



MYTHIC EARTH

Short Stories



Most Ancient Pine.

He was the most ancient of his kind. In fact, he was the most ancient of any of the living creatures on the land. He had been born before the ice had come, and he had seen the ice retreat far to the north. The Children in the area sang to him during the summer and winter solstices. Many of the Children communed with him when they were out beyond the realms of reality. Only a few of the Children could communicate with him in that way since only a few of them were trained to walk upon the paths of the spirits and the ancestors before their own deaths. This, the ancient pine thought, was as it should be. The Children could be so talkative. But, for the most part, he enjoyed hearing their stories.

His own story was longer than most. By the reckoning of the Children, he had been alive for tens of thousands of years. He had seen many ages of the Children come and go. He had been born because the One wanted him to exist. It was the One who breathed life into the young pinecone, and it was the One who had planted him here at the top of this tallest of mountains. Around him, the One had also sown many others like him. But his younger brethren had been here for only a few centuries. His kind had spread across the lands of the north, and now their descendants covered almost all of the continent. This was also as the One had desired it to be. This was part of the Balance the One had established in all things. But now, as foretold, the Balance of all had been disrupted. Once more, the Ruling Children had brought about their own end and had birthed the beginning of the Newborn Children.

This, too, is as it is supposed to be. Balance maintained for an age. Balance disrupted. The old Children cede way to the new. Even now, he could feel Mother Turtle awaken; even the twin spirits, Tween and Twixt, were now upon the Children's lands. Soon death would cover all the realms in its world-encompassing reach. But death would not come for him yet. He had always known when the time of his demise would be. And that moment was still many centuries in the future.

As he did on countless occasions, the ancient tree opened his soul and allowed his spirit to emerge from deep within his massive bulk so that it could dance upon the majestic might and awe-inspiring heights of his branches. Branches that could see above the clouds, and at times, like tonight, be caressed by the northern lights as they reached down towards him from the heavens above. The lights were physical manifestations of the Children's ancestor spirits and the freed souls of many creatures that once roamed blessed Mother Earth.

Together, they will all dance and sing for the One to restore the sacred Balance. This is as it has always been.

Balance is the only truth. This is Our Way.



Ahuatl's Journey.

Ahuatl knew he was in trouble. He had journeyed far, maybe too far, from his village, which, as his father regularly reminded him, was in an already isolated position compared to other Aztec settlements in the general area. Of the six neighboring communities, their village was the closest to the edge of the dark rainforest, which stood at the heart of their shared valley. How deep the forest actually was Ahuatl didn't know, but he had been warned time and time again not to venture into it, even in times of emergency.

The forest was rumored to be home to demons and the undead spirits of the Everliving and the Everchanging. Creatures of the night who hunted humans, and especially children, for the simple joy of hearing their screams. This, and more warnings, he and the other children in his village had been told over and over again. Yet here he was, deep within the forest. And now, perhaps, deep in trouble as well.

In many ways, the scene before him was more horrifying than any of the terrifying stories he had heard around his village. Why could he not control his longing for the jungle, especially the ruined temple which supposedly sat deep within it?

Ahuatl had always felt a strong, even primal, need to discover the fabled temple city rumored to exist within this forbidden jungle. The hidden city was thought to have structures tall enough to rise above the forest. He knew such curiosity was the main reason the village elders worked so diligently to scare the children from the temptation to venture into the woods.

Despite the warnings, even as a small child, Ahuatl would sneak right up to the forest's edge. He would find the tallest tree there and climb up as far as possible. He would sometimes get lucky and catch a glimpse of what he thought was a stone statue peeking out over the forest canopy. He could never be sure if those fleeting glimpses were genuine or made up by his longing imagination. But even if what his eyes saw felt like an impossibility, his soul assured him that what he had actually seen was the Mighty Temple of the Heart: The long-forgotten, and perhaps mythical temple at the heart of a, likely, fictitious city. He did not know why the Temple of the Heart had become shrouded in such mystery and fear.

The open field he could see from his hiding spot behind the Ceiba tree stretched out in front of him into an open expanse of rock and sand, and stopped abruptly at the foot of the largest building Ahuatl had ever seen. The giant structure could have easily housed dozens of his villages. The building was made of black stone. It rose high into the sky. It had several levels, one on top of the other. He had never been to the sacred city of Tenochtitlan. Still, the Temple of the Heart (and he was now sure that the building he looked at was indeed the temple of lore) looked as imposing as any of the buildings he had heard his father speak of after his return from one of his yearly pilgrimages to the holy city.

Here in front of his eyes, was what he had dreamt of for so long. Yet the temple was also the physical manifestation of his worst nightmares. In addition to the building itself, he could also see a crowd of men, women, and children standing by the hundreds, being spoken to by a man who stood on the first level of the temple building. From what the man wore (a large, feathered head-dress and wildly colorful garb, much brighter than any garb he had ever seen on even the village leader), Ahuatl was sure the man was an Aztec High Priest, one of the fabled sorcerers who, if the stories were true, could command even the dead, and wield powerful magics that could bring death and destruction to entire cities!

Ahuatl could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He tried to calm himself. He tried slowing his breathing. He was afraid that his heart was pounding so loudly that it could be heard by someone in the crowd. Or even the High Priest! Even from this far a distance. He knew he was being overly paranoid.

