



Tlailli Mahuizotl

Celebration of Pain



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"Tlailli tlalli. Nenepantli ithualli masali.

Pain is the soil. Wounds are where your light shines."

-Yn'tuac Saying

Colel tucked her knife into the fiber belt she'd woven, closing her eyes for a few brief moments.

The feeling of her blade sliding into place was an echo of her strength—a reminder of what she had endured and survived. The knife had been with her since the beginning, since the night she had cut Tzitzin's throat and watched the life drain from his eyes. She had made the belt herself, weaving it during the long months in the jungle when her hands needed something to do besides tremble.

Smiling with quiet certainty, she opened her eyes and hoisted the monkey carcass over her shoulder, then began walking with practiced care to avoid disturbing her sleeping infant son.

He was bundled against her chest in a sling she had fashioned from vines and leaves, his small body warm against hers. He had been born three moons ago, in a hollow beneath a great ceiba tree, with no one to help her but the jungle itself. She had bitten through the cord with her own teeth, had cleaned him with water from a stream, had held him to her breast and wept with a joy she had not known she was still capable of feeling.



Ixchel had given her this gift. A son, born of violence but innocent of it. A reason to keep walking when her body screamed for rest. A future, when she had thought she had none.

The light was fading, the sky turning from gold to orange to the deep purple that preceded night. They would need fire soon—both to cook their meal and ward off the night's hunters. The jungle was beautiful, but it was not kind. It took the weak and the careless without remorse.

Colel was neither.

Judging by the sky, it was almost Tlailli Mahuizotl—her people's celebration of harvest and life, pain and growth. A fitting mirror for her own journey.

When the Chichil had first attacked their village and taken her, Colel had thought life was over. She had watched her mother die with a spear through her chest. Had felt the rough hands of warriors dragging her away from everything she knew. Had been bound and marched through the jungle for days, her feet bleeding, her spirit breaking with every step.

Death would have been preferable to breathing as a slave.

Things had grown worse when Tzitzin claimed her as his wife. The man was ugly—not in his face, which was ordinary enough, but in his spirit. There was a rot in him that she could smell, a wrongness that made her skin crawl whenever he touched her. He was soulless, as if Innatraea herself hated him. Nothing good would ever grow from him.

But she had endured.



She had learned to be silent when silence kept her safe, to be compliant when compliance kept her alive. She had watched, and waited, and planned. And when the moment came—when Tzitzin had drunk too much fermented cacao and fallen into a heavy sleep—she had taken his own knife and opened his throat with a single, perfect cut.

She had escaped into the jungle that same night, with nothing but the knife and the clothes on her back.

The jungle had tried to kill her a hundred times since then. Snakes and spiders, rivers that swept her off her feet, hunger that gnawed at her until she learned to hunt. And then the discovery that she carried Tzitzin's child—a horror at first, a violation growing inside her.

But the child was hers, not his. Hers to raise, hers to love, hers to shape into something better than his father had ever been.

By Ixchel's grace, she had been given a son.

Colel listened to the jungle's sounds as she walked—the calls of birds settling for the night, the rustle of creatures in the undergrowth, the distant roar of a howler monkey marking its territory. She knew these sounds now, knew which meant safety and which meant danger.

Nothing would stop her from reaching home.

And when she arrived, she would kill them all.

Chichil blood would feed the ground, creating fertile soil—a sacred purpose beyond what such worthless enemies deserved. Every one of them who had watched her suffer, who had laughed at her pain, who had done nothing while Tzitzin used her. They would all die.



That was not vengeance. That was justice. That was balance.

That was Kobaal.

Colel found a small clearing beneath a large cocoa tree, its broad leaves creating a canopy that would help hide the light of her fire. After carefully placing her son between the trunk and where she would work—close enough to reach if danger came, sheltered by the roots—she gathered dry fallen wood and coaxed flames to life.

The fire caught quickly, casting dancing shadows across the clearing as she began skinning their dinner. Her hands moved with practiced efficiency, the knife an extension of her will. The monkey would feed them both—its meat for her, its blood mixed with mashed fruit for the baby.

But a threatening growl froze her hands mid-cut.

A sound any Yn'Tuac knew well.

She looked up slowly, carefully, her body going still even as her mind raced.

There, only a few leaps away, stood an Ocelotl watching her. Its spotted coat was beautiful in the firelight, gold and black and deadly. Its eyes reflected the flames like burning amber, fixed on her with the patient intensity of a predator who knew it had found its prey.

The great cat opened its mouth, snarling, those gleaming eyes never leaving hers. Its massive jaws opened so wide that she thought it could swallow her whole, could crush her skull with a single bite, could end everything she had survived in one violent moment—

Her eyes shot open.



Colel gasped for breath, her heart pounding, her muscles tight with the phantom memory of terror. She was not in the jungle. She was in her home, in her bed, safe.

Those terrors had been years ago now.

She had survived. Her son Tonatiuh was a grown man—a warrior in his own right, with his own scars and his own victories. Those dark days had indeed become her soil, and from that soil had grown everything she was now.

Colel jumped to her feet, glorying in the feeling of her scarred and muscular body stretching with the dawn.

She was no longer young—her joints ached in the mornings, her hair was threaded with grey, her face lined with decades of sun and struggle. But she was *strong*. Stronger than she had been at twenty, in some ways. The strength of youth was fire, burning hot and fast. The strength of age was stone, enduring and immovable.

Tlailli Mahuizotl was here, and it was time.

She walked to her mirror—taken from a Seylan trade caravan long ago, a rare treasure of polished metal and glass that showed her reflection with perfect clarity—and looked at herself in its surface.

She was older now. The scars, tattoos, and stretch marks on her body showed that. Four sons had come from her womb, each one leaving his mark. Battles had left their signatures across her skin—the long slash on her thigh from a Chichil spear, the puckered burn on her shoulder from a cooking fire that had exploded, the web of fine lines on her forearms from a hundred small cuts that had healed imperfectly.



But each one was a symbol of honor and strength, marking what she'd been through that made Colel who she was now.

She smiled at her reflection.

Then she strode out the door of her small home into the sunlight, naked, feeling its warmth wash over her skin like a blessing.

Others would look at her. Let them look.

She was Kobaal—one of the honored warriors whose strength was so proven that they had earned the right to bear their bodies without shame. This was their way. Pride in who they were. Pride in what they had survived. Pride in the soil of their pain and the light that shone through their wounds.

Her tribe had come to Teokahl for Tlailli Mahuizotl, the greatest city on Innatraea now filled with visiting tribes from across Amng'khor. The city was ancient and vast, its stone buildings rising from the jungle like monuments to generations of her people's civilization. At its center stood Tlasaqen, the great pyramid whose peak touched the clouds.

Every tribe had claimed its Calpulli—its section of the city—and this one belonged to the Yn'Tuac. The streets were hung with banners in their colors, the walls painted with their symbols, the air filled with the sounds and smells of their cooking.

All around the Calpulli, her people were preparing for the day. Women tended to children, their voices rising in the old songs that had been sung for generations. Warriors cared for weapons, sharpening blades and restringing bows. Cooks stirred great pots of stew and roasted meat over open fires, the scents making her stomach growl despite her years of discipline.



Many paused to look at her as she passed.

Colel closed her eyes, smiling, and tilted her face into the sun. Let them look. It was respect for her beauty and power. Even at her age, after four sons, tragedies, and more wars than she could count, her people still respected her strength.

That was purpose.

That was happiness.

That was the fertility that the soil of her life had created.

Colel stopped at the preparation grounds to wait for her eldest son. It was his task to dress her for the ceremony—a sacred duty, to help a Kobaal prepare for the honoring. A mother could choose to be upset that he hadn't been there waiting for her, but he too was a warrior. Though not Kobaal himself—not yet, perhaps not ever, that honor was rare—his war party had been on a hunt until late yesterday.

She would wait.

Every tribe had their special ceremonies for Tlaililli Mahuizotl. The Cuauhnemi, the "Tree Walkers," had their peaceful rituals honoring the ancient Great Trees of Teokahl—massive giants that had stood since before the city was built, their roots drinking from sacred springs. Their enemies, the Chichil, had their secretive jungle rites that no outsider was permitted to witness.

But her people, the Yn'Tuac, honored their most powerful warriors in front of everyone, so that all would see their strength. There was no hiding, no secrecy. Only pride, displayed for the world.

Tonatiuh stepped up beside her, also looking over their tribe's Calpulli.



The morning sun shone on a new gash bleeding down his left shoulder—a fresh wound, the blood still bright. He was smiling, because of course he was. Her son had always been quick to smile, quick to laugh. It was one of his finest qualities.

"Nantzin," he said.

The word meant "honored mother"—a woman who had birthed you and was also a great warrior. It was not a title given lightly. It was a title earned in blood.

Colel touched his new wound, feeling the heat of it, the wetness of fresh blood against her fingers. "You are hurt."

His smile widened as he picked up her Ocelotl hide ceremonial mantle. Its spotted surface glowed in the morning light, bringing back memories—the snarl, the amber eyes, the moment she had known she was going to die and had decided to fight anyway.

She had won.

The Ocelotl's skin was now a symbol of her strength that all could see.

"The pain is a good symbol for today," Tonatiuh said. "The others have said it's an omen."

He draped the mantle over her shoulders—gentle, reverent—before picking up the thick cotton lining that went under her leather hide armor.

"The hunt went well, my son?"



Tonatiuh nodded, still smiling. He was never one to hide his joy—a trait he had inherited from her, though she expressed it differently. "Yes, Nantzin. We trapped a Tezcatl. Its black coat will make a fine addition to our war trophies."

A Tezcatl. The black jaguar, rarer and more dangerous than even the Ocelotl. Her son had helped bring one down.

Colel smiled too, pride warming her chest.

Tonatiuh carefully lifted her mantle from her shoulders, then helped her into the leather hide armor over the cotton lining. The armor was heavy, familiar, molded to her body by years of use. Once it was secured, he placed the mantle back over everything, as the ceremony required.

"You have done well, my son."

She looked out over their Calpulli toward Tlasaqen, the giant pyramid whose name meant "Sacred Light." It formed the entire center of Teokahl, rising so high that its peak was often lost in clouds. The stone was ancient, covered in carvings that told the history of their people—the wars, the victories, the gods who watched over them.

"It is time. Walk with me."

The noise of Teokahl engulfed them as they left the Yn'Tuac Calpulli.

Most of their tribe would follow soon; for now she had her son and honor guard trailing behind her. The streets were crowded, busy, and very loud. Foreigners were still allowed in the city until the third day, so the markets were teeming with people—traders from every corner of Innatraea, selling goods and buying treasures, their voices raised in a dozen different languages.



Colel enjoyed the cacophony. While they were here, it was much different from the jungle sounds of their tribe's home—no bird calls, no rustling leaves, just the endless roar of human activity. Still, she longed to be back under the foliage again. The jungle was harsh, but it was honest. Cities were full of hidden dangers that wore human faces.

Ahead, there was an Atlnemi woman—her tribe's name meaning "Water Walkers"—negotiating at a merchant's stall. The Atlnemi were peaceful traders, respected for their fairness and their skill at navigating the great rivers that connected Amng'khor's scattered cities.

She was negotiating with a rough-looking Iztalli man. "Pale One," the word meant—a foreigner from the north. He could have been Aedonian, or maybe Nordrian; Colel wasn't sure. All Iztalli looked the same to her, with their strange pale skin and their coarse manners.

He was being loud and rude, his voice carrying over the crowd. The disrespect wasn't a surprise, since most Iztalli had no honor. They came to Amng'khor seeking trade and treasure, but they did not bother to learn the ways of the people whose land they walked.

When he grabbed the woman's arm, Colel's anger flashed like hot fire.

She rounded on him, closing the distance with predatory purpose. Her honor guard moved to follow, but she waved them back. This was not a battle. This was a correction.

Direct confrontation wasn't permitted during Tlailli Mahuizotl—Ixchel's peace protected all tribes within Teokahl, and that peace extended even to foreigners. But Colel wouldn't stand by while any of their people, even from another tribe, was being treated with dishonor, especially by Iztalli swine.



There were other ways of handling things.

"Iztacchichi!" she called out, her voice cutting through the noise of the market. "Remove your hand!"

The insult—"pale dog"—had its desired effect. The man let go of the Atlnemi woman and turned toward Colel, his face reddening with anger. His hand went to his sword hilt.

"Wench! I can do as I please. Leave me be, or else!"

Colel smirked as she noticed the Atlnemi woman stepping back, smiling. Good. That was the goal, this was Teokahl, her people had a right to safety here.

She shifted her body into a seemingly relaxed fighter's stance—weight balanced, hands loose, ready to move in any direction. To an untrained eye, she looked casual. To anyone who knew combat, she looked like death waiting to happen.

"The most painful thing any Innatraean can do is give birth to a child," she said, her voice calm and even. "I have four sons. And you believe you are my equal, little man?"

She smiled—not a kind smile.

"Come then. Show me what fighting skills your mother gave you."

The man's face twisted with rage, and for a moment she thought he would actually draw his blade. She hoped he would. It had been days since her last good fight, and her blood was singing with the need for it.



But then another Iztalli put his hand on the first man's shoulder, holding him back. This one was older, calmer, his eyes calculating as he looked at Colel. He saw what the younger man did not—the scars, the armor, the Ocelotl mantle. The way she stood. The way her honor guard waited behind her, hands on their weapons, ready.

"Ease off, Eyolf," he said quietly. "She's a Kobaal. She would kill you quicker than blinking. Then the rest of us would be kicked out—fighting is prohibited during their festival, and we need the trade."

The younger man—Eyolf—hesitated, his pride warring with his survival instinct.

Survival won.

He spat on the ground at Colel's feet—a petty gesture, the defiance of a man who knew he was beaten—and let his companion pull him away into the crowd.

Colel watched them go, feeling more than a little disgruntled. She had wanted that fight.

But she had accomplished her goal, at least. The Atlnemi woman was safe.

Tonatiuh laughed from beside her. "It is a fine line you walk, Nantzin. Come, we have somewhere else to be. Ocsequintin."

Colel nodded and started moving toward the center of Teokahl again. She resisted the urge to smile—her son was learning to be a true Yn'Tuac warrior.



Occequintin. "There will be another." A saying that meant the future held more battles; let this one go. It was wisdom, hard-won. Not every fight was worth fighting. Not every insult was worth answering with blood.

But some were.

She slapped him on the back, earning another of his smiles. He was a good man.

"I did not lose that fight," she said. "He chose to surrender."

Tonatiuh looked at her sideways, amusement dancing in his eyes. "One could also say that it never happened. This is Tlailli Mahuizotl."

"Winning without a single blow is still victory."

He chuckled. "Maybe for a Tlatoani."

Tlatoani—the word meant "Speaker" or "Ruler." To the Yn'Tuac, it meant someone who ruled with their mouth and had no strength. Politicians. Diplomats. People who talked while warriors bled.

It was not something you called a Kobaal.

Colel was about to retort—something sharp, something that would make him regret his cheek—when the base of Tlasaqen came into sight, cutting off her words.

The ancient pyramid rose high into the sky, its stone steps climbing toward the heavens. One could see its top—the seat of their Tecuhtli, their Emperor—from anywhere in Teokahl. It was a beacon, a symbol, a reminder of everything her people had built together.



But to Colel, Tlasaqaen's true beauty was when you got up close and could see its base.

The sacred part of the monument spread out into their world, belonging to Ixchel rather than the sky. The stone here was carved with a thousand images—jaguars and eagles, serpents and warriors, scenes from the great myths that formed the foundation of their people's beliefs. Flowers grew from cracks in the ancient stone, red and gold and purple, offerings left by generations of worshippers.

Long ago, the Amng Khoran war had ended with the building of this great pyramid. That event had unified their people—tribes that had fought each other for centuries, finally coming together under a common purpose. The pyramid connected Wachan's harsh sky realm to Ixchel's fertile jungles, bridging the divine and the mortal.

There was no event in history more sacred.

Colel smiled, feeling awe wash over her despite the years. No matter how many times she came here, Tlasaqaen still took her breath away.

She watched as the heads of Teocihuatl's young divine servants spread throughout the pyramid's walkways and balconies, lighting the sacred torches. Each flame caught and held, golden light dancing against ancient stone.

It meant that the high priestess's three-day prayer had ended—something she did before every Tlailli Mahuizotl, each hour honoring a generation lost in that ancient war. The torches would stay lit for the entire celebration, a constant reminder of sacrifice and unity.

Then she saw two figures standing atop Tlasaqaen.



It was too far for her to make out their details, but she knew it would be their Tecuhtli and Teocihuatl—the Emperor and the High Priestess, the two pillars upon which Amng'khor rested. Their presence at the peak meant it was time for the council.

Every major tribe would send a representative, and they would discuss all of Amng'khor before the celebration started—disputes to be settled, alliances to be reaffirmed, matters of trade and territory and justice. It was politics, but it was necessary politics.

Colel silently started toward the steps. Now was not the time for useless words.

She made sure to smile at the Chichil assembly among the throngs, though. Because of a young girl they'd kidnapped years ago, their tribe no longer counted as a major one. They had lost warriors, lost territory, lost standing—all because of what they had done to her.

She had been their soil. And from that soil had grown their destruction.

Colel started climbing the steps, focusing on going upward while maintaining her control.

The distant murmur of Teokahl slowly faded below her as she climbed, step by step, the great city shrinking beneath her feet. Members of other tribes joined her on the journey—warriors and elders, representatives chosen for their wisdom or their strength.

She kept her quiet, resolute pace, not speaking, not acknowledging. This was a sacred climb. Words would cheapen it.

The noise of those below her vanished altogether, replaced by the whisper of wind across stone. A warm breeze blew over her, bringing a feeling of stillness, of being suspended between earth and sky.



Colel stopped and looked upward, her breath catching.

A wing-shaped shadow fell across the steps.

She blinked, certain she was seeing things—but no. The shadow was real, and it was moving. Moments later the air stirred, a great rush of wind that made her mantle snap and billow, and suddenly she was looking into the eyes of a giant.

The towering woman stood there, the upper half of her body coming out of Tlasaqen's steps like she was part of Innatrea herself, staring down at Colel.

She was impossibly tall—the size of a Great Tree. Her luminous eyes seemed somehow reminiscent of a great cat, golden and slitted, ancient beyond measure. And her visage was made of the jungle itself. Foliage and branches grew from her skin, leaves rustling with each breath. Roots and vines wrapped around her limbs like living garments. Flowers bloomed in her hair.

She was beautiful.

She was terrifying.

She was *divine*.

There were stories of omens during Tlailli Mahuizotl—strange visions, prophetic dreams, gods walking among mortals. Whether true or political, Colel had never been sure. She had always been practical, focused on what she could touch and fight and kill.

But this was different.

This was sacred.



She could feel it in her bones, in her blood, in the deepest part of her spirit. The presence before her was not mortal, was not a trick or an illusion.

The colossal woman flowed down toward her, her body passing through Tlasaqen like it was water, those feline eyes stirring memories of her own encounter with an Ocelotl so long ago. The same patient intensity. The same sense of power barely contained.

Ixchel.

It had to be.

She was looking into the face of their goddess.

The others around her fell to their knees, their foreheads pressing against the stone steps, their bodies trembling with awe and fear. She could hear their whispered prayers, their gasps of disbelief.

But Colel stood tall.

She met those powerfully deep eyes without flinching.

Even under the harsh light of Wachan and Ixchel's gaze, she was still Kobaal. Her knees did not touch the ground. They never had. They never would.

Ixchel stopped and smiled.

It was not the smile of a goddess receiving worship. It was the smile of a friend greeting a friend, warm and genuine, as if this were nothing more than a conversation between equals.

Her voice held a lilting music, and a feeling of warm kindness emanated through her words. "Colel, my daughter. You do not kneel—a true Kobaal indeed."



Colel stood tall, smiling, some of the tension leaving her body. This was not a test. This was... recognition.

"For you I would, mother, if you asked me to."

She looked down, reddening slightly at those words. They were not her way—submission was not her way, surrender was not her way. But this was Ixchel. For Ixchel, she would bend her pride.

The goddess's laughter was like a bubbling waterfall, like sunlight on moving water. "No, child. Your strength is needed. Always be who you are, Colel, for she is the woman that I came here for."

Colel's breath caught.

She barely noticed the others around her gasp—they were completely forgotten. The world had narrowed to just her and the goddess, standing together on the ancient steps.

"You... came here for me?"

"Yes, child. I have been with you since the beginning."

The words hit Colel like a physical blow. Since the beginning. Since the Chichil attack, since Tzitzin, since the jungle and the Ocelotl and the birth of her son by firelight.

Ixchel had been watching.

Ixchel had been *with her*.

"Watching you grow and become Kobaal has been a joy," the goddess continued. Her eyes were soft now, tender—the eyes of a mother looking at a child she was proud of. "You have suffered much. You have endured more. And you have become exactly what I hoped you would be."



Every word made Colel stand taller, her heart beat faster, her mind reel in shock.

She had always believed in Ixchel, had always honored her, had always given thanks for the gifts of survival and strength. But she had never imagined—never dared to imagine—that Ixchel had noticed *her*.

Ixchel leaned close.

"Listen carefully, all of you others here, and bear witness to these words."

Moments passed as the others slowly looked up, nodding, their eyes darting between Ixchel and Colel. Their faces were a strange mixture of awe and disbelief—to see their goddess speak directly to a mortal, to witness such a moment, was beyond anything they had expected from this day.

"There is a war coming," Ixchel said. Her voice had changed—still musical, still kind, but underneath it now was something harder. Steel beneath silk. "Nothing like anything Amng'khor—or even Innatraea—has ever seen."

Her eyes bored into Colel's very being.

"You must unite the entire Amng people, all of the tribes. That is the path to victory and survival."

The words hung in the air, heavy with meaning.



Unite the entire Amng people. Tribes that had fought each other for generations, that nursed ancient grudges and bitter rivalries. The Yn'Tuac and the Chichil. The Cuauhnemi and their enemies. The Water Walkers and the Tree Walkers and all the countless smaller tribes scattered through the jungle.

All of them. United.

Led by Colel.

A great war.

Colel nodded, unable to form speech immediately. Her mouth worked silently, her throat feeling dry. The weight of the command was almost unbearable—but she had carried unbearable weights before.

She had always survived.

"I will do as you ask, mother."

The words came out stronger than she expected.

"On the soil of my very being, I swear it."

A weight seemed to settle upon Colel's shoulders as Ixchel stood tall—not crushing, but present. The weight of responsibility. The weight of destiny. The weight of becoming something more than she had ever been.

Ixchel smiled.

"Good. For now, enjoy Tlailli Mahuizotl, and then your work begins."



She reached out and touched Colel's face—just briefly, just a brush of fingers that felt like sunlight and growing things and the heart of the jungle itself.

"I believe in you."

Then, with the wind, Ixchel was gone.

Colel turned to look out across Teokahl as the others beside her slowly stood on shaking legs. The city spread below her, vast and ancient, full of people who had no idea what was coming.

All of her people.

She would unite them.

She would save them.

And when the war came—whatever war it was, whatever enemy threatened—she would stand at the front of the Amng army, Kobaal and unbreaking, and she would teach their enemies what it meant to fight a woman whose pain had become her soil.

A woman who did not kneel.

