

## The Three Hunters and the Dead Boy

This is the story of three hunters who disobeyed the words of the priests and came to sorrow. Here they are, then: Tokpakal, whose name means "Flint Shield," and Seebtok, whose name means "Fast Flint," and Atlatla, whose name is the same as the dart thrower. Those men lived in the time after the cities died, after ah-Puch defeated our fathers and destroyed everything they had made. They were the grandsons of the people who abandoned the great cities.

Since Tokpakal was in the ripeness of his life, it was he who led the other two into the jungle to hunt. He was no longer as fast as the other men, but there was not a track that he did not know, not a sound that he had not heard, not a path that he had not walked many times.



All of the great trees, he knew. All of the marker stones that our fathers had placed on their roads, he knew. So every day he rose before Father Sun and prepared his spear and his knife and led Seebtok and Atlatla into the jungle. Those three always said the proper prayers to the hunting spirits and made proper sacrifices of palm-leaf animals before they left their village. Then they hunted the ocellated turkey, and the red deer. They followed the prints of the armadillo back to his burrow, and they speared agouti for tasty supper. They even hunted puma and jaguar, sometimes, that was how strong those hunters were.

There was a day early in the rainy season when Tokpakal gathered Seebtok and Atlatla and led them to the place where the paths of the village became the paths of the jungle. There they tested the wind and said their



prayers and made their sacrifices.

"What animals shall we hunt today?" Tokpakal said.

Seebtok said, "Red deer. He is fat now and will be delicious."

"Jaguar," Atlatla said, and the other men laughed. He was the youngest hunter and loved best hunting the jungle cats, for their fur.

"If we hunt jaguar, you can eat his flesh," Seebtok said. "Let us find sweeter meats, instead. The paca is tasty, and the porcupine is nourishing when baked. Take rabbits to the unmarried women, and see if their reward is not more pleasing to you than an armband of jaguar hide."

Atlatla only clapped his arm in the place where he wanted an armband. Tokpakal wore two armbands of jaguar hide, and Seebtok wore one armband of his own.



Atlata was seventeen years in this world, and always he was longing for jaguars to hunt.

"Red deer, then," said Tokpakal. "We will go to the river, where the tender moss grows. That is where we will find the biggest red deer."

These are the three hunters walking along the river, watching for red deer as Father Sun rises. Since it was rainy season, the valley was covered by dark clouds, and Father Sun's light only came through as a glow or as fingers touching the tops of the trees. The river was silent and slow-running, and the white morning-mist hid the water. In the reeds, the deer had left many hoofprints, but they were old. He was no longer there. All that morning the three hunters followed the tracks, while they watched the water for crocodiles.



Tokpakal's feet were silent. His legs were thin, old man's legs, and his sandals hardly sank into the mud. He knew how to walk quietly. His dark eyes saw everything in this world, and maybe he saw into the underworld below, and even the garden of the gods above. Some old people are like that. Their eyes see so much more than the eyes of the young.

Seebtok was not as silent. Most of the time he was quiet, but sometimes his sandals rubbed the stalks and made brushing noises. He needed some more years to ripen as a hunter. That morning he looked at the river often. "Where is that crocodile today?" he said. "A big one lives near this place. If he comes out of the water, I'm going to spear him a few times. He chased the women away from the river yesterday and frightened them. He needs to be reminded of his place." But the crocodile did not come out of the water, did not come out to fight. He stayed hidden, and Seebtok did not see him.



Atlata's feet were noisy. He placed them carefully, like Seebtok and Tokpakal, but his steps were falling trees, were lightning bolts in the ears of the older men. Every step made mud-sucking noises, and he swatted reeds out of his way with his spear. All those stalks rattled and shook and rustled. He pretended to be looking for deer, but really he just watched the tree branches, where jaguars like to rest. He was looking for yellow hair and gleaming eyes.

The hunters were not alone, there by the river. The blue devil mosquito pierced their skin, but they only slapped him and killed him. Sand flies stabbed them, and they rubbed the bleeding places and cursed their buzzing. Spider monkeys saw those men walking along the river and threw rotten fruits at them. They called to all their brothers and sisters, and they laughed at the hunters from



the tree tops.

"Spider monkey meat is tasty," Seebtok said, and he hurled darts into the trees. But in rainy season the treetops are dark, and black spider monkeys are very hard to see. Seebtok's darts were only lost. Atlatla also hurled darts, but they went past the monkeys' heads and between their legs. The darts just whisked away.

"Save your darts!" Tokpakal said. "A deer will walk right past us, and what will we do then?"

"Spider monkeys are crazy, anyway," said Seebtok. "They just laugh and play all day. Anyone who eats his flesh might become the same way."

So the hunters went past that place of crazy monkeys and left them behind. They followed the tracks of the red deer across the marshy ground through the grass and onto the trails.



They did not go far before they saw the tops of the old temples, over the trees. They could see pyramids in the city of our fathers. That was where the deer tracks were leading them.

"Be watchful," said Tokpakal. "Spirits live in the old city, and they look like animals, sometimes. Do not throw your darts until you know what you are throwing at."

There were many tracks from deer, and the hunters followed them closer to the buildings.

"See," said Seebtok. "The deer knows we will not go into the city. So he lives there now."

"These tracks are new," said Atlatla. "The deer is not far ahead. Shouldn't we follow him to the edge of the city and see if he is there?"

"We should look for other animals," Tokpakal said. "Honey bees have a large nest near here. We can take





fat combs of honey back to the village, and everyone will be pleased."

"If I do not come back with meat, my wife will laugh at me, behind her hand," said Seebtok. "Honey is not hunter's food. Surely not all these tracks go inside the city."

"Why don't we just go to the edge of the buildings?" said Atlatla. "We won't go farther than that."

Tokpakal saw that those two were not going to release the deer easily. "We can follow a little farther," he said. "Perhaps Lord Deer is only testing us, to see if we are truly deserving." They followed the tracks along a creek and between some hills, and then the hunters were at the edge of the city of our fathers. There were no trees growing in the stone plazas, no flowers or vines on the pyramids. The city was as it had been when our fathers



left it. Only the lintels of the doorways were different, where birds had built their nests.

"That is the magic of our fathers, keeping the jungle out," Tokpakal said. "There is old magic in the city, and much of it is wicked. Only the priest may walk safely on these stones, and even he does not come often."

Seebtok and Atlatla only stared. In all his thirty years, Seebtok had never gone close to the city. No hunt had ever taken him there. He said, "Eight thousand deer could hide in this place, and we would never find them."

"Look over there, on that temple-mountain," said Atlatla, and he pointed with his spear. The other men looked, and there he was, a great jaguar, resting far up the side of a high pyramid. His tongue was hanging out, and his paws were crossed. He was just watching those men.



Tokpakal said, "He knows we cannot hunt him, there."

"Look how big he is," said Seebtok. "His fur is an armband for Atlatla, and another one for me. His spots would be a headband for you, Tokpakal, and gifts for our families. His tail would be a fine gift for the caçique."

"That place is madness, and death," said Tokpakal. "Don't you see whose temple that is?"

Now Seebtok and Atlatla saw the dark stones of the temple. They saw the masks of The Evil One. That was ah-Puch's temple, and the jaguar sat atop one of ah-Puch's stone masks.

Atlatla said, "I can spear him from here, and he will fall right off that mask. We can run over and bring him out before ten heartbeats pass."

"Your father would be proud of you," said Seebtok.

"Your father would weep, if you were made crazed,"



said Tokpakal. "And you, Seebtok, do you want your wife to be alone? Do you want your children to be without their father? Who knows what could happen to you, in such a wicked place?"

The jaguar heard them and growled at the hunters.

"Look at him," said Seebtok. "He does not respect us. He does not fear our darts or our spears. He is taunting us. We should teach him to recognize our strength."

But Tokpakal said, "We should show him that we are too wise to fight him here. We can hunt him another day, when he is away from these tainted stones."

Who knows how things would have been, if Tokpakal's wisdom had carried the three hunters away from that place? But it was not wisdom that took the men forward,



it was the dart Atlatla hurled at the jaguar. He did not wait for the older hunters. He did not say words of thanks to the animal lords, for bringing a jaguar to him. He only thought of his own want, an armband glowing like the sun. Here is the hurling of the dart, Atlatla's obsidian dart pierces the jaguar's heart. He falls off that mask and dies on the plaza, with blood running from his mouth.

"This is what Father Sun wanted," Atlatla said. "Would my dart sail so true, if he did not want me to take the jaguar back to the village? Look at him, Tokpakal. He is the greatest jaguar taken in many years. Is his fur not beautiful? Is he not pleasing? We cannot leave him there."

Tokpakal shook his head and looked to Father Sun, but His face was hidden by the clouds. Tokpakal was left to decide for himself. So he looked at the plaza, and



he looked at the masks of the black stone temple. He looked at the city going on as far as he could see, and he looked at the dead jaguar.

