



Tlailli Mahuizotl

Celebration of Pain



E.R. Zaugg



"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. 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. The light was fading, and they would need fire soon—both to cook their meal and ward off the night's hunters.

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; 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 and soulless; he was soilless, as if Innatraea herself hated him.

But she had escaped, killed him, survived the jungle's trials, and by Ixchel's grace had been given a son. She listened to the jungle's sounds as she walked—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.



Colel found a small clearing beneath a large cocoa tree. After carefully placing her son between the trunk and where she would work, she gathered dry fallen wood and coaxed flames to life. The fire caught quickly, casting dancing shadows as she began skinning their dinner. But a threatening growl froze her hands mid-cut—a sound any Yn'Tuac knew well. There, only a few leaps away, stood an Ocelotl watching her, its eyes reflecting the firelight like burning amber.

The great cat opened its mouth snarling, eyes gleaming with predatory hunger; its massive jaws opening so wide that she thought it could swallow her whole. Her eyes shot open, and Colel gasped for breath, tightening her muscles and focusing as she pulled herself from the nightmare's grip. Those terrors had been years ago now. She had survived, her son Tonatiuh was a grown man, and those dark days had indeed become her soil. Colel jumped to her feet, glorying in the feeling of her scarred and muscular body stretching with the dawn. Tlailli Mahuizotl was here, and it was time.

She walked to her mirror, taken from a Seylan trade caravan long ago, and looked at herself in its reflective surface. She was older now—the scars, tattoos, and stretch marks on her body showed that. 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 and strode out the door of her small home into the sunlight, naked, feeling its warmth wash over her skin. Others would look at her, but she was Kobaal, and this was their way. Pride in who they were.



Her tribe had come to Teokahl for Tlailli Mahuizotl, the greatest city on Innatraea now filled with visiting tribes. Every one had claimed its Calpulli, or section of the city, and this one belonged to the Yn'Tuac. All around the Calpulli, the Yn'Tuac were preparing for the day—tending to children, caring for weapons, cooking. 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, happiness—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 mother could choose to be upset that he hadn't been there waiting for her, but he too was a warrior, and though not Kobaal, his war party had been on a hunt until late yesterday. Every tribe had their special ceremonies for Tlailli Mahuizotl. The Cuauhnemi, or "Tree Walkers," had their peaceful rituals honoring the ancient Great Trees of Teokahl. Their enemies, the Chichil, had their secretive jungle rites. But her people, the Yn'Tuac, honored their most powerful warriors in front of everyone, so that all would see their strength!

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, and he smiled. "Nantzin."

It was their word for an honored mother, a woman who birthed you and was a great warrior. Her son was a good man. She touched his new wound. "You are hurt."

His smile widened as he picked up her Ocelotl hide ceremonial mantle, its spotted surface glowing in the morning light, bringing back memories. "The pain is a good symbol for today. The others have said it's an omen."



He draped the mantle over her shoulders 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. "Yes Nantzin, we trapped a Tezcatl. Its black coat will make a fine addition to our war trophies."

Colel smiled too, remembering her night facing the Ocelotl alone so long ago. Now its skin was a symbol of her strength that all could see. Tonatiuh carefully lifted her mantle from her shoulders, then helped her into the leather hide armor over the cotton lining. Once the armor 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 *Tlasagen*, the giant pyramid whose name meant "*Sacred Light*" that formed the entire center of Teokahl. "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 them. 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. Colel enjoyed the cacophony—while they were here, it was much different than the jungle sounds of their tribe's home. Still, she longed to be back under the foliage again.



Ahead there was an Atlhemi woman—her tribe's name meaning "Water Walkers"—and they were peaceful traders. She was negotiating with a rough looking Iztalli, or "Pale One," man. He could have been Aedonian, or maybe Nordrian; Colel wasn't sure. All Iztalli looked the same to her. He was being loud and rude—the disrespect wasn't a surprise, since most Iztalli had no honor. It irked her to see such behavior during Tlailli Mahuizotl, and when he grabbed the woman's arm, Colel's anger flashed like hot fire. She rounded on him, closing the distance with predatory purpose.

Direct confrontation wasn't permitted during Tlailli Mahuizotl; Ixchel's peace protected all tribes within Teokahl. But Colel wouldn't stand by while any Amng was being treated with dishonor, and there were other ways of handling things. "Iztacchichi! Remove your hand!"

The insult, which meant pale dog, had its desired effect as the man let go and turned toward her, putting a hand on his sword hilt. "Wench! I can do as I please, leave me be or else!"

Colel smirked as she noticed the other woman leaving, shifting her body into a seemingly relaxed fighter's stance. "The most painful thing any Innatraean can do is give birth to a child. I have four sons, and you believe you are my equal, little man? Come then, show me what fighting skills your mother gave you."

But then another Iztalli put his hand on the first man's shoulder, while giving her a calculating look. "Ease off Eyolf, she's a Kobaal and 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."

Colel watched the men go, feeling more than a little disgruntled. It had been days since her last good fight, but she had accomplished her goal at least.

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



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*, or "*there will be another*," was a saying that meant the future held more battles; let this one go. She slapped him on the back, earning another of his smiles. He was a good man.

"I did not lose that fight, he chose to surrender."

Tonatiuh looked at her sideways. "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 this meant someone who ruled with their mouth and had no strength. It was not something you called a Kobaal, and she was about to retort when the base of Tlasaqen came into sight, cutting off her words.

The ancient pyramid rose high into the sky; one could see its top, the seat of their Tecuhtli, or "Emperor," from anywhere in Teokahl. But to Colel, Tlasaqen's true beauty was when you got up close and could see its base, the sacred part of the monument that spread out into their world and belonged to Ixchel.

Long ago the Amng Khoran war had ended with the building of this great pyramid. That event had unified their people and connected Wachan's harsh sky realm to Ixchel's fertile jungles. There was no event in history more sacred.

Colel smiled, feeling awe, as she watched their head Teocihuatl's young divine servants spreading throughout Tlasaqen's walkways and balconies, lighting the sacred torches. 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.



Then she saw two figures standing atop Tlasaqen. It was too far for her to make out their details, but she knew it would be their Tecuhtli and Teocihuatl, which 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. 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.

Colel started climbing the steps, focusing on going upward while maintaining her control, the distant murmur of Teokahl slowly fading below her. Members of other tribes joined her on the journey, but she just kept her quiet, resolute pace, until the noise of those below her vanished altogether and a warm wind blew over her, bringing a feeling of stillness. Colel stopped and looked upward, her eyes widening in disbelief as the harsh sun's light shone on her under a wing-shaped shadow. Moments later the air stirred, and suddenly she was looking into the eyes of a giant.

The towering woman stood there on Tlasaqen's steps, staring down at Colel. Her luminous eyes seemed somehow reminiscent of a great cat, and her visage was made of the jungle itself. Foliage and branches, roots and vines—they were as much a part of her as her flesh.

There were stories of omens during Tlailli Mahuizotl—whether true or political, she didn't know. But this was different, sacred; she could feel it. The colossal woman stepped down toward her, those feline eyes stirring memories of her own encounter with an Ocelotl so long ago. *Ixchel*. It had to be—she was looking into the face of their goddess.



The others around her fell to their knees, but Colel stood tall, meeting those powerfully deep eyes. Even under the harsh light of Wachan and Ixchel's gaze, she was still Kobaal; her knees did not touch the ground.

Ixchel stopped and smiled, as if this was nothing more than a conversation between friends. 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. "For you I would, mother, if you asked me to." She looked down, reddening slightly at those words. They were not her way, but this was Ixchel.

Her laughter was like a bubbling waterfall. "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, not even noticing the others around her gasp - they were completely forgotten. "You... came here for me?"

"Yes, child. I have been with you since the beginning. Watching you grow and become Kobaal has been a joy."

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

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

Moments passed as the other Amng slowly looked up, nodding, eyes darting between Ixchel and her. Their faces were a strange mixture of awe and disbelief.

"There is a war coming. 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. That is the path to victory and survival of all."



Colel nodded, unable to form speech immediately, mouth working silently, throat feeling dry. "I will do as you ask, mother. On the soil of my very being I swear it."

A weight seemed to settle upon Colel's shoulders as Ixchel stood tall. *Unite all their people? A great war? Led by Colel herself?*

Ixchel smiled. "Good. For now enjoy Tlailli Mahuizotl, