



MYTHIC EARTH
Short Stories



The Snake, Jaguar, Condor, and the Oracle.

The Oracle sat on the beach. His legs crossed under him. His arms stretched up towards the glimmering stars above. In front of him was a deep blue ocean, which went on into an impossibly distant horizon. The calm, mirror-like sea merged with the night sky, and at the spot on the horizon where they both met, a dark line formed which stretched from east to west and was much darker than both; the water and the star-filled firmament. Beyond and into that dark belt of darkness, time and space created a second ocean, a magical body of water that would allow any who could reach it to travel into the Crux. But this black ocean's horizon went further than any of the children or gods could see. Only the One could travel there. And only the eternal twins could keep him company in such a place.

The Oracle meditated while the gentle waves lapped up to his feet, but yet never touched him. The water glowed from the lights made by a million luminescent shrimp, all excitedly glowing together. The tiny creatures could be seen dancing in the water, like so many falling stars. But the Oracle paid them no heed. Instead, he kept his mind and eyes focused on that dark space where the sky and ocean met. Though he could not travel into that darkness, he could use it as the singular point to focus his mind on achieving internal peace and thus better reach a total meditative state. Anchoring his mind and soul to the darkness would allow him to glimpse the future. Though which of the many possible futures he did not know.

Gathered around him were three wondrous beasts. A venomous serpent was coiled to his left. The snake was large enough to devour the largest of men. It was a brilliant green with pulsating red stripes. The stripes slowly rotated around its body. With its forked tongue, the serpent sang to the Oracle. It sang of the darkness beyond the horizon and the wonders that could be his if only he would be brave enough to trust it and let it swallow him whole. While the Oracle rested peacefully in its belly, the snake promised it could take him into the darkness. All the Oracle needed to do was trust it, and much power would be his.

To his right sat a splendid Jaguar. The Jaguar's coat was the blue-black of the night sky, and his spots shone like the stars. They shone with a universe of colors and bathed all the figures around the Oracle and the Oracle himself with magical light. The Jaguar remained silent. It, too, focused on the darkness between heaven and ocean. What it looked for, the Oracle did not know. But it was well known that Jaguars could see into the future better than even the Children, and the Jaguar sitting to his right was not any ordinary earth-bound animal but a spirit jaguar. A legendary beast that only ever offers its services to the highest-ranking and most potent Inca warlords; the Sapas. What the spirit jaguar was doing here, the Oracle did not know. The spirit creature appeared and joined him as silently as the serpent had.

Flying above them was the largest Condor to have ever flown. It was golden, and its feathers reflected the sun and the moon. Both of which were now high in the sky. Though the sun was not its standard golden color, but a dark blue. The dark spots that usually floated on the sun's glowing surface were not their usual black but a bright, translucent green. When the Oracle first noticed the blemishes on the sun's surface, he could see faces through them as if looking through a crystal-clear mountain lake. The faces were screaming and seemed to be calling out to him. The moon pulsated as if it were an enormous heart. Like the Jaguar, the Condor said nothing to the Oracle. It simply flew in circles around the three figures gathered below.

After some time, the Oracle finally reached his perfect meditative place. His mind was free. No longer did any of the creatures around him occupy his thoughts. Instead, his inner eyes opened wide and saw The Way. Tears welled up in his eyes. Seeing The Way never failed to move him to his deepest core. The Way calls out to the soul and can connect with it. That connection can be so strong that if the Oracle had not been prepared, he could have been pulled in by it like a small child who ventured too close to a raging river would be pulled in. Only death would be the end result of such an event.

The Way is an ever-flowing river of spiritual energy. Yet, if one is careful and well-trained, a person could walk onto the Way and use it to travel into the future, not physically into the future itself, but onto a plane in the universe where visions of the future can be glimpsed. As the Oracle stepped onto The Way, he saw death and birth on either side.

On the side of the Way, which death called home, he saw a giant sea turtle wash onto a beach covered with tiny exploding stars. The waters that had carried the turtle onto the beach gently receded, and the turtle came to rest on the emeralds and rubies which covered the shoreline.

The Oracle could see that the beast was dead. Its eyes had been gouged out, and a stream of bright white maggots came out of those black orifices. In the blink of an eye, the larvae covered the entire sea turtle and had begun to devour its flesh. They consumed all of it, even its shell. While the Oracle stared in horror at the scene, the sea turtle turned towards him and opened its mouth as if to speak. No sound came out of it, but black smoke, which smelled of sulfur, poured out of its mouth. The stench made the Oracle turn away. He almost stumbled but managed to keep his footing. When he opened his eyes again, the sea turtle was gone, night had turned to day, and the ocean was now lit by a bright sun.

Sea birds screeched and swooped over the beach, nothing but the blue sky behind them. Strange voices drifted in from the ocean. He could not understand what they were saying. He did not recognize their language. He began to see distant white shapes on the water. At first, he thought them to be massive sea creatures. There were three of them. But these beasts were nothing like he'd ever seen before. Instead of swimming through the water, these monstrosities floated over it with the help of multiple white wings. Their wings had colorful yellow and red feathers, which gracefully trailed over the beasts.

As the creatures got closer, the Oracle could see that they were covered in swarms of what looked to be men. But these men were clad in pure metal. Not gold, but more like silver. The three massive creatures and their occupants turned towards him, and out of their sides came large black spines.

The sea birds stopped screeching, and even the sounds of the ocean ceased. When all was quiet, the spines burst into life, and fire poured from them as it does from some of the local fire mountains. Not far from where he stood, the water began to explode upwards as if giant rocks had landed on the surface. More and more turquoise blue waters burst from the ocean's surface as even more of the creature's black spines started spewing fire. The water churned violently, and soon it took on a new color. Instead of the aqua blue of a tropical sea, it turned dark red. The ocean was now a sea of blood. The sea birds were dead, and on the shoreline, the Oracle could see the bodies of his people. Like the sea birds, they, too, were all dead. The human's bodies were covered in black sores. Some of the deceased he could recognize. Amongst them were his woman and his children. He wept. He looked away and tried to return to the beach but couldn't. The serpent was now blocking his Way. Above him, the Condor screamed at him and told him his end had come.

The Jaguar came to him when he thought he would lose his mind in despair. It reached out and bid him to look up. The Oracle did so. The sky was once again blue. The scenes of death and destruction were now gone. In their place was a beautiful valley surrounded by snow-covered mountains. The Jaguar looked towards those mountains. It was early dawn. The sun was shining from behind the mountain range. Inti would rise above the mountain tops at any moment and bathe him with his golden warmth. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the Jaguar had begun to walk away from him, and then the Jaguar began to run toward the darkness. Soon it had disappeared, and the Oracle could no longer see it. He stopped looking for the animal and directed his gaze toward the mountains, hoping to see the sunrise in all its glory.

The rays of sunshine flowed over the smallest peak and the tallest. The sun rose high above the mountains and valley. But something was wrong. The sun was rising tall and was actually stretching into an elongated form. It was no longer a sphere but had begun to stand up, making a shape roughly similar to one of the giant mushrooms he had seen growing in the forest. The sun became brighter and brighter, and then it suddenly burst, and the Oracle tried to shield his eyes from the intense light.

A wall of fire came towards him that reached high into the sky. In the blink of an eye, it got to where he stood. Powerful winds blew trees and even large rocks away as if they were mere blades of grass. The Oracle felt immense heat and looked down into his hands. They were turning black. They were burning. His flesh was falling off. He tried to scream but realized no sound would ever come from him again. The all-consuming fire would soon entirely turn him to dust. So, he fell to his knees. And then he saw his body burst into flame. And then he thought no more.

But a few moments later, or perhaps after many hours or even days had passed, he felt the gentle touch of water upon his feet. He opened his eyes again. The snake, Jaguar, and Condor were gone. It was no longer night, and the sun was high up in the sky.

He looked towards the horizon and saw the ocean as he remembered it. Turquoise blue and white caps gently danced on its surface. He looked at his hands. They were fine. His flesh was intact. He heard a flute in the distance. The melody was familiar, though he could not remember the song. He was tired. His eyes ached. He could not stand up yet. He felt as if he were rooted on the spot.

He noticed the sea birds. They were flying high above. He looked on the sand and, for the first time, saw the bright green emerald lying right by his feet. He reached for it and picked it up. He looked into it and then held it up to his eyes. Staring through it, he could see the distant horizon. Inside the gem, he thought he could see shapes in the ocean. Giant black creatures with white wings and yellow and red feathers. He could not take his eyes off the emerald. He kept looking into it. He wondered if he was still in a trance. But he knew he was not. He forced himself to put the gem down and now looked onto the ocean and saw nothing. Nothing but blue water, as far as the eye could see.

Suddenly he could move.

He got up.

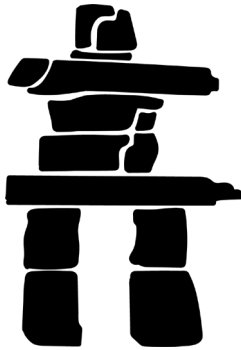
He ran.

He cried.

He had walked The Way.

He had seen the future.

And wished he had not.



Savior.

For weeks now, Toklo had been having dreams of Sedna. Sedna, the Mistress of the Sea, kept calling to him in those dreams. Like all in his tribe, Toklo had first learned of Sedna, the beautiful and terrifying sea deity, when he was a child. The tale was typically told during summer when his people moved from ice-igloo villages to warm-season tents.

As far back as he could remember, Ujurak, the village leader, would gather the children in a circle and tell them the various Sedna stories. Ujurak even claimed to have met the deity.

Toklo remembered Ujurak's Sedna stories very well. But one story stood out from the rest; Ujurak always began the telling in the same way, "Sedna was a beautiful but conceited woman who pushed away the advances of all of the men in her village. Even when mighty hunters from other villages would come to seek her out, she would refuse them. Sedna viewed all men as being beneath her, not good enough for the gift of her beauty."

Ujurak has always been a great storyteller. He never just sat there when telling his tales but became very animated, adding body motion and vocal emotion to every story. But this was even more so whenever he spoke of Sedna. Pointing to the sky, Ujurak continued sharing Sedna's saga, "But one day, while Malina, the sun goddess, shone high in the sky, Sedna met a man so special that she immediately fell in love with him. The man told Sedna that he was also in love with her and asked that she marry him and come away with him across the sea to his home.

Sedna quickly said yes! The two were joined together, and the man took her away to his home across the sea. But once there, Sedna discovered that his home was a giant nest, and the man was really a bird." Typically, at this stage, Ujurak would make great enormous wings out of his arms and vigorously flapped them around and "flew" circles around his audience. At the same time, he spoke, "Sedna was appalled and frightened! She wanted to get away but knew she would have to wait for her father to visit so she could escape.

One full year later, her father finally came to visit, and upon seeing Sedna's terrible situation, he grabbed his daughter and escaped with her in his boat. But when the great bird, who had pretended to be a man, found they had left, he flapped his wings and caused the sea to form giant waves, threatening to sink Sedna and her father's boat.

Her father was so frightened that he threw Sedna overboard to appease the bird's anger. But Sedna held onto the boat rails with such a firm grip that her father had to cut off her fingers to try and save himself. He didn't succeed at the first attempt, even when he tried cutting at the first joint, so he had to try again and started cutting off at the knuckles. It was only then that poor Sedna finally let go. But the rest of the Children became blessed from her pain, fear, and misery." Always at this point in the story, Ujurak looked sad but then brightened a bit when he spoke of what bounties Sedna's sacrifice had brought them all, "Those fingers became the Walrus and Whales and other animals that feed the Inuit people to this day.

Being so beautiful, Sedna was saved by the sea fish, which brought her down to the ocean's depths and made her their Mistress. Giving Sedna dominion over every creature in the seas. To this day, Sedna commands which animals, and in what quantities, will make themselves available for the hunt so that we, the Children, have food to eat. But even after becoming a goddess, Sedna remained quick to anger. This is especially true whenever she looks into the waves and does not see a beautiful woman looking back at her in the reflection." Ujurak would then pause and look at the audience, "You see, Children, even after becoming a goddess and being treated with reverence by all the Children of the sea, she still hung on to her vanity. Beware to always look deep into the people around you, not just at the surface. Sedna reminds us every day that beauty is skin deep."

Toklo awoke alone, as always, in the confines of his tent. He had never married though he had opportunities. He was a good hunter and a great fisherman, able to help provide meat and fish for his village. He would make a good husband and father, but he could never find a woman to settle down with. He felt something was missing, and he could not grasp what that was.

Toklo cleaned the sleep from his eyes and quickly ate some dried fish. He then grabbed his pack in which he kept his hand-carved fishing lures, most made of bone and some provisions. Then he retrieved his Kakivait, the three-pronged spear he used to harpoon the fish he could lure near the surface. When he had gathered all his gear and provisions, he walked out into the relative warmth of the sun.

Most mornings, Toklo would join others from his village and head to the fishing hole together. But today, they were out early hunting for Caribou and other animals. While he usually enjoyed the company of others, on this morning, he was relieved to be alone. A feeling of unease had begun to creep into his mind soon after leaving his home.

Toklo walked along the stone-marked path until he reached the fishing hole in the ice. After setting down his pack and chewing on a piece of dried fish, he dropped his fish-shaped bone lure into the hole and waited while he jigged the line. His harpoon was always ready to spear any fish that might be drawn to the surface.

Some minutes passed until Toklo began to see and sense a shadow rising from below. He readied his harpoon, but something told him to wait. If this was a fish, it was a big one, very big for what he usually caught here. To his surprise, what now broke the surface was no fish.

Rising from the freezing water was the woman from his dreams. Sedna, the Mistress of the Sea. Toklo could see that she was indeed a beauty to behold. Her deep dark eyes were set perfectly in an unblemished face, which in turn was framed by long, jet-black hair. All types of fish swam beneath and around her feet as if waiting in attendance.

Toklo dropped his harpoon, his eyes transfixed on the deity. Feeling fear and exhilaration, he resisted returning to his tent.

Sedna looked into his eyes and said, "Hello, Toklo." She said in a silky voice. "You know me, don't you?"

"Yes," He replied. "I have dreamt of you."

"I have been watching you, Toklo." She said. "I watch all of the Children. But lately, I have been watching you more than others."

“Why haven’t you taken a wife, Toklo?” Sedna continued. “Is it because you were waiting for someone from your dreams?”

“I... I don’t know...” He stammered.

“Come closer.” She said with her arms outstretched, beckoning.

It was then that he noticed her hands. The hands could not hold onto anything because all her fingers were missing. Toklo hesitated. His fear annoyed Sedna.

“I have chosen you, Toklo, and you have spent your life waiting for me.” Said Sedna. “Look at me. Am I not beautiful?”

Yes, Mistress. Replied Toklo, “You are magnificent.”

“You must comb my hair for me, Toklo.” Said Sedna as she threw back her hair, “As you can see, I cannot do it myself.”

Toklo felt more afraid than before and gave Sedna the only excuse he could think of “But I have no comb, Mistress.” He whispered. “I cannot do this.”

Sedna’s eyes seemed to swirl with differing shades of black as she continued to speak to the terrified Toklo. Her tone had turned sharp and demanding, “Then you must get a comb Toklo. Promise me you will return with a comb tomorrow because if you don’t, I will not send the animals to you, and your village will not eat. There is the Balance to be kept. Do you promise to come back?”

Toklo promised, but he was not sure he meant it. He ran back to his tent and sat in the dark, not knowing what to do but in great fear of doing nothing at all. Was the fate of the whole village really in his hands now? He asked himself this question repeatedly until Malina, the Sun Goddess, left the sky and the Moon God Anningan rose above their humble gathering of tents.

After a while, he fell into a fitful sleep. This time he dreamt of his village, not Sedna. What he saw disturbed him. The hunters were coming back empty-handed. The fishing nets were torn. The children cried because they had nothing to eat. Toklo awoke with a start, wet with sweat despite the cold.

He did not go to the fishing hole that morning. Instead, he sat outside his tent, pretending to repair his tools to keep his mind off the events of the last morning. But he knew that he was breaking his promise to Sedna.

Sometime later, Toklo saw Ujarak returning from a hunt, but the great hunter was empty-handed. Could this be a sign, a message from Sedna, he thought? In the past other hunts had not been successful, but this time he could not help but think that the Mistress of the Sea was sending him a message.

Toklo decided to speak with Ujarak and seek his advice and wisdom. Toklo greeted the older man with a smile, but Ujarak could see the tension on Toklo’s face and the fear in his eyes. “Come, Toklo.” The old man said, “Let’s sit inside. It’s been a while since we talked. Maybe it’s been too long.”

Ujarak was the oldest of all the people in the village and their leader, and, like Toklo, he had never taken a wife or had any children. The villagers did not understand why and if any asked, he would smile and say, “You are my family. I am like your father. This is our Way.”

Toklo followed Ujarak into his tent, sharing some dried meat. When they finished the small meal, Ujarak spoke. “tell me, Toklo, why are you not fishing today? What is it that bothers you so?”

Toklo sat nervously, fidgeting, but the village leader’s calm manner and gentle smile set him at ease, and he finally managed to speak. “I have been dreaming for some time now about the woman you used to tell us about when I was a child. The Sea Mistress.”

Ujarak’s warm expression grew serious. “You mean Sedna.” It was not a question but a statement of fact.

“Yes, said Toklo. “But there is more....”

Toklo told the old man about what had happened the day before and his promise to Sedna. He expected disbelief from Ujarak, but he got something else entirely. Ujarak smiled and leaned in close to Toklo as he spoke. “You have heard of The One Toklo. Even as a child, you would listen to the elders whisper The One is above all living things, and the eternal Balance is the Way of The One.

“The Balance must be kept. This is our Way. The Children must keep that Balance. That is why we are here. We are the Children, Toklo. We have not always been the Children; many have been before us. But it is for us to keep the Balance now.”

“What we do now may have no effect that we can see. What happens to us matters little. We are a small part of something that is beyond our comprehension. But we must constantly work to keep the Balance.

Toklo tried to understand what Ujarak was saying even as he asked the question, “But what can I do? I am one man. How much can I matter in all this?”

“We can’t see far enough to know and understand what our actions mean to the Balance.” Answered Ujarak. “But we must still do what we can to keep the Balance.

Ujarak’s face tightened, and he spoke to Toklo as a father to his child. “You made a promise Toklo. And if this promise is not kept, the Balance will not be kept. Sedna must be appeased so that we will have successful hunts and be able to fill up our food stores for the winter.”

Toklo’s eyes widened, “But how can I go with her? Surely, I will die!” He cried.

Ujarak replied, “We must believe in the Way of the One and that there is a reason and purpose for all we do and all that happens. What does it matter if a man lives or not compared to everything that is around, above and below us?”

“Like myself, you never took a wife or had children Toklo.” Ujarak continued. “There is a reason for that. Come... We will walk together.”

As they reached where Sedna had first appeared to him, Toklo began to understand, and calmness filled him. Toklo saw that Sedna, Mistress of the Sea, was there waiting for him.

Toklo looked at the old man, “But I do not have a comb Ujarak.”

Toklo looked at the old man, “But I do not have a comb Ujarak.”

Ujarak pulled something from inside his coat. It was an old and weathered comb carved from bone.
“Here, child, take this one,” Said Ujarak, “I think she will recognize it.”

Toklo understood now, and as he took Sedna’s arm, she slowly pulled him into the cold sea.

Before going entirely underwater, he looked back to where Ujarak stood.

Ujarak had been joined by all of the people of his village. They were all smiling and filled with gratitude for their savior.

And as one, they all chanted, “Balance is the only truth. This is our Way.”

To be continued...