

The Night of Spirits

This is a story of the time before Father Sun had finished the creation, when the paths of things were not yet laid down. Our ancestors were here in the fourth world, but they had not yet learned everything they needed to know to live well. In those days even the gods and the goddesses had not all arrived in the garden of the gods yet. Only Father Sun was there, and Mother Moon. Only their oldest children were with them; there were not yet any grandchildren. Lady Time had not even finished laying down the path of the months, and in our world there was only endless growing and no rainy season for the world to lie fallow.

And here is ix-Chel, Lady Rainbow, a young goddess who came to Father Sun's creation through a spray of colors from a place she never named. This was her way, to always look into hollows, to always peek into closed places, to always smell strange flowers and chew on new plants. That is why her tongue was so often green, why her clothing was so often spotted with leaves and bits of moss, why her hair was so often tangled with sticks. Every day she walked along the great rivers and in the jungles of the garden of the gods. She walked across the burning mountains, and the mountains of frozen water. Through the hills and across the ravines she wandered, between the branches of great trees and over the surface of rivers. In all those places she paused to see whatever might amaze her. She watched the children of Lady Insect fly and crawl and make their nests. She found the leaves that Lady White Bat broke down to make sleeping places, and she met the children of Lady Bird and spoke with them of things that were happening.

In secret clearings ix-Chel grew the xivs, those special plants strong in healing power. She had brought them with her from the rainbow when she came to the garden of the gods. Every day she spoke to her herbs, and she touched their leaves and made sure they did not hunger or thirst. Sometimes she took a little bark, or some berries, or a root, to dry and grind up. No one saw her do those things; she tended her plants in the jungle, in the mountains. Then



she took the powders back to the palace of her husband ah-Itzamna, where she kept them in healing-pouches.

There was a day when ix-Chel strolled very far from the garden of the gods. In the morning she gathered leaves and bark from her plants and spread them in Father Sun's light to dry, and later she returned to her secret clearings to crumble the fragrant pieces. So it was that she was carrying nine pouches of powder when she returned to the garden of the gods, at the end of that day. Father Sun was coming down to rest for the night, and his light shone slanted through the trees. All the garden was filled with shadows and dust settling in the last glows. In the day, Lord Jaguar liked to sit in the trees of that place, but when ix-Chel came there he was already gone. She did not see one animal, not one bird in the garden. There was only her, alone.

It was then that she felt a strange wind. There was a puff of cold that touched her and was gone. That was a gust from the watery sinkholes, warning that spirits were near. But ix-Chel just kept going, there was no calling out, for her. She just wanted to return to her husband before Father Sun sank for the night. She was really moving through the garden when she heard a sound from one of the darkening groves. It was a snapping sound she had never heard before, and it was loud in that quiet place.

"Oh," she said, "Perhaps one of the animal lords is doing something interesting. There is still a little time before the world becomes dark." So she went to see who it was, maybe someone she knew. But there was no animal lord. There was only a pile of bones, only a skeleton of a man resting on its back on a mossy log. Dried skin was stretched over that old scarecrow, and the eyes were still in its head, they were looking at her. That bone-devil was breaking apart a bloody ribcage with its hands, such was the snapping noise ix-Chel heard. Pieces of the ribs were falling to the ground.

"I thought I knew everyone in the fifth world," said ix-Chel. "But I have never seen your face."

"You are never here at the proper time," said the spirit.



“Are you only here at twilight?” she said.

“This is the finest moment, when the day is dying and the night is not yet born. Who knows what may be glimpsed, when Father Sun’s light is weakest?”

“Are you a watcher, then?” she said. In those days many spirits took turns watching for wicked ah-Puch and his servants; the underworld had not yet been sealed off from the garden of the gods.

“I am only waiting,” said the spirit, and it twisted apart our ancestor’s spine so that splinters fell onto the moss. “I am waiting for you, ix-Chel.”

“Oh?” she said.

“I have brought a gift,” the spirit said.

ix-Chel looked but saw nothing.

“It is a gift of knowledge I bring,” confided the spirit. It slid off the log and stood before her, that heap of bones began to whistle. It began to dance the Shadow Dance. All around that grove it rattled, always away from the light.

