



MYTHIC EARTH

Short Stories

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The God Below

Silver Spring stood on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Passaic River valley. As he stared at the vast green expanse below, he thought of his last conversation with the Soul Walker, Oak Bark.

As was typical of his infrequent chats with Oak Bark, he had left their meeting by the shores of the Passaic River, needing some clarification. Oak Bark's answer to his question about who would emerge triumphant in the upcoming battle between his Tribal Nations force and the massive Aztec force now taking up almost half of the river valley below was, "Why does any of it matter?"

Of course, such a vague and non-definitive answer had brought up an immediate sense of discomfort in his heart. But he had somehow managed to keep his disappointment from being obvious as he bid the old Soul Walker goodbye.

Now, standing alone, looking down at the thousands of enemy warriors, he felt a smile blossom on his lips. He had to admit, after some consideration, that Oak Bark's last comment to him had shown a hint of the older man's wisdom. Though at first, Oak Bark's "Why does any of it matter?" response had seemed like a useless and even flippant attempt at philosophy, it had turned out to be the best advice he could have received at this particular moment. It was now clear to him that the result of the upcoming battle mattered little in the larger scheme of things, especially when it came to how it may affect, or not, the Eternal Balance as mandated by The One. It was thus the obvious conclusion that his primary concern should not be whether he would savor sweet victory or taste the bitterness of defeat. His main and only problem should instead be to remain focused on doing his part in maintaining The One's Balance. And who was he to judge whether this would happen from his Force's defeat, or preferably, victory. His only task now was to do what all of the Children who find themselves in a position of leadership do, strive for success.

This newfound freedom from seeking victory at all costs had unshackled his mind from having to focus on the small and petty aspects of command. Instead, his mind now moved much more swiftly by not being overburdened by thoughts about victory or defeat or what defeat would mean for the people of this valley and the lands beyond.

His thoughts were on the here and the now. Not the tomorrow that would come after the bloody struggle ahead. Tomorrow, and all the days that would follow, were a matter for The One's Balance to sort out. By doing their part to maintain the One's Eternal Balance, he and his force had already won, so simple.

His newfound clarity of thinking helped him see how best to fight Red Crow's massive force, with its horde of Tlalocan-bound dead below, cohort of Jaguar and Eagle warriors, and even two mighty behemoths; a massive Ayar and majestic Quetzocoatl. Both of the massive creatures were impossible to miss as they stood imposingly behind the enemy lines. To fight as if both forces were of equal strength would be the height of folly. They were far from being that. The Tribal Nations force was easily outnumbered three to one.

Today's battle would not be a direct head-to-head clash. He would not send his warriors rushing forward seeking glorious victory and hoping their superior fighting skills would win the day. The only guaranteed result of such a head-on collision between the two forces would be for all his warriors to be overwhelmed by the masses of Tlalocan-bound dead, which formed the core of the Aztec force.

No, today's battle would instead behave in a similar way to a flock of sparrows mobbing a swooping hawk. His Seneca archers would move swiftly around the sides of the larger Aztec force. His Mohawk warriors would choose and target choke points on the battlefield where they would outnumber their foes. The marauding wolves, which always accompanied his force, would race far behind the Aztecs and harass their supply lines. In this way, by pecking at the Aztecs from many directions but never head-on, as the sparrows do to drive away the much larger hawk, the Tribal Nations force would work to turn their enemy's main advantage into a liability, the larger force's size, would bog it down. Multiple brutal, swift, and focused attacks would then prove decisive and perhaps reward the Tribal Nations force with an unlikely victory.

Silver Spring knew that his battle plan would frustrate Red Crow from accomplishing his main primary objective. And now that he had learned what that main objective was, he had the ultimate advantage.

Red Crow was here not just because this was sacred land, but also because an actual god or its soul may be buried deep within the valley. Which of these was the case, he did not know, and possibly, neither did Red Crow. He knew all of this because Running Fox, his most trusted Medicine Man, had seen it in a Soul Walker's journey. Running Fox saw the aura of power under the valley through his soul's eyes. So much energy, as what he had seen during his Soul Walk could only be flowing from a god.