He didn't want to risk capture. He tried to turn around and return to his village to tell everyone about his discovery. He knew he had to do so now if he wanted to return before nightfall. It was already getting close to midday, and he had spent half the day just getting to this point. 'Leave now or risk being in the forest at night,' he thought.

He was about to unglue himself from the Ceiba tree, which he had been clinging to with white-knuckle intensity, when the High Priest stopped what he was doing and climbed a few steps up to the temple's second level. When he got there, he slowly turned, raising his right hand. A hand that pointed straight and accurately to the Ceiba tree that Ahuatl was using as his hiding spot.

Ahuatl froze. He was overcome with dread. Despite being a typically hot summer day, he suddenly felt a deep cold come over him. When he finally let out his breath, which he had been holding for what felt like an hour, he saw the air from his lungs rush out in a mist as if he were standing in the forest, not in the middle of summer but in the depths of winter. He could see his breath wisp up towards the tree canopy high above. As he looked up, following his rising breath, his view of it was suddenly cut short. There in front of him, looking down straight into his eyes, was the High Priest himself.

Ahuatl's mind could not process what his eyes were seeing. How could the High Priest be here when he had just been on the steps that far away only a moment ago? He could not possibly have traversed such a long distance in mere seconds.

But the fact that the High Priest had closed the gap in space and time instantly was soon confirmed when that same High Priest spoke to him, "My child ... Ahuatl, I believe ... you have come at last." The Priest stood straight and held out his hand for Ahuatl to grab. The High Priest was firm in his manner but did not frighten him. "Ahuatl," he said again, "I have called to you many times, my child, and you have finally come. The Children can now be made whole with your help."

"What children?" Ahuatl asked, even before he knew he had intended to speak, "Are there others like me here? Other children from my village?"

The High Priest smiled at him, which froze Ahuatl's heart. The Priest's mouth, full of needle-sharp teeth, was covered in fresh blood. "No, young man, the Children I speak of are all of us. You, me, your entire village, and every village and city in all of existence. We are all the Children of the gods. And today, you have come to pay them the respect they are due. Come with me. Let me help you meet the gods themselves. You see, your help is needed in the eternal battle for Balance. Come child, walk with me."

That comment surprised Ahuatl, and he interrupted the High Priest, "Me? What could I do to help?" Ahuatl felt sudden pride and continued, "I am but a boy. What could I do that would please the gods?"

The High Priest looked down on him again. Not smiling this time but with a gentle manner. He put his hands on Ahuatl's shoulder and led him towards the temple. "Ahuatl, you and many others; boys like you, men and women from villages far from here, and some even from the holy city itself will join in a large feast. You will eat maize and feast on boar, fish, and bird flesh. You will dance. You will celebrate the Everliving, the Everchanging, Mother Earth, and even Cizin himself!"

Ahuatl couldn't believe this sudden turn of fortune. He would make sure everyone in the village heard of his exploits. He would show them they had nothing to fear from the forest. His bravery was being rewarded! Before he realized it, the High Priest had stopped walking. They had both reached the foot of the great temple. Now Ahuatl was close enough to see the people he had spied on from his distant hiding spot. They looked sleepy, almost as if they were daydreaming. None looked afraid. But something was off about it all. Ahuatl could not put his finger on what was wrong. But then the smell hit him. Its putridness struck his senses suddenly and overwhelmingly. How could he not have noticed it before? It was the smell of death. And then he heard the flies. There were so many buzzing around him, almost to the point where he felt that if he opened his mouth to speak, they would drown him as they poured into him.

Ahuatl was gripped by panic, realizing that the elder's warnings had all been accurate. He wanted to cry but held back his tears. He would not be found to be a coward and bring dishonor to his father and his entire village in front of the High Priest. "Then you will sacrifice me and make me like them?" Ahuatl managed to whisper.

The High Priest responded. "My child. Why would you say such a thing?! No, no, no. You are indeed going to join a feast." Ahuatl looked confused. Why was the High Priest toying with him?

"I have been calling to you through your dreams and desires so that you may join us in adoration of the One and his pantheon." The High Priest continued, "You will join us here at the Sacred Temple, and we will see if you have what it takes to someday become a High Priest like me."

Ahuatl looked at him in disbelief, but before he could respond, the High Priest led him towards an open door, which until now, he had not noticed was there. He gently moved Ahuatl towards the door, where two young attendants were waiting for him.

The High Priest finally spoke to him, "I was once like you. Now go and work hard. Your old life is over. Your new life begins. Train to become one of us. Train to help maintain the One's Eternal Mandate for Balance. All the Children will depend on you and those like us to keep the darkness at bay."

The Priest paused as if he had just remembered something and continued, "Perform poorly my child... and become one of them." Ahuatl didn't need to turn around to see who the "them" were that the Priest was referring to. They were the dreaded Tlalocan-bound dead, and he had no desire to join their ranks.

What would Ahuatl's final fate be? No one knew for sure or would likely ever know. Only a select few Children could see that far into the future. And none would ever share what this young boy's future would be. Not on that day, anyway.

Balance is the only truth. This is Our Way.

To be continued...