“You dance like a live man,” ix-Chel said politely. She just said that to flatter the spirit. In truth she thought that old skeleton was funny, swaying and dancing as it did. “But I cannot stay to watch, I am returning to my husband.”

“You do not want to learn the steps of this one?” said the bones.

“If you can return tomorrow, you can show me how this dance ends,” she said.

“I can show you that now,” said the spirit, and it seized her. It just grabbed her and began to crush her ribs, all the air went out of her, and her bones creaked. It just leered at her.

“You are leaving with me, but not as you are,” it said. “Your bones are too whole. They need to be splintered to be beautiful.” Now the skeleton squeezed her, and ix-Chel’s bones crackled. She tried to get away, but the spirit’s fingers were too tight. She could only reach to her k’ub, her skirt, and the pouches that hung there. She opened one of the pouches, and the scent of wild coffee came out. The skeleton-spirit coughed on that scent, water poured from its eyes.



“What is that disgusting stink?” it said, and it tried to slap the pouch out of her hands. But ix-Chel dashed some of the powder onto the spirit, and it pushed her away. It just flung her across that grove.

“What thanks is this?” said the spirit. “Here I am trying to give you a gift, and you burn me with poison.”

“That isn’t poison, it’s medicine. Who do you serve, that the herb burns you? Go from this place, or I will throw more on you.”

That was how the lord of the night whose name is Bone Snapper was defeated. He turned into a stinking wind and blew back to his master, ah-Puch. He didn’t want to be burned by wild coffee powder. When he was gone, ix-Chel rubbed herself with the dust until the pains in her bones went away.

“Well,” she said. “No one told me about that nasty spirit. Maybe I should grow some wild coffee around here, to keep it away.” So she threw wild coffee seeds all around the garden of the gods. Some of those fell down to our world and took root, and that is why we find them here today.

“Hmm,” a voice said, as she finished this planting. “What are you doing? I don’t know these seeds.”

“Who is speaking?” said ix-Chel, for she could not see anyone.

“Oh, it is only me,” said the voice, and ix-Chel saw someone in the branches of a tree. It looked like Lord Margay Cat, but the face was not clear, behind the leaves.

“ah-Bobilche?” said ix-Chel. “I thought you would be hunting, now that Father Sun is coming down.”

“No, I am not he. But I know him, he is a friend sometimes.”

“Are you one of his children? I do not remember your voice.”

“We don’t know each other. That is why I have come here, to meet you. But... can you see me, over there? Will you not step closer, so we may know each other’s face?”

ix-Chel stepped toward the spirit and saw little ears standing up and a small tail twitching. She saw paws brushing whiskers, and curved teeth.

“You must step out of the shadows,” were her words to him.

The spirit moved a tiny step closer and lay down and purred.



“Teaser,” said ix-Chel, but here is a smile, here is the way of the laughing heart.

“Ah,” said the spirit. “Ha, ha, ha. It is just that I have come such a long way, and I must rest.”

And now was the arrival of something strange, something unexpected; the teeth of the goddess began to twist in her mouth. They ached as though she had bitten a stone. And ix-Chel smelled something foul, it was the stink of dead animals and rotting meat. She reached to her skirt and opened one of the pouches that hung there, a strong fragrance was her way of fighting the stench.

“Come, now,” said the spirit. “Won’t you scratch my ears and show me how friendly you are? Or are you just going to sniff smelly herbs all evening?” He crawled down the branch toward her, purring. His claws scraped loudly on the bark.

“Truly, I want to see your lovely fur,” said ix-Chel. “But my teeth are aching and complaining. I will just cure them, first.” She opened that pouch and took out a pinch of dust from the Spanish Elder, and put it in her mouth.

The spirit hissed, and his tail stiffened. He lay his ears back and scratched the branch with his claws. “What stink is this you take out, in front of my face? Don’t you know how sensitive my nose is?”

“ah-Bobilche likes the scent of herbs,” said ix-Chel. “How is it that you do not?” She sucked on that dust, and the pain in her teeth went away.

But the spirit did not answer. He just stood up and clawed at her. He just slashed at her face. But he could not come close enough to tear her skin. The scent of Spanish Elder held him back.

“Wicked little thing!” said ix-Chel. “Who are you, to claw at me?” Now she stepped near the spirit, and he leaped away from her. But she finally saw his face. His skin clung so close that she could see his bones. And his eyes were not blue like ah-Bobilche. They were yellow, like ah-Kan Koch, Lord Fer-de-Lance. There was blood on his fur, blood on his whiskers. There was blood on his fangs. That was why he stank of death. He did not clean himself.

“Now do you know me?” said the spirit. Suddenly he grew as



large as ah-Balam, and his teeth became great, curved fangs. His yellow eyes burned with hunger, and he breathed stinking breath that made her choke.

"I have heard your name," she said. "You are ah-K'iik'ts'a'ay, that lord of the night who is called Bloody Fang. This is not your place. Leave our garden!"

The spirit did not leave. It only jumped over her and clawed at her from behind. It only tore her skirt and cut her leg.

"Vicious thing!" she said. "Now I know why the gods and goddesses say you are hateful. Here is your reward!" She flung a pinch of the herb right on him, and it burned the spirit's face and whiskers. Its ears were burned, and its back. ah-K'iik'ts'a'ay roared and ran away from her, but it could not see. It smacked into trees and brained itself. It staggered in circles.

"What a wretched spirit you are!" said ix-Chel. She threw another pinch of dust, and Bloody Fang leaped away. He turned into a foul wind and rushed back to ah-Puch's palace to hide.

When that spirit was gone, Lady Rainbow walked around the garden of the gods, burying pieces of the root. "We'll see if he comes back here again. Everywhere he walks, he will smell this herb. Let him stay in the darkness, then, that wretched spirit." Those were her words.

That was not a night of peace for ix-Chel. She was not going to be allowed to just enjoy that evening. Not ten breaths passed before she was visited by another spirit. She was walking under the balché tree when she saw someone sitting high up in its branches. He was sipping sour bark-water from a gourd and belching.

"Ho, Lady Rainbow!" he called down to her. "What sort of gardener are you, who plants so late in the day?"

ix-Chel looked up and said, "Are you another spirit who wants to break my bones and cut my skin? Is this a night for all wicked spirits to gather here in the garden?"

The spirit only laughed. He perched on a branch like a lazy man, with his legs crossed and one hand behind his head. In his other



hand, he held a gourd full of balché bark wine. "This is a night for greetings and for looking upon the faces of those one does not know," he said. "Truly, I only wanted to see you, and to bring you a gift."

"What is this?" said ix-Chel. She had never drunk balché wine before, she did not know what was in that gourd.

"Climb right up, and I will show you this wondrous honey, this exciting juice of the bark," said the spirit.

"I am not Lady Kinkajou, to be climbing trees," ix-Chel said. "I will speak with you from here on the ground."

"Ah, I know your fear," the spirit said. "Already this evening you have met other visitors, and you are growing tired. But it is only a greeting I have for you, and something to sip and enjoy. That is how you will know me."

"Can you not come down and show me what is in your gourd?"

"There are amazing things to be seen from up here," said the spirit. "Have you looked upon the garden from such a high place?"

Well, ix-Chel had never climbed that tree before, and she did not know what might be seen from up there. So she grasped the branches and climbed up next to the spirit, she was a young goddess and full of energy. From up there she could indeed see across the garden of the gods. All the bright flowers, all the ponds and streams were below her. The wind moved her hair and touched her face. Far away were the fire mountains and the frozen water mountains, high above everything else.

"Now do you see why I would not come down?" said the spirit. He handed her the gourd he had been holding. "And here is the gift I promised you."

ix-Chel did not take the gourd right away. She just looked at that strange spirit. He was tall and very thin, with a fat and rounded belly. His skin was grey, and his eyes were circled with darkness. There were only wisps of hair on his fat head.

"You see how beautiful this world is?" he said. "You have only to sip, and it will grow even more beautiful." He drank from the gourd and again handed it to her.

ix-Chel smelled the strange drink, but she did not know what it



was. She took the gourd and sipped, and her mouth puckered. "Bitter!" she said.

"Only for a short time," he said. "It becomes much better."

Lady Rainbow took another sip, and a third. Her throat was warmed, and her belly. The bitter taste went away. The yellow and orange flowers below her seemed to glow, and the last light from Father Sun seemed to burn in the air. "Oh!" she said, and she sipped again. Now the far mountains seemed much closer, and the creaking of the trees sounded far away.

"Take a great drink, and see what happens," the spirit said.

ix-Chel took a great drink, and all the colors of the garden blurred together. Her head began to buzz. The stuff in that gourd wasn't clean. It was polluted, it was just poisoned.

"Something is wrong," she said. "I can hardly see anything, and my head aches."

"Drink another large drink, and it will stop hurting."

ix-K'an-nohol drank a very large drink, and the ache in her head went away. Now all she could see were tiny lights that moved like Kitu, the firefly. "What is this drink?" she said.

"It is called balché," said the spirit. "I am he who discovered this pleasure, this fire."

ix-K'an-nohol-na sat there for a time, humming. Then her head began to ache again. Flames gnawed at the inside of her skull. She began to wobble on her branch.

She said, "I think I am too high above the ground. I should go down."

"No, no, you only have to take another drink."

ix-Chel pushed the gourd away. "Each time the ache is worse," she said. "If I take another drink, I might fall."

"I will catch you. One more drink, and then you will see as I see."

But she just reached to her belt and opened a pouch, seeking an herb to soothe the pounding in her head.

"You do not need that," said the spirit. "You can use that later." Again he offered her the gourd. But ix-Chel opened the pouch and let out the scent of cruxí, the cross vine. She took a pinch of its dust



and sniffed it and rubbed it on her face and her neck. She did not have any water to put it in, but the herb cooled her skin. It cooled the fires and aches in her head.

"Does your head ache also?" she asked the spirit, and she offered him a pinch of dust. But he did not thank her. He only said, "Disgusting!" He just jumped into his gourd and disappeared. ix-Chel caught that gourd and looked into it, but there was nothing inside. All the drink was gone, and so was the spirit. He had turned into a putrid wind and gone back to ah-Puch. That was how ix-Chel defeated ah-Puch'ikho'ol, the lord of the night who is named Skull Breaker.

"That wasn't good wine," said Lady Rainbow. "I don't think he should be around here, giving that stuff to everyone." So she climbed down and planted seeds of cross vine in the garden of the gods, to keep Skull Breaker far away. As she scattered those seeds, Father Sun's last light disappeared, and there were only shadows in the garden of the gods.

It was when ix-K'an-nohol-na had finished planting that a new voice spoke to her.

"You did not like my brother's gift?" said the voice, behind her.

ix-Chel turned and saw a bloody spirit. He looked like a short, squat man with mossy hair and milky eyes. His skin was covered with running sores. He dripped pus.

"Who are you?" she said. She could see that he was another trickster spirit. She just wanted to hear him speak for himself.

He said, "I am only someone who has come to meet you, and to sing you a song." He cleared his throat and began to screech.

"Ugh!" said ix-Chel. She opened a pouch and took a pinch of dust of the cancer herb.

"Wait!" the spirit said.

"This will heal your sores," she said, and she blew that dust on him. But his wounds were not healed. His sores only bled more.

He called out, "Ow, ow, hey!" and hopped in circles. He clawed and dug at his skin.



ix-Chel took another pinch of powder, but that spirit did not stay. He became a reeking cloud and fled that place. So it was that ah-Kak, the lord of the night who makes pus wounds, was overcome. It is cancer herb which drives away running sores.

Now ix-Chel was angered. "I will tell Father Sun that all these crazed spirits are wandering our garden," she said. "He will put an end to this." She began to walk quickly toward the palace of Father Sun, tossing out seeds of x'axivab, the cancer herb, as she went. That was to keep away ah-Kak and his servants.

She passed by a pond where crickets should have been singing. The metalstreak butterfly should have been resting on the stones for the night. But none of Lady Insect's children were there. There was not one insect, not one bird. There was no sound at all.

ix-Chel called out, "Hello?" She only wanted to return to her husband, but she had to stop. Lord Cricket was supposed to watch for ah-Puch and his wicked servants, and it was not good that he was not there.

Then she saw something strange. All around the pond, Lady Plant's children were dying. The catclaw was yellow and wilted. The basil was stiff and black. All the lemon grass had dried up. Even the leaves of the bamboo stalks were withered. ix-Chel looked in the water, but there was nothing there. She looked into the dark sky, but there was nothing there, either.

"Is someone here?" she said, but no one answered her. She felt a cool breeze on her neck. She felt dew settle on her. Her throat and her nose and her eyes burned. She coughed, and she choked, and her eyes filled with tears. There was laughter, then, an old woman's laughing.

"Do you like this night air?" that voice said. "Does it not tickle your throat?"

"Who are you?" ix-Chel said. She looked all around her and saw two eyes floating above the pond. There was no face, no body. There was no skin, no cheeks, nothing. There were only two eyes, shining in the air.



"I am only a wise old one, come here to talk with you."
ix-Chel coughed. "I am going to the palace of Father Sun," she said. "Come with me, and we will talk."

"Of course," said that voice. "Let us go."

But ix-Chel could not walk. She was weak from the poison dew. She could only choke, and drool a little.

"There is nothing wrong, is there?" said that old voice. "I think your skin is turning yellow."

ix-Chel tried to call to her husband, but she could not make any sound. She could hardly breathe. It was the poisoned air, blowing on her skin and making her sick. Around her, Lady Plant's children fell apart. All the plants dried up and turned to dust.

ix-Chel reached to her pouches and opened one up. It was full of the powder of tzibche herb. She took a pinch of the dust and flicked it into the air above the pond. The old woman's voice shrieked and cursed.

"Your loathsome powder burns my eyes!" the old voice said. "Next time we meet, you will not be so fortunate. Next time, it is you who will be dried and turned to dust."

The eyes closed and disappeared. That spirit transformed into a rancid wind and went back to ah-Puch. So ix-K'anye'eb, the lord of the night whose name is Yellow Mist, was driven far away.

After Yellow Mist ran away, ix-Chel went to the pond and washed her face. She rubbed tzibche dust on her skin, and the poison of the yellow mist was taken away. Then she planted many tzibche seeds in the garden of the gods, to keep ix-K'anye'eb out of there.

It was when she was planting the seeds that a drum started pounding. It was a dancing drum, and someone pounded it very fast.

"Oh, no," said ix-K'an-nohol-na. "That must be another crazed spirit, come to make me sickly and weak. Where are all the watchers, tonight?" She turned away from that sound and walked toward the palace of Father Sun. Far away was a tiny light from the hearth-fire of that place. She could see it, in the distance. Already she felt



warmed.

"Where are you going, ix-Chel?" said a small voice, above her head. That was Lady White Bat, who was hunting Lady Insect's children for dinner.

"I am going home," said ix-Chel.

Lady White Bat said, "Don't you hear that drum? Don't you think you should see who it is, before they bring trouble?"

"Surely all the gods and goddesses can hear that drum," she said. "If there was trouble, wouldn't Father Sun come and end it?"

"If he has not sent someone by now, he must want you to see what is happening," said Lady White Bat. "But you don't have to go alone. I will go with you. There might be some juicy insects stirred up by all that noise." She let go of the leaf where she hung and flew over ix-Chel's head.

So ix-Chel went through the trees until she found the drummer. That spirit looked like a tall, plump man with skin of shining black. He sat on a great log and held the drum between his knees, and his hands moved like the wings of Lord Hummingbird. His face was hidden in darkness. Around him danced three pale spirits, with backracks of dark green feathers. They looked like people, but their faces were shadowed and gray. They held their hands over their heads and turned in circles. They laughed and sighed and stamped.

The spirit looked up from his drum, and ix-Chel saw his red eyes. He said, "Won't you join the circle? Won't you dance with these other dancers?"

"Do your eyes hurt?" she said to him. "I have some powder that might help."

He said, "No powder will help these tired, old eyes. Come and join the dance, and do not worry for me. I will rest later."

ix-Chel looked at that circle. There were just the four of them, drumming and dancing and laughing.

"Maybe for a short time," she said, and the drummer nodded his head. The pale dancers opened their circle for her and let her into the middle. Then they closed around her and brushed her with their fingertips.



"Oh, your fingers are cold!" she said, and they laughed.

"We have come over the mountains of frozen water," they said.

"Our hands are still cold. Dance, and your heat will warm all of us!"

Then the drummer started to chant, and all of the dancers turned in circles and stepped from side to side. ix-Chel had never heard such music before, had never seen such a strange drummer. She turned, and she swayed, and she stamped her feet into the black soil of the garden. It was the Spirit Dance she did, and the Drum Dance.

"Now we feel your heat," those other dancers said. They stepped close to her and touched her arms, her legs. Their cold fingertips stroked her skin. She could not see their faces, but she heard their voices chanting. She felt the drum beats pound like her own heart. Faster and faster the drummer beat his drum, and the other dancers circled closer and closer to ix-Chel.

All at once the drum-thunder ceased. All the dancers looked upward and stopped, with their hands in the air. Even ix-Chel stopped moving. Then the pale dancers lowered their gazes and looked at the ground. They did not look at ix-Chel. They just stood with their arms out toward each other and swayed.

The drummer thumped his drum slowly. That was the music of the dead, the music of burning bodies and departing souls. The drummer looked at ix-K'an-nohol-na, and he smiled at her with teeth like needles. The other dancers smiled, too, and all of them had long, sharp fangs.

The dancers said, "Do not stop now, ix-Chel! We have come from so far away to dance with you. Let us end this the proper way." Those were their words. Their cold fingers tapped her stomach and her back. Their cold touch froze her. She could not run away. She could not leave the circle. She could only dance in place.

"Oh, truly, strong drummer, this is the music of grief," said ix-Chel. "Won't you play the music of joy a little longer?"

But the drummer only tapped his drum. He lowered his head and chanted death prayers.



ix-Chel reached to her skirt and found that her pouches were gone. They had been taken by the other dancers, pulled off by their clever fingers. Fear squeezed her heart, but she just twisted her body and shuffled her feet. She did not want to stop dancing. The drumming slowed, and the chanting slowed, and ix-Chel hardly moved. All the strength went out of her arms, out of her legs.

The three pale dancers opened their mouths and leaned toward her. They were going to bite her and take the last of her heat.

That was when Lady White Bat flew down from her place in the treetops. That was when she landed in ix-Chel's hair.

"Jump, now," Lady White Bat said. "Jump away in any direction. Trust my luck."

ix-Chel jumped out of the circle of dancers, and their grasping, freezing hands did not find her. Their strong fingers could not squeeze her arms or her legs any more. Their long fangs did not find her skin. She leaped away from them and fell over a log, and there were all of her pouches, right where the dancers had tossed them. Lady White Bat's luck led ix-Chel right to her powders.

"That is all I can do for you," said Lady White Bat. "Now it is you who must help yourself." She let go of ix-Chel's hair and flew away, into the sky.

"Thank you!" said ix-Chel. She picked up one of her pouches and opened it. A terrible stink came out, for that was the powder of payche, the skunk root. The fear that had made her heart heavy left her, and strength came back to her arms and her legs.

The pale dancers reached for her, over the log, and she blew the powder into their faces. They howled and cursed her name. Then they twirled in a strange circle and disappeared. ix-Chel stepped over that log and looked at the drummer. Now she could see his true face. It was the face of ah-Camazotz, the lord of the night who is Killer Bat.

"This is not your place," she said.

"Ah, ix-Chel, you have not walked this world long enough to know me. There are no places I cannot visit, no person who has not heard my music and danced my dance of terror, some time. Tonight



you did not finish my song, but you are young. There is time for you to learn its ending." He picked up his drum and turned into a sour wind and left that place. That was how ah-Camazotz was defeated by young ix-Chel. He just ran back to his master before she could drive him away with her herbs.

"That is one more spirit I will keep away from here," said ix-Chel, and she planted skunk root in the garden of the gods. When she finished, all of Father Sun's glow was gone from the world, and there was only the cool night.

She had not gone twenty steps when an animal leaped in front of her and stopped her on the path. It was a large animal, like ah-Coh, Lord Puma, and its fur was black. Only its golden eyes were clear in the darkness.

"Quick!" said that spirit, in a very deep voice. "Bring me the little sun! Bear it on the palm of your hand to my plate. A green jaguar is seated over it to drink its blood.' "

"What?" said ix-Chel. Truly she was astounded to hear a spirit speak riddles.

"That is not the answer," the spirit said. It swept out with its claws and tore the pouches away from ix-Chel. It just took them away from her. Then it ran off the path and out of her sight.

"I am through with you crazed spirits!" said ix-Chel. She did not chase after that spirit. She ran past it, toward her husband's palace.

"If you do not like that riddle, try this one," said a soft voice, in front of her. That voice just made her stop, right there on the trail.

"Bring me a very beautiful woman with a white skirt,' " said the soft voice. "I greatly desire her. I will cast down her skirt before me.' "

"What foolish spirits show themselves here, only a hundred steps from my husband's palace?" said ix-Chel.

"Only playful spirits," said Deep Voice.

"Only riddling spirits," said Soft Voice. "Can you answer our riddles? Are you as clever as people say?"

"These are child's riddles," said ix-Chel. "You, Deep Voiced Spirit,



you want a fried egg, with a green pepper perched on the yolk. And you, Soft Voiced Spirit, you want a white hen to pluck. Now, I have a question for you."

"Surely," said Deep Voice.

"Of course," said Soft Voice.

"What is it you spirits want, that you keep coming to me all this long night?"

"That is not a riddle," said Deep Voice. "But we will answer anyway, since you answered ours."

"We wish only to see you, and to meet you," said Soft Voice. "All the gods and goddesses talk about the beautiful goddess from the rainbow."

"Well, you can meet me in my palace, with my husband," said ix-Chel.

"No!" said Deep Voice. "We want to show you something amazing, something fit for a goddess. It is not far from here."

"I know everything around this place," she said. "I have seen all the amazing things here. And I don't need more tricky spirits tonight."

"You haven't seen this thing," said Deep Voice, and it laughed an ugly, growling laugh.

Now ix-Chel felt Lord Army Ant walking over her feet. She had stepped right onto his road. There he was, with twenty thousand of his children, looking up at her.

"Why are you out in the garden so late, ix-Chel?" he said. "This is an unlucky night. There might be wicked spirits about."

"Yes, and two of them are close," she said. "They have not yet crossed your path, but they will come for me soon, I think."

"Mmm, very bad," said Lord Army Ant. "We must chase them out of here."

"They have taken my herb pouches," she said. "Would your warriors return them to me?"

"Oh, this is a simple thing," said Lord Army Ant. "You just keep talking to those spirits." He hurried off the path and disappeared, with all his children.

"ix-Chel?" said Soft Voice. "Are you ready to come with us?"



"I have fallen and hurt my knees," she said. "I have to rub healing powder on the wounds." She just said that to keep those spirits away while Lord Army Ant searched for her pouches.

"I don't smell any powders," said Deep Voice. "I think you are up to some trick. We will have to come over there and bring you along." In the trees behind ix-Chel, something large moved. It shook the leaves and made nuts rain down. That was Deep Voice. ix-K'annahol-na could not see that spirit, in the darkness. But she could hear it coming.

Then something else moved, ahead of her. It splashed on the ground and made slobbering noises.

"You do not want to come over here," said ix-Chel. "There are thorns along this path. You will be cut and stabbed." In truth there were no thorns. That was just a trick she was playing, a small lie to stop those spirits in their tracks.

"Then you will have to come to us," said Soft Voice. "You will be pleased when you see what we have."

"I don't know which way to go," she said. "I hear one ahead and one behind. Which way is the path I need to walk?"

"This way," said Deep Voice.

ix-Chel walked very slowly and said, "How can you find your way, in this darkness?"

"Just keep walking," they said.

Then she heard the claws of Deep Voice in the branches over her head. There was a strange sound behind her, and she turned and saw something glistening on the path. It was like a puddle of water that flowed over the ground. It shimmered and quivered toward her. That was how those spirits were going to defeat her. One was going to pounce, one was going to smother.

There was a sharp sting on ix-Chel's foot, and she looked down and saw Lord Army Ant's warriors carrying her pouches above their heads. She reached down and took her herbs.

"Drive them away for good, or they will only come back," Lord Army Ant said. Then he and his warriors walked away and left her there.