"Go," he said. "Run, very fast. Do not look at the buildings. Do not listen to any sounds. Only look at the ground. I will wait here; I am too old to run. Hurry."

Away ran Atlatla and Seebtok, with a spear and cord to sling up the jaguar's body. They went across the stone plaza and squatted next to the fallen jaguar and placed the spear between his legs. They started to tie his feet together.

That was when they heard a sound. It was a small sound, a whispering sound. It was the sound of a child's voice, laughing softly. All three of them, even Tokpakal, looked toward that strange sound. There in the dark doorway of the temple was a yoom kaax, a pale spirit



from the time when the city died. It was a child's spirit that was broken and twisted by ah-Puch's magic.

Seebtok stood and tried to throw his spear at the yoom kaax, but the spirit only looked at him and whispered his name. It had heard them talking. It knew everything. It caught Seebtok, with its eyes, and he could not move. The spear fell from his hand.

"Run, Atlatla!" Tokpakal shouted. "It has Seebtok. Run, now!"

But Atlatla did not run. It was too late for him. For he had looked at the yoom kaax, too, and after it had Seebtok it turned to him and said, "Be still, Atlatla." And Atlatla, too, could not move.

Now there was only Tokpakal, alone. He took a dart from his quiver and put it in his atlatl. That was an ancient dart, with a red flint head that was chipped by



his great-great grandfather. The feathers of the dart were the red feathers of the scarlet macaw. That dart had great power, and it would have pierced that spirit, if he had hurled it. But Tokpakal was old, and his arms were not fast enough. While he raised his atlatl, the yoom kaax leaped down the steps of the temple. It fell inside Seebtok and went into his head.

"I said run, Atlatla!" Tokpakal shouted one last time, and his voice was strong. While that spirit was inside Seebtok, while it was busy in that man's head, its hold on Atlatla was weak. The young man heard Tokpakal's voice and forgot everything else. He forgot his spear and his cord. He forgot the jaguar. He forgot about his armband. He just tried to run away.

The yoom kaax was too fast. It poisoned Seebtok's head, so he couldn't think any more. He could only do





what the yoom kaax wanted. He picked up his spear and stabbed Atlatla in the back with it. He pierced the young man's heart.

At last Tokpakal's old arms moved, and he hurled his dart. It struck Seebtok in the head and killed him, and he fell onto the jaguar. The yoom kaax came out of him, through his open mouth, like mist. It turned into a broken boy-spirit again.

"Old man," that spirit said. "I cannot come to you, but my power can. Hear these words, and weep:

Listen, blood, lymph, bile  
Listen, muscles, flesh, bone  
Now you become mine  
Now you obey me  
You will bite your wife's throat  
You will poison your children  
You will savage your caçique  
You will murder your priest  
Until the spears of your own people pierce your heart



Then that spirit laughed and went back to its temple. It did not walk like a person. It floated up the steps like a feather on a breeze and went inside the temple and disappeared in the shadows.

Tokpakal ran from that place. He threw down his spear and ran like a young man. He did not stop, did not rest. He prayed, and he wept, and he cursed those younger men for not listening to his words. All the way to his village he ran, shouting for the priest to come, begging for the priest to stop the curse of the yoom kaax.

The priest came out of his hut and met Tokpakal at the edge of the village, at the guardian stone. The priest saw what had happened, and he raised his staff against the old hunter.

"Stop. You can no longer enter this place, Tokpakal. For now, you are still yourself, but you will change. It



is already happening. You will become crazed. You will kill children and old people, everyone you can reach. There is no magic that I have to save you from such a powerful curse. So turn, now, and run. Run far, and beg the gods and goddesses for healing."

But Tokpakal did not run, at least not into the jungle. He did not want to leave his people. He did not want to abandon the place of his ancestors. So he chose this instead of loneliness: he pulled out his flint knife and lunged at the priest, and the hunters struck him with their spears and slashed and stabbed him. The caçique came out of his hut with his red-tipped spear from the time of the city and struck Tokpakal in the heart and killed him. It happened at the edge of the village, no heart-blood fell inside the guardian stone.



This is how it ends, then, this thing that happened with the three hunters: their three lineages made a great fire and sang their ancestor-songs, and the priest burned the old man's body. Many balls of copal incense were thrown into that fire, many feather headbands and armbands of balam's hide were incinerated. When the flames burned out there were only the weeping families, alone in their sorrow.

That is why no one goes to the ancient city any more. Our ancestors brought ah-Puch's corrupted magic into their sacred places, and now those old buildings belong only to the hungry spirits, and the ancient dead.

