now walking with the gods.”

She tried to speak, but a strange growl came from her mouth. Expecting her tongue to feel strange and swollen, it took her a moment to realize her teeth were pointed.

Her body... her fur... was black.

“He's waiting for you.” Lord Itzam pointed below, and she realized they were on top of Kukulcan's Pyramid in Itza's Well, not the black

shining mountain of her vision. The city was deserted except for the sorcerer, herself, and B'alam, who sat on his haunches at the edge of the jungle.

Lord Iztam dropped to his knees and threw his arms around her neck. She leaned into him, relieved, happy, and so full of love and hope.

“Go, dear child. I will never forget your sacrifice, how you saved an entire people. I remain to help the Maya who live on in this age, determined to save as much of our civilization as possible. Someday, the Great Serpent will rise in the Sky once more, and our people will return to reclaim this world. In the meantime, live and love the mate of your heart.”

:Come, Lady, my love. Our jungle awaits.:

Bumping the old man in the chest with her head, she turned to leave and noticed a quetzl feather on the stone. She gently picked it up in her jaws and dropped it onto his lap. Then she turned and with all the love in her heart, she leapt. Effortlessly, she soared, not touching a single stone, to land beside B'alam. They bumped noses, rubbing cheeks, rumbling with pleasure.

And she followed her black jaguar deep into the shadowed jungle.