"What are you doing?" said Deep Voice. "Are your knees still sore? You won't have to worry about that, when you see what I have to show you."

ix-Chel opened her pouches but did not know which powder to throw at that spirit.

"Wait!" Deep Voice shouted, right over her head. She looked up and saw him crouching there, snarling. She saw his golden eyes, and she could not move. She could not lift her feet or raise her arms. That was the power of his gaze, to paralyze people. Then he could kill them easily.

But ix-Chel's pouches were already open, and the scents of the powdered herbs came out. It was the smell of the pheasant tail that made that spirit sneeze. It was that herb which made him fall from his branch onto the ground. Then ix-Chel was not paralyzed any more. She threw pheasant tail on the spirit, and he cursed and wailed. The herb burned his eyes and his nose, and he changed into a rank wind and blew all the way back to ah-Puch. That was how ah-Tsaypachtik, he who is called Stalker, was defeated. It is pheasant tail which cures paralysis and drives Stalker away.

But that spirit was not alone. ix-Chel heard squishing behind her, and something wet wrapped around her throat. It was like a vine, like a rope, and it squeezed her neck. She fell to the ground and dropped her pouches. That spirit slid over her and covered her and sucked at her skin. It sucked at her arms, her legs, her face. It tried to suck out her eyes. That spirit really had her. It was going to win.

Then she found one of her pouches and poured out the dust. That was the dust of the most powerful of herbs, called green stick. She threw that dust everywhere, in the air and on the spirit and on herself. The spirit shrieked and slid off her and slithered away. It became a fetid wind and twisted down to ah-Puch. That was how ix-Chel defeated ix-Ha'ich, the lord of the night called Watery Eye, who brings death by drowning and suffocation. Only green stick can drive that powerful spirit away. After those two spirits were defeated, she planted seeds of the two herbs in the garden of the gods. Those plants would keep the lords of the night away.



Then ix-Chel took her pouches of dust and ran from that place. She had met enough strange spirits for one day. But they were still not satisfied. She ran ten steps, and something hit her in the back. It was not big or heavy, but it stung her and would not let go. ix-Chel did not try to find out what that thing was. She was very close to her husband's palace now, and she was not stopping for any more spirits. She went ten more steps and became dizzy. Her legs began to shake, and she could not run. She tried to call out, but she could not raise her voice.

"Well, this is certainly strange," said a loud voice. ix-Chel saw Lord Spider Monkey hanging from a branch by his tail. "There is a spirit on your back, sucking your blood. How will you get it off?"

"Won't you take it off, Lord Spider Monkey?"

"It is not my place to fight spirits," said he. "I only give warnings." He looked at the spirit again and said, "Mmm, it is growing fat with your blood."

"You know," ix-Chel said, "I have seen where the sweet fig grows. I can tell you where, if you will only do a small thing for me."

"I cannot fight spirits," said he. "That is not the place Father Sun has given me."

"I would never ask you to act against Father Sun's wishes," said she. "I only have an itch, where I cannot reach. Won't you sprinkle some powder for me? Won't you cure that itch?"

So Lord Spider Monkey took the last pouch of powder from ix-Chel and poured it on that spirit. He dumped the whole pouch right on its face. That was how ah-Ts'u'uts'k'iik, the lord of the night named Blood Sucker, was defeated. It just fell off her and transformed into a rotten wind. It was the powder from the anal plant that drove it away.

Lord Spider Monkey swung up into the treetops. "Oh," he said. "I am on watch tonight, so I should tell you to be careful. It is an unlucky day, and there are many wicked spirits about." He winked at her. "I will come back tomorrow, and you can tell me about these fruits you were talking about." Then he went away into the darkness, his assistance was done.

ix-Chel said, "All these spirits are wicked and hateful. None of them should ever come here again." She planted more seeds in the garden of the gods, to drive away Blood Sucker and those like him. She had planted the seeds of all the nine most powerful medicinal plants, and from that time the nine lords of the night and their servants could no longer enter the garden of the gods. Some of those seeds fell down into this world, and our ancestors were blessed with healing herbs. In dreams ix-Chel and ah-Itzamna, Lord Medicine, taught our ancestors to use those herbs, and with them we can drive away the lords of the night and the sicknesses they bring.

