

The Hero Twins

An excerpt from the *Popol Vuh*, translated and adapted by David Bowles

The Tragedy of Their Fathers

The sea-ringed world was dark but for the light of the stars and a faint smear of perpetual dawn on the eastern horizon. During this long night were born two brothers, minor gods of the *milpas*, those tangled fields of corn and bean and squash. They were named One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, for their respective day signs.

In time One Hunahpu married Lady Egret, and she bore him two sons: One Monkey and One Artisan. The small family continued to live with One Hunahpu's mother and brother in the gloom of a world with no sun.

Other gods hailed One and Seven Hunahpu as knowledgeable and wise, the foremost seers on the earth. They taught young One Monkey and One Artisan many skills, and in time the boys became like their father and uncle singers, musicians, poets, sculptors, and workers of jade and metal.

Though the brothers possessed a singular, innate goodness, they tended to shirk their responsibilities in order to roll dice and play ball. Every day the four of them played two against two in the ball court, and as each game began a falcon would descend to watch them, sent by Hurricane and his sons. The falcon could fly in an instant from the sea-ringed world to Hurricane's abode in the sixth heaven, or just as well descend to the Land of the Dead to do his master's bidding there.

Lady Egret left the earth, returning to the Mother, but the four ballplayers remained behind. Their ball court was located at Great Hollow, on the road to the Underworld, the dark land that men would one day call *Xibalba*, Realm of Fright. The King and Queen of Death could not help but hear them.

Disturbed by the riotous sounds, the god and goddess called together their council, all the dark lords in that place of fear, tasked with bringing death to humans in a variety of savage ways.

“Who are these middling fools that shake the earth with their running and that disturb the stillness of the grave with their shouts?” demanded the King of Death. “They show no proper fear and run roughshod over the natural order. We should bring them here to play ball. Since they have no respect for us, we shall beat them at their favorite game and then destroy them.”

The dark lords all agreed with their sovereign, adding that upon winning they could seize the brothers’ gear, the pads, yokes and plumed helmets that made up their kits.

The task of summoning One and Seven Hunahpu was given to the Royal Guard, four fearsome owls from the very throne room of the Land of the Dead. They flew from the Underworld in an instant, alighting in the stands above the ball court. The four players halted their game and approached the messengers.

“We have been sent by the Lords of the Underworld,” announced Strafer, chief among them. “Harken unto the words of the King and Queen of Death: ‘You must come. Do us the pleasure of playing ball in our dark courts. Your skill amazes us. Bring your gear, your yokes and pads and rubber ball.’”

“Is that what the gods of that fearful place truly said?” asked One Hunahpu.

“Yes. Now, come along. We shall accompany you.”

“Fine, but wait while we let our mother know. She’ll have to watch over my sons while we’re gone.”

The brothers took the boys back home and explained the situation to their mother.

“We’ve no choice but to go. These are messengers of the King of Death himself. But we’ll be back, we promise. Here, we’ll leave our ball behind as a token.” They hung the rubber sphere in the rafters. “Don’t worry, we’ll be kicking it around again very soon.”

One Hunahpu turned to his sons. “You two keep practicing your music, your art, your skill at games. Keep this house—and your grandmother’s heart—warm in our absence.”

Their mother began to weep at their words.

“We’re off on a journey,” they told her, “not to our deaths. Don’t be sad.”

Then the brothers left. Guided by the Royal Guard, they headed North toward the entrance to the Underworld. They descended through strange canyons, past streams of scorpions, over rivers of blood and pus. None of these obstacles slowed them down.

But then they came to a vast crossroads that offered four paths to the Land of the Dead: the Red, the Black, the White and the Green. The messenger owls indicated the Black Road. “That is the one you should take. It is the King’s Road.”

And here was the beginning of their defeat, for the brothers heeded the Royal Guard, not suspecting that this was the path of the dead. They were led along its gruesome length to the council chambers of the dark lords, where their doom was further sealed. The horrid

aristocrats of that fell place were seated in a row, but the first two—the king and queen themselves—were clever statues carved and arrayed by the artisans of the netherworld.

“Greetings, Your Majesty,” they said to the first statue.

“The dawn shine upon you, Your Majesty,” they said to the second.

The chambers erupted with laughter, for the brothers had failed again. Chortling, the dark lords mocked them.

“Foremost seers, indeed! Those are mere manikins, fools!” In their hearts the nobility of the Realm of Fright felt certain they had already won.

The real king and queen entered, smiles on their skeletal faces.

“Perfect. You have arrived. Tomorrow you will show your skill with yokes and guards. For the present, however, take a seat upon the bench we have prepared.”

When the brothers sat down, they realized the bench was a burning hot slab. They squirmed around for a time, trying to save face, but finally they had to leap to their feet or risk real damage. The dark lords once more burst out in howls of laughter; they laughed so hard their innards ached. Even writhing in pain, they could not stop their chuckles and hoots.

Now the Underworld is full of torments of every kind, among them five terrible houses of torture. But as fate would have it, the brothers would only experience one. They were escorted to their supposed sleeping quarters by the rulers of that fearful place, who smiled and said:

“Enter, friends. Get some rest. In a moment you will be brought a torch and two cigars.”

One and Seven Hunahpu went inside, greeted by inky blackness. Unbeknownst to them, the brothers were lodged in Dark House, a place devoid of light.

Meanwhile, the dark lords conferred. “They are certain to lose. Let us sacrifice them tomorrow. It will be quick. We shall use our bone white blade to kill them both, and then we shall keep their gear.”

The king and queen sent a messenger with a torch of *ocote* wood and two lit cigars. “Here you go. You are expected to return these in the morning—whole, just as they are now.”

The brothers took the torch and the cigars, and once again they were defeated. They let the torch burn down to ashes; they smoked the cigars down to stubs. In the morning they were led back to the council chambers, fear mounting in their hearts.

“Where are my cigars? Where is the torch that I lent you last night?” demanded the King of Death.

In that moment of terror, a vision winged its way to the brothers from the heavens above. They saw their doom. But then they saw their victory.

So they admitted defeat. “They’re all gone, Your Majesty.”

“Very well. Today your days are ended. You will die here. You will be ripped from the world. Your faces will remain hidden. You will be sacrificed!”

And there and then the brothers were slaughtered. Their bodies were buried together in a single grave near the ball court, except for the head of One Hunahpu, which was removed at the king’s command.

“Take his head,” the god of death instructed, “and set it in the forked branches of that bare tree beside the road to serve as a reminder of our might.”

But as soon as the head was fixed in place, the tree miraculously bore fruit, round and heavy like a skull. It was the calabash, and it hung now from every branch so that it was no longer clear where the head of One Hunahpu had been deposited.

The dark lords gathered round in amazement. It was clear that the sudden appearance of fruit was an ill omen. So the king and queen issued an edict:

“Let no one pick fruit from this tree. Let no one even sit beneath its boughs.”

And all the inhabitants of that dreadful realm obeyed.

Except a maiden.

The Victory of their Mother

The dark lord Blood Gatherer had a daughter, a maiden named Lady Blood. He told her of the tree and the prohibition of their king, trusting that she would obey. But Lady Blood was curious. She wondered about the taste of the fruit and pondered its possible origin.

Finally, she could not resist looking on the miracle herself, so she went alone to where the tree stood, near the ball court and the graves of sacrificial victims.

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “What sort of fruit is this? It simply has to be sweet. If only I could pick one and not be killed or banished. Just one.”

Then the head of One Hunahpu spoke from the fork in the tree. “Come, you’re not really interested in these round things hanging from the branches. They’re just skulls. You can’t possibly want one.”

“But I do,” answered Lady Blood.

“Alright, then. Stretch out your right hand.”

“Fine.” Lady Blood reached toward the source of the voice, and the head squirted a bit of spit into her palm. Startled, the maiden drew back her hand and stared at it closely, but the saliva was gone.

“The spittle I’ve given you is a sort of symbol,” explained the voice of One and Seven Hunahpu, for they had merged and spoke with a single mind. “You see, my head here has been stripped bare: all that’s left is just the bone. But that’s the way it is even with the head of a great lord. He only looks decent because of the flesh on his skull. Once he’s dead and rotted away, though, people shrink in fear from that naked bone.

“His sons, now...they’re like his saliva, which still contains his essence even after leaving his mouth. Whether they be the sons of a lord or a wise man or an orator, they preserve the basic nature of their father. His face isn’t wholly lost, but passes to the children he leaves behind. That’s what I’m doing through you. Now abandon this land of fright. Go to the surface of the sea-ringed world before they kill you. Trust in my words.”

The skull gave her many more instructions before she was on her way. By the time she reached her home, the saliva had sparked life in her womb, and she conceived twins, sons of One and Seven Hunahpu both. But instead of leaving the Land of the Dead, she remained in her father’s house.

When six months had passed, Lord Blood Gatherer noticed that his daughter was pregnant. He went to the council chambers and addressed his king and queen:

“That daughter of mine is with child. A bastard.”

“Very well,” said the queen. “Question her. If she refuses to reveal the truth, you must punish her. Have her taken to some distant place and sacrificed.”

So Lord Blood Gatherer confronted Lady Blood. "Whose child is in your belly, girl?"

"There is no child, lord father. I have not known the face of a man."

"I see. So you are clearly a whore." He summoned the Royal Guard, and when those four fearsome owls arrived, he gestured at his daughter. "Take her away for sacrifice. Bring back just her heart, in a gourd, and surrender it to our king and queen this very day."

The Royal Guard departed, bearing aloft in black talons Lady Blood, a gourd and the council's bone-white blade, with which they were to sacrifice the maiden. Once they had traveled far from the center of the Underworld, the owls alighted and reluctantly readied themselves to complete the task.

Lady Blood begged them to reconsider. "It is not right that you should kill me, messengers. There is no disgrace carried in my womb, but a miracle, begotten when I went to visit One Hunahpu's head there beside the ball court. There is a greater power at work here, respected friends. You must not sacrifice me."

The owls looked upon her unblinking for quite some time. They had known her all her life, had watched her grow into a delightful young woman. Deceit was not her nature. And even if she were lying, they realized with a start, they did not wish her to die.

"But what can we take in place of your heart, Lady Blood? Your father demanded we bring it to the king and queen today."

"My heart will never belong to them. And you, friends, must no longer call this place your home. Never again let them force you to kill someone unjustly. There, upon the sea-ringed world, you can harry true villains. From now on, let the King and Queen of Death taste only blood, sap, resin. No more hearts burned in their presence. Not mine, not anyone's."

She placed her palm on a cochineal croton tree. “Drain the sap from this plant. Collect it in your gourd.”

They used the blade to slice the trunk until sap dribbled out. The red resin congealed in the makeshift bowl, forming a lump like a heart surrounded by what appeared to be clotted blood.

“On the surface of the world you will be blessed,” said the maiden to the owls with a happy smile. “You will have all you desire.”

“So be it, Lady. We will accompany and serve you. But go on ahead while we present this false heart to the dark lords.”

When the Royal Guard arrived in the council chambers, the fell aristocracy of the netherworld had already gathered.

“Has it been done?” asked the King of Death.

“Indeed, Your Majesty. Here is her heart in this gourd.

“Very well. Let us see.” The king lifted out the coagulated sap, which looked for all the world like a heart glazed with ruddy gore.

“Excellent. Stir up the fire—let us set it among the coals.”

Once the resinous clump was thrown upon the fire, the dark lords delighted in the aroma of its burning. They stood near, leaned into the smoke, delighted at the sweet smell.

As they watched it bubble and hiss, the owls slipped away, overtaking the maiden and leading her up through caverns, out of the bleak Land of the Dead and onto the surface of the earth.

And that is how the dark lords were first defeated, every one of them tricked by a maiden.

Their Birth and Childhood

Following the instructions she had been given by One and Seven Hunahpu, Lady Blood finally arrived where their mother lived with One Monkey and One Artisan. She carried sons in her womb—soon they would be born, twins named Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

Standing before the grandmother, the maiden announced:

“Here I am, Lady Mother—your daughter-in-law, your own sweet child.”

“What? Who are you? Where are you from? How can you be my daughter-in-law when my boys have both died in the Land of the Dead? Look upon these two: One Monkey and One Artisan, their true blood and heirs. Now go. Get out!”

Wincing at the shouts, Lady Blood did not move. “Regardless, I am still your daughter-in-law. I belong to your sons. One and Seven Hunahpu are not dead, Lady Mother. They live on in what I carry. They have turned dark tragedy to brightest hope, as you will see for yourself in the faces of my sons.”

The other woman scoffed. “Daughter-in-law indeed. No, you lying wench, I have no need of you or the fruit of your disgrace. My sons are dead, I tell you. You are clearly an impostor!”

Lady Blood remained where she was, head high. After a few moments the grandmother frowned. “Right. You claim to be my daughter-in-law. If that is true, then go bring food for these boys. A netful of ripe ears of corn from our *milpa*.”

“As you say,” the maiden replied. She walked along the road that One and Seven Hunahpu had cleared until it opened onto the family *milpa*. One lone clump of cornstalks stood in its midst, with a single ear dangling from it.

“Oh, I am but a sinner, a debtor!” Lady Blood cried. “Where will I get the netful of food she has demanded?”

Then she remembered who she was, a noblewoman from the Land of the Dead, powerful and commanding. Lifting her hands, she called out to the guardians of food:

“Arise now, come, O Lady of Tribute, O Lady of Maize-Gold, O Lady of Cocoa Beans, O Lady of the Shameless Day! Come, you guardians of the food of One Monkey and One Artisan!”

Then, seizing the cornsilk at the top of the ear, she yanked upward. Though she did not pick the corn, it multiplied magically, filling her net till it overflowed. Calling to the animals of the field, she enlisted their help in transporting the load back to the house. Once they had arrived, the creatures brought her a carrying frame, and she made herself break out in a sweat so her mother-in-law would believe she had brought the net herself.

The grandmother emerged from the house and was astonished at the mound of food. “Where did you get that corn? Did you steal it? Let me go see if you have stripped the *milpa* bare!”

She rushed to the field to find the clump of cornstalks intact and the impression of the net sunken deep in the earth. Something miraculous had occurred. And where there was one miracle, there could be others. She hurried back home and spoke to Lady Blood.

“This is surely a sign that you are, in truth, my daughter-in-law. I will keep watch over all that you do. Those grandchildren of mine you carry must already be as magical.”

The day at last arrived, but Lady Blood was on the mountain, so their grandmother did not witness the birth. Labor came upon the maiden suddenly, and the twins were born: Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

When their mother finally brought them down to the house, they could not sleep and made quite a fuss.

“Take them back to the mountain and leave them there,” the grandmother told the other two boys. “They just will not stop screaming.”

So One Monkey and One Artisan dumped them on an anthill, hoping they would die, but the babies slept soundly and were not harmed. The jealous half-brothers then threw them in the brambles, from which their mother soon rescued them. Neither had a scratch.

In the end the older boys simply would not accept their half-brothers or Lady Blood into their home. The maiden had to raise her sons in the mountains, aided by animals and other beings. Over the years they learned to harness the divine energy that was their birthright, to communicate with the animals, to hunt with a blowgun, to coax melodies from the flute, and above all to play ball with such skill as to make their fathers very proud.

When they were able to fend for themselves, Lady Blood left them, knowing their destiny could not be fulfilled at her side. Once their mother was gone, Hunahpu and Xbalanque spent their days shooting their blowguns and felling prey. Though they had never received love or food from their fathers’ family, the boys began to visit their grandmother’s home again, avoiding mealtime in order to minimize conflicts. Silently, understanding their low rank in the family, they suffered the rudeness of their grandmother and older-brothers, making a gift of

fowl each day with the full understanding that they would never have a bite from the fruit of their own labor, which was devoured by their older siblings without a word of thanks.

One Monkey and One Artisan had suffered greatly from the loss of their father and uncle, but they had grown in stature through the years, becoming in many ways the equals of One and Seven Hunahpu. However, though as talented and wise as their father, the brothers felt such envy of the twins that their hearts were filled with hate, keeping them from showing true wisdom. Their natural foresight told them that their young brothers were destined for greatness, but they did nothing to encourage those abilities.

Finally, Hunahpu and Xbalanque decided to put an end to their siblings' cruelty. "We'll just turn their beastly nature against them. It'll be a fitting payment. If they'd had their way, we would've died as babies or been lost as little kids. They treat us like slaves. To their minds, we're nobodies. Time to make an example of them."

That evening they arrived at their grandmother's house empty-handed.

"Why have you not brought any birds?" she demanded.

"Well, grandmother, we shot some birds, but they're stuck in the top branches of a tree. We're pretty clumsy and can't climb up there, so we were hoping our older brothers would come help us."

"Very well," said One Monkey and One Artisan. "We will go with you in the morning."

The next day the twins led their brothers to a large *madre de cacao* tree replete with countless singing birds. They loosed a barrage of darts, but not a single bird fell to the ground.

"See? They're getting stuck or something. Climb up and fetch them here."

“Fine.” One Monkey and One Artisan clambered up into the very top branches of the tree, looking for the birds. As they did so, the twins caused the trunk to swell and stretch toward the sky until it was monstrously big. When their brothers realized what was happening, they tried to get down but couldn’t.

“Little brothers!” they called down. “Take pity on us! What can we say? This tree is frightening to behold.”

“Look, it’s your loincloths that are keeping you from moving freely. Loosen them and then retie them so the long end sticks out behind you. You’ll be able to get down easier.”

One Monkey and One Artisan did as they were told. The moment they pulled out the long ends of their loincloths, these instantly became tails. The spell had been triggered. Within seconds, the older brothers were transformed into spider monkeys. They leapt from the gigantic *madre de cacao* into the branches of smaller nearby trees and then went swinging their way into the dense mountain forests, chattering and howling wildly.

And so One Monkey and One Artisan were defeated by the divine magic of Hunahpu and Xbalanque. The matter of their grandmother still remained, of course. When they got home, they immediately called to her.

“Grandmother! Something’s happened to our brothers! Their faces have changed: now they look like animals!”

“If you have done something to them, boys, you will break my heart. Please tell me you have not worked your magic on them!”

“Don’t be sad, Grandmother. You’ll see our older brothers’ faces again. They’ll be back. But this is going to be a test for you. You can’t laugh at them, okay? Now, let’s see what fate has in store.”

They sat down outside the house and began to play the flute and drum, singing a song they called “Hunahpu Spider Monkey” in which their brothers’ names were repeated. Soon One Monkey and One Artisan approached, excited, and began to dance to the music. When she saw their ugly little simian faces, their grandmother could not contain her laughter. Her guffaws startled the monkeys, and they scampered off into the forest.

“Grandmother! Didn’t we say not to laugh? Look, we’re only going to try this four times. Three more. You simply have to keep yourself from laughing next time.”

They started up the tune once more, and their transformed siblings rushed to the patio to dance with wild abandon. The grandmother struggled not to even giggle, but the monkeys had truly funny faces. Their little pot-bellies jiggled and their genitals were showing. Their grandmother could not help herself: she burst into gales of laughter that made them run off toward the mountains.

“What else are we supposed to do, Grandmother? Here goes attempt number three.”

Again the song. Again the dancing. Now, however, their grandmother kept her composure. So the monkeys clambered up the wall, making foolish expressions. They puckered up their red lips and snorted at the twins. It was too much. Their grandmother cackled and howled, and her grandsons left in a hurry.

“This is the last time,” Hunahpu and Xbalanque warned, and they struck up the melody again. But the monkeys did not return; they stayed in the forest instead.

The twins shook their heads in disappointment. “We tried, Grandmother. They’re gone. But don’t be sad. You still have two grandsons, right here with you. You can give your love to us. Our older brothers will always be remembered, you know. For they were given names and titles. Down the ages musicians and artists and scribes will call on them for inspiration. Yes, they were prideful and mean, and their cruelty brought ruin on their heads. But people will always remember that once One Monkey and One Artisan accomplished great things, in a distant time, when they lived with their grandmother in a small house near the mountains.”

Their Journey to the Realm of Fright

And so Hunahpu and Xbalanque took their rightful places as the heirs to their fathers. For a time they tended the family *milpa*, enchanting axes and hoes and animals to do the brunt of the work while they went hunting with their blowguns.

After a time, however, they found their fathers’ rubber ball in the rafters. Strapping on their siblings’ gear with great joy, they headed down to the ballcourt. For a long time they played there alone, sweeping the field of their fathers.

The dark lords of the Realm of Fright could not help but hear.

“Someone has started a game again there above our heads. Are they not ashamed to be stomping about like that?” the King of Death asked. “Did not One and Seven Hunahpu die precisely for this reason? Just like these knaves, they wanted to prove their importance. Go, then, messenger: summon these fools as well.”

Hurricane’s falcon, who had watched many of their fathers’ game, winged his way to the surface to call the twins before the nether council. As he approached, he cried out:

“Wak-ko! Wak-ko!”

“What’s that sound?” Hunahpu exclaimed, dropping his yoke. “Quick, grab your blowgun!”

They shot the bird out of the air, a pellet impacting against his eye. When they went to grab him, they asked why he was there.

“I’ve a message for you, but first heal my eye.”

They took a sliver of rubber from their ball and used it to cure his wound. As soon as his vision was restored, he spoke the words in his belly:

“You are commanded by the King and Queen of Death to present yourself in the Realm of Fright in seven days. Bring your kit, for you will be playing ball against the dark lords of the netherworld. They promise it will be great fun.”

The twins went to their grandmother, who was devastated by the news.

“We’ve got to go, of course,” the told her. “But first let us be your advisors. Each of us will plant an ear of unripe corn here in the center of the house. If one dries up, you’ll know that grandson has died. But if they sprout up, you can be sure we’re alive.”

After the planting, the twins took up their gear and their blowguns and departed. They wended their way down toward the Realm of Fright, over the rim of the world, along the canyons, through flocks of strange birds. They came to the river of pus and the river of blood, intended as traps by the dark lords. But the brothers caused their blowguns to swell as they had the *madre de cacao* tree and simply floated across without a care.

Then the brothers came to the crossroads, but their mother had taught them about the roads: Black, White, Red and Green. Hunahpu plucked a hair from his knee and with a whispered spell transformed it into an insect he called *mosquito*, the perfect spy.

“Go, little guy. Bite each of them in turn till you’ve tasted them all. Then forever the blood of travelers will be yours.”

“Good,” said the mosquito, and it flew down the Black Road. When it reached the council chambers, it alighted first on the wooden statues that had been dressed up to resemble the king and queen. It bit the first, but got no response. The second said nothing, either.

Next he bit the third one, the King of Death.

“Ow!” he cried.

“What, Your Majesty?” asked the dark lords. “What is it?”

“Something stung me!”

The queen looked at him. “It is merely a...Ow!”

“What, my queen?” asked the king. “What is it?”

“Something stung me!”

“Ow!” cried the fifth one seated there.

“What, Peeling Scab?” asked the queen. “What is it?”

“Something stung me, Majesty!”

Then the sixth one was bitten.

“Ow!”

“What, Gathered Blood?” asked Peeling Scab. “What is it?”

“Something stung me!”

And thus went mosquito to every dark lord, biting him or her to learn the face and name of each: Pus Demon, Jaundice Demon, Bone Scepter, Skull Scepter, Wing, Packstrap, Bloody Teeth, Bloody Claws.

Xbalanque and Hunahpu, meanwhile, had been approaching down the Green Road, the only one living beings should travel. As the mosquito heard the dark lords' names, so did Hunahpu, who shared them with his twin.

Finally the brothers reached the council chamber.

"Greet the King and Queen of Death, seated here before you," the dark lords commanded.

"Uh, no. Those aren't the king and queen. They're just statues," said the twins. They turned to the rest and greeted them by name.

"Morning, King of Death.	Morning, Queen of Death.
Morning, Peeling Scab.	Morning, Gathered Blood.
Morning, Pus Demon.	Morning, Jaundice Demon.
Morning, Bone Scepter.	Morning, Skull Scepter.
Morning, Wing.	Morning, Packstrap.
Morning, Bloody Teeth.	Morning, Bloody Claws."

And the dark lords were taken quite by surprise.

"Greetings to you as well. Have a seat on that bench," directed the king.

The twins were not defeated by this ruse. "Uh, that's no bench, Your Majesty," Xbalanque replied. "It's just a heated stone."

“Well done. Your journey has been long. You require rest before our game. You may enter yonder house now.”

The brothers headed toward Darkness House, the first of the torments in the Realm of Fright. The dark lords felt certain that these two would be defeated there, so they sent a messenger with a torch and two cigars.

“Take these and light them,” he instructed. “Our king bids you bring them back to him in the morning, intact.”

“Will do!” the twins replied. But they did not light the torch; instead, they substituted consuming flame with the tail feather of a macaw that shimmered with magic. The night sentries saw it and believed the torch lit. In the same fashion the brothers called fireflies and set them dancing at the tips of their cigars. So Darkness house was aglow all night long.

“We have beaten them!” exulted the sentries.

Yet in the morning, when the brothers went before the council, the torch had no mark of fire and the cigars were whole. Then the lords consulted together:

“What sort of beings are they? Whence did they come? Who sired them? Who gave them birth? Our hearts are deeply troubled, for they will do no good unto us. Their appearance, their very essence, is wholly unique.”

The king and queen confronted Hunahpu and Xbalanque. “Tell us, truly—whence do you come?”

“Well, we must’ve come from somewhere, but we just don’t know.” They would say nothing more.

“Very well. Let us go play ball, boys.”

“Great.”

They arrived at the ballcourt of the Underworld. “So, then, we will use this rubber ball of ours,” said the dark lords.

“No, let’s use ours.”

“Not at all. We will use ours.”

The twins shrugged. “Fine.”

“The ball is just embossed with an image,” clarified the dark lords.

“No, it’s pretty clearly a real skull,” the brothers countered.

“It is not.”

“Sure. If you say so,” said Hunahpu.

The dark lords hurled the ball at Hunahpu’s yoke. He batted it away with a twist of his hips; the ball struck the ground and burst open, sending the bone-white dagger of sacrifice spinning around the ballcourt, threatening death.

“What’s this?” shouted the brothers. “So that’s why you sent a messenger to summon us: you want to kill us! What do you take us for? We’re leaving!”

And indeed, that had been the dark lords’ plan, for the twins to be kill right then, defeated by the blade. Hunahpu and Xbalanque had once again frustrated their design.

“Do not leave, boys. Let us continue the game, using your ball instead.”

“In that case, alright,” the brothers agreed, dropping their fathers’ rubber ball onto the court.

“Let us discuss prizes,” said the dark lords. “What will we receive if we win?”

“Whatever you want.”

“We request merely four bowls of flowers.”

The boys nodded. “Okay, but what sorts of flowers?”

“A bowlful of red petals, one of white petals, one of yellow petals, and one of the large petals.”

“Done.”

The game began. The strength of both teams was equal, but the boys made many plays, for their hearts were full of goodness. In the end, though, the twins allowed themselves to be beaten, and the dark lords reveled in their defeat.

“We have done very well. We vanquished them on the first attempt. Now, even if they survive the next torment, where will they go to pluck our flowers?”

Since the only possibility was the garden of the King and Queen of Death, the council instructed the feathered guardians of those royal flowers:

“Keep a diligent watch over these blossoms. Do not permit them to be stolen, for they are the tool for the boys’ defeat. Think what would happen were they able to obtain these as our prize! Do not sleep tonight.”

Returning to Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the council reminded them of the agreement.

“You will give us our prize of flower petals early in the morning.”

“Sounds good. First thing in the morning we’ll play again.”

Then the brothers reviewed their plans together until they were sent into Blade House, the second trial of the Realm of Fright. Inside, blades spun through the air constantly, and the hope was that the twins would quickly be sliced to ribbons. But they did not die. Instead, they called out to the blades, instructing them in this way:

“Be still and the flesh of animals is yours forever.”

The blades stopped spinning, and one by one they lowered their points to the ground.

As the brothers rested in the Blade House that night, they called to the ants:

“Cutting ants, conquering ants, come! Go fetch us flower petals as prizes for the dark lords.”

The ants marched down to the garden of the King and Queen of Death and began swarming over the flowers, but the guardians did not notice a thing. Out of sheer boredom, the birds perched in the branches and squawked or ambled through the garden repeating their song:

“Whip-poor-will! Whip-poor-will!” And that is indeed what we call them to this day.

The guardian whippoorwills did not notice the ants, thronging blackly on the stems and leaves, carrying off what the birds were meant to guard. The ants clambered up trees to harvest more flowers, with the guardians none the wiser, even though their wings and tails were chewed on as well.

By dawn, the ants had harvested enough flowers to fill the four bowls. When the messengers arrived at Blade House, they were discouraged to find the brothers alive.

“The lords summon you both,” they announced. “They demand you deliver their prize into their hands.”

“Right away,” the brothers replied. When they arrived before the lords, they place the bowls on the council table. The dark lords looked upon the petals with woeful expressions. They had been defeated, and the faces of the council members went pale with fear.

Realizing the flowers were from the royal garden, they summoned the whippoorwills before them. The birds, tails and wings ragged from the ants' chewing, had no answer for their incompetence, so their mouths were split open so that they would always gape in the future when cawing their song.

A second game was played, but this one ended in a tie. After it was over, each side began making plans.

"At dawn again tomorrow," said the dark lords.

"We'll be there," responded the twins.

They were escorted to a third torment, Cold House. Upon entering, they encountered cold beyond measure. The interior was thick with snow and hail. But the boys immediately dispersed the cold with divine magic, melting the ice and halting the hail. Though the dark lords intended them to die, they survived the night and were fine in the morning when the sentries summoned them.

"What is this? Did they not die?" asked the dark lords.

Once again they marveled at the deeds of the twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

That evening they entered Jaguar House, which was crowded with ravenous jaguars. But the brothers were prepared.

"Wait. Don't eat us. We'll give you what's yours."

Then they scattered bones before the beasts, the remains of humans from the first three ages, which they had collected during their journey through the Land of the Dead. The jaguars crunched the bones contentedly while the brothers rested.

In the morning the sentries were delighted to see these skeletal remains scattered among the beasts. “They are finished! They gave themselves up. The jaguars ate their hearts, and now they gnaw upon their bones!”

But, of course, the twins were fine. They emerged from Jaguar House to the amazement of the dark lords who had gathered.

“What kind of beings are these? Whence did they come?”

The next evening they stepped into flame—Fire House, the fourth torment of that Realm of Fright. Its interior was pure conflagration, but neither Hunahpu nor Xbalanque was burned. The dark lords intended for them to be roasted to a crisp, but they were proof against such flame and emerged unscathed in the morning.

The dark lords were losing heart. The next evening they escorted the twins to the final place of torment, Bat House, replete with death bats, enormous beasts with razor-like snouts they used for slaughter. The dark lords were certain that this would finish them off, but the brothers made their blowguns bigger and slept snugly inside.

During the night they awoke to the sound of flapping wings and horrible screeching. The twins prayed for wisdom for hours until the house fell quiet and the bats stopped moving.

Xbalanque called to his brother. “Hunahpu, are they asleep? Is it morning already?”

“Let me check.”

Hunahpu crawled to the end of his blowgun and poked his head out to see, but at that instant a death bat swooped down and snatched his head from his shoulders.

After a few moments, Xbalanque called again. “And? Is it morning?”

There was no response.

“What’s going on? Hunahpu wouldn’t leave without telling me, so what’s wrong?”

Nothing moved, however. All he heard was the rustling of leathery wings.

“Ah, damn it. We’ve lost already,” Xbalanque groaned.

Soon the sentries entered. Xbalanque dragged his brother’s body from Bat House, but the King and Queen of Death ordered Hunahpu’s head placed atop the ballcourt. The dark lords rejoiced to see the youth dead.

But Xbalanque was inspired to action. He called to his side all of the animals, great and small, telling them to bring him the various foods that they ate. The coati brought a *chilacayote* or Siam pumpkin, rolling it with her snout as she came. Xbalanque saw that the round squash would make a perfect replacement for his brother’s head. He carved features into the rind, calling on wiser deities from the heavens to descend and help him. Together, they hurried to make the pumpkin a perfect duplicate of Hunahpu’s head, endowed with the ability to speak. When it was placed on Hunahpu’s shoulders, the youth returned to life.

“Not bad,” he said.

“Okay, time for the ruse,” Xbalanque told him. “Don’t even try to play ball. Just look enigmatic and threatening. I’ll take care of things.”

Turning to a rabbit, Xbalanque instructed:

“Head to the far end of the ballcourt and hide in the tomato patch. When the ball lands near you, hop away until the deed is done.”

The dark lords were shocked when the brothers challenged them. “What trick is this?” they demanded. “We have already triumphed! There sits your head, boy, proof of your defeat. Surrender!”

Hunahpu merely called out:

“Use that head as a ball. Strike it toward us. We’re not afraid of any harm... Are you?”

So the dark lords took up the head and threw it down. It rebounded before Xbalanque, and he used his yoke to send it sailing over the court. It bounced into the tomato patch, and the rabbit immediately hopped away. All of the dark lords rushed after the animal, shouting and rushing about. They believed it was the ball.

While their enemies were thus distracted, Xbalanque retrieved and reattached his brother’s head. He then set the pumpkin down on the court.

“Hey, come on!” the brothers cried. “We found the ball!”

The dark lords returned, confused about what they had been pursuing. The game resumed, each team equally matched, until Xbalanque struck the pumpkin so hard it burst, strewing seeds before the startled nobles of that Realm of Fright.

“How did that get here? Who brought it?”

They soon realized that they had been solidly defeated by Hunahpu and Xbalanque. Despite the best efforts of the dark lords, the brothers would not die.

Their Death and Resurrection

Hunahpu and Xbalanque knew, however, that the King and Queen of Death would not let them leave the Realm of Fright alive. They summoned the two great seers, Xulu and Paqam, whom the dark lords would consult concerning the proper disposal of the dead boys’ bones.

“It’s heaven’s plan that we die here. But we need a favor. When they ask what to do with our bones, have them grind them up like flour and sprinkle that dust into the river that wends its way through the mountains. Then our destiny will be fulfilled.”

The dark lords had meanwhile dug a pit oven, hot with coals and burning rock. They tried to trick the brothers into leaping over it in sport, but Hunahpu and Xbalanque called their bluff.

“You can’t fool us. We’ve known the form of our deaths for a long time. Just watch.”

Facing each other, the twins lifted their arms and dove into the pit. As they died, the maize withered in their grandmother’s home, in their family *milpa*, across the entire face of the sea-ringed world. Without the brothers or their fathers to ensure their survival, the golden and silk-tasseled ears of corn could not grow.

When the two corpses had burned down to barest bones, the dark lords consulted with Xulu and Paqam, who recommended the grinding down and sprinkling the brothers had requested. Their ashes were not borne away by the current, however: they sank right away beneath the water.

Five days later they appeared again, as tritons in the river, and the inhabitants of the Land of the Dead stared in shock at their fishlike faces. The next day they appeared as poor orphans, dressed in rags, unrecognizable. The dark lords hurried to see them when they heard the news; they found the strangers doing dangerous dances and swallowing swords. The two seemed to set fire to a house, but then they recreated it from ashes.

As the dark lords looked on in amazement, first Hunahpu then Xbalanque would leap from a high place, killing himself, only to be resurrected by the other. No one realized that this show laid the groundwork for the eventual defeat of the Land of the Dead.

The king and queen summoned the orphans before them, and the two reluctantly allowed themselves to be herded to the dread palace. Pretending humility, they threw themselves upon the ground, covering their faces with rags as if desperately ashamed.

“Whence do you come?” the king asked.

“We do not know, Your Majesty. Nor do we know the faces of our mother or father. They died when we were small.”

“Very well. Let us have a spectacle. What payment do you request?”

“We ask nothing. We are truly afraid.”

“Do not fear. Be not timid. Dance! Demonstrate how you sacrifice and then revive yourselves. Burn this palace down and rebuild it. Let us behold your repertoire. As you are poor orphans, we shall pay whatever price you name.”

The brothers began their routine, the dangerous dances and swallowing of swords. The word spread, and soon the place was overflowing with spectators.

“Sacrifice my dog,” the queen commanded.

“As you wish,” they replied, killing the dog and bringing him back to life, tail wagging for joy.

“Now burn the palace down,” instructed the king.

They used illusion to make the vast fortress appear to burn down with all the dark lords within, but no one was consumed, and the palace was restored straightaway.

“Now kill one of these lords,” the queen told them. “Sacrifice him, but do not let him actually perish.”

They complied, holding down a lord, killing him, extracting his heart, and setting it before the king and queen, who marveled to see the noble immediately revived and rejoicing.

“Very well done. Now sacrifice yourselves, boys. We yearn to see this feat with all our hearts.”

And so they did. Xbalanque killed his brother, severing his arms and legs, removing his head and placing it far away, digging out his heart and set upon a leaf. The dark lords became giddy at the dismemberment, and Xbalanque continued his dance.

“Arise!” he shouted, and his brother was restored immediately to life. The dark lords roared their approval. The King and Queen of Death celebrated as if they themselves had wrought the miracle. So caught up were they in the spectacle that they felt part of the dance.

The king surged from his throne. “Now do the same to us!”

The queen stood, trembling. “Yes, sacrifice us in the same way!”

Xbalanque and Hunahpu nodded. “As you wish. No doubt you will be revived. After all, are you not the gods of death? And we are here to bring such joy to you, to your vassals, to your servants.”

Dancing forward, they seized the king of that fearful place and slaughtered him, ripping away his limbs, tearing out his heart. They reached for the queen, but she saw that her husband was not revived, and she began to grovel and weep.

“No! Have pity on me!” she cried out, disoriented.

But the brothers stopped their ears to her laments as they eviscerated her as well.

The dark lords and their servants fled along the Black Road to the canyon en masse, filling it up, packing tight in that gloomy abyss. Then the ants came, millions of them, herded by the brothers' power, streaming down the canyon walls. They drove those twisted nobles from their hiding place, and when the rulers of the Land of the Dead arrived once more before the twins, they bowed in abject and silent surrender.

"Listen! We'll tell you our names and the names of our fathers. Behold us, little Hunahpu and Xbalanque, sons of One and Seven Hunahpu, the ones you killed. We're here to avenge the torment and afflictions of our fathers: that's why we put up with your torture. Now we've got you where we want you, and we're going to kill you, every last one!"

But the dark lords pleaded and begged for their lives. They showed the twins their fathers' grave and the tree in which a skull still sat.

"Fine. We'll spare you," the brothers agreed. "But you'll never be what you were. The great and noble sacrifices of humanity aren't yours to savor, and you will never again touch the souls of men and women born in the light, good and honest folk there above. No, your offerings will be broken things, clumps of sap, insects and worms. And only the scum of the earth will offer themselves to you: the wicked, the corrupt, the wretched, the deviant. Only when their sins are clear can you attack—no more snatching the innocent!"

On the sea-ringed world, their grandmother—anguished and bereft for days at the signs of her grandsons' death—rejoiced at the sprouting of new corn in the heart of her home. And in the fearsome depths of the netherworld, the brothers resurrected their fathers, who curled up through the earth like tendrils and burst through the crust, emerging as a maize god, forever

renewing that precious source of human sustenance. The place of their emergence was called *Paxil*, "Rivenrock," revered down the ages as a most holy site.

And the hero twins? They were swept up into heaven, there at the heart of all light, to guard the sun and moon as they poured their brilliance out upon the heads of a newborn human race.

The long dawn had ended, and the fourth age had begun.