Red Crow was planning to build altars and in this way he would praise the god buried beneath them all. Neither, Red Crow or himself, knew if the flurry of altar building would affect the sleeping god in any way. Even his cohort of powerful Tlalocan Priests would be uncertain that their altar-building strategy would work in any hoped-for way. Was Red Crow hoping to harness some of the power of the god through human sacrifices on the altars? Was he looking to awaken the entity below and somehow control it? Did Red Crow even know whether the god interred within the valley was of the Everliving or the Everchanging Pantheon? Most likely, none of this mattered to Red Crow because Cizin had ordered him to do this. And Red Crow always unquestionably did whatever Cizin asked. No one questioned Cizin's motives, not even the mighty Red Crow.

Silver Spring, himself a mighty warrior of the Tribal Nations, felt a surge of positive energy that filled him with battle lust. He felt joy. His soul became like a sun, and shone with a hunger for the struggle to come. He was confident that he would fully play his part in maintaining the Eternal Balance as The One mandated it.

The scream of a high-flying hawk broke his reverie. He looked at the sky and saw a red-tailed hawk mobbed by a dozen sparrows. He smiled again. He had been sent a message from The One. Today, the Balance would be kept. And Silver Spring would do his part to ensure it was so.

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Becoming Mortis

The long-anticipated battle had not started, but the tension was rising, seeming to keep pace with his quickening heartbeat. He always enjoyed the quiet before the storm of war. The opposing forces all stood with weapons ready, facing their mortal enemies.

As he looked down upon the warriors in the vast prairie, he knew that some of the men would be hoping to have gone unnoticed as they furtively stole glances at him.

Even from such a great distance, the men who did manage to look upon the mysterious warrior felt a sense of dread and impending violence. It was as if they were looking at the dark clouds of an approaching summer storm. The promise of the wild and uncontrollable power of lightning and thunder that would surely come was there, though the booming of the storm was not yet even a mild rumbling.

They all knew his name, but none dared speak it aloud.

His name changed from place to place, it was not always Mortis, and he was not often referred to as Lord either. At times he was called "Lord Mortis." A few even referred to him, in whispers, as Mictlantecuhli. He did not now remember why others knew him by so many different names. Perhaps it was because he had been around so long. He had killed many and even though he was born an Aztec, he had never become one with any particular village or city-state. From his early manhood to today, he had been a loner like one of the ancient wolves that wandered the far north woods.

In general, he remembered very little of his past. To him, memories were burdens that always managed to find a way to encroach upon his mind at the most inopportune time. So, he forced himself to forget.

But he could never truly forget his entire past. None of the Children really could, even if they tried, so he did still remember a few bits of his early years. He had been born as the 11th son in a warrior family of some renown. Ohtli, as his famed Jaguar Warrior father had named him, began his education as most male children did back then and still do today.

He attended military school. All boys from noble families did. Girls went to schools where they learned how to become mighty women who would run the business of state and home alike. In school, he was taught Astronomy, Religion, and History. But his favorite subject had been poetry.

Ohtli had then, and to some degree did so to this day, seen the world through idyllic eyes, and poetry fueled this idealism. Poetry was the best way one of the Children could praise the Eternal Balance as mandated and created by the One.

As a young man, warriors and poets were held high in his esteem. He viewed his Aztec people as the ones who should rightfully rule all of the Children on Sacred Mother Earth. He thought this was the case because he felt that the Aztecs were superior warriors in every way. And warriors were created by the One to rule. Therefore it should be Aztec warriors who ruled all. It seemed evident to him.

As a child, he had seen all Aztec warriors as heroes and the wars they regularly fought as the highest of noble undertakings. He believed Aztec warriors should be the ones to rule the entire world, but was also aware that mighty warriors could come from any tribe, culture, or people. He had seen it himself. He had met fierce warriors from every culture he had fought with and against, from the Inuit in the far North to the Chachapoya in the South.

Back when he was but a young snout-nosed boy, even before entering military training, he would run after his older brothers with a makeshift Macuahuitl, imitating their every move. Finally, it was Ohtli's turn to begin his military career. He took to his martial schooling with unmatched zeal and fearlessness. His teachers marveled at his cunning and intensity. But his ferocity and viciousness shocked even the most seasoned warriors, and nothing they tried would curb his insatiable and uncontrollable lust for combat.

He showed little emotion most times except when he trained. When news of his father's death was brought to his household by the city elders, his only reaction was a few moments of silence. He had not shed a tear or uttered anything but a line from his favorite poem, "All of Mother Earth's shell is but a grave..."

Like all young aspiring warriors of his age group, he had started at the bottom of the army's hierarchy. The younger recruits were typically tasked with performing menial duties such as carrying weapons and supplies into battle for the men who were doing all of the fighting and dying. But no matter how small the job, his potential greatness shone through, and anyone one with a discerning eye could see that the young man would some day become a great warrior. A leader of men.

Many strangers knew more of his past than he did. After a recent battle, he had overheard a story told to a group of warriors about an event from his past. The memory had been spoken not by him but by an Eagle warrior at a recent campaign. The surviving members of a unit of Eagle Warriors were sitting around the post-battle celebrational fire when one spoke up and began telling the rest of his cohort the story of how Lord Mortis had become a Jaguar Warrior.

Neither the storyteller nor anyone in the small audience of warriors had realized that Mortis was lurking in the shadows beyond the firelight's reach, so unnoticed, he sat behind a tree and listened. At the same time, he idly wiped gore off his Macuahuitl. As the Eagle Warrior spoke, the story and his own memories uncoiled like a serpent. The Eagle warrior started his tale, "It was during a minor skirmish many seasons ago that his reputation as a holy killer of men had begun to emerge. During a very bloody skirmish, his force had been taking heavy casualties. The tide of battle had turned against them. The enemy's champion had killed and maimed many of the Lord's brethren. But then, Lord Mortis had picked up the broken Macuahuitl of one of his fallen brothers, and with a ferocious blood-curdling scream, he charged and in a few minutes felled the enemy's mightiest champion."

The other Eagle warriors listening to the story looked proudly upon the storyteller. He then continued, "Ohtli, which I believe was the name given to him by his father, did not outright kill the warrior. Instead, he pointed down at the injured man and spoke, not with a boy's voice, but with the booming speech of a demigod "By Huitzilopochtli this great warrior is now my prisoner. He will serve me for eternity and only die by my sword!"

"The entire enemy force had been frozen and stunned by the sight of the young boy besting their mightiest champion in a blink of an eye. Their hesitancy was immediately capitalized on by Lord Mortis and his remaining warriors, who all charged the enemy. Ohtli and his battle brothers killed many and took many more prisoners that day. That was the day Ohtli, Lord Mortis, was initiated into the Jaguar Warriors brotherhood." The story being told, the wider group, and the story-telling Eagle Warrior returned to chatting.

Lord Mortis ignored their chatter and refocused his attention on cleaning his weapon. So many names he has had. Recently he had heard a new name attached to him, Tlayecoa, which in the old tongue means "He who is death-incarnate in battle."

Lord Mortis has remained a man alone in his single-minded pursuit of martial success. But all was not well with his spirit. His inner self was troubled. So much killing was beginning to take a toll on him. Few mortals could experience such heightened levels of ferocity for as long as he had done so and not be affected somehow.

The boundless rage which fills his heart and soul has finally begun to consume his mind, body, and spirit. But even knowing that such continuous draining of his being from the burning rage within will eventually turn him into something akin to a maddened demon, he does not seek to tame himself. The opposite is true. If the oblivion of demon hood awaits him, then he welcomes it. He may then have the opportunity to fight the genuinely great heroes in the underworld. Masters of destruction roam the underworld's many hidden realms. In such a place, and amongst such mighty warriors he wishes to see himself for all of eternity. For ever battling for the Balance in the darkness and magical ways of the Crux or the fires of the Underworld. Such a fate would be a great boon indeed.

As in so many past battles, even before he realized what was happening his inner rage overwhelmed his consciousness, and his body leapt into action. To the many men now about to do battle, the sight of Lord Mortis, Ohtli Tlayecoa, joyfully charging toward the two opposing forces inspired a united chorus of joy. Added to the blood-curdling scream from this master of death now running toward them with the power of a hurricane the men began to chant his many names, "Some screamed Mortis!!!... others Lord Mortis!!!... and many more Tlayecoa!!!"

Which force this avatar of death would fight along side of did not matter to them at the moment, all that mattered was that they would fight alongside or against a legend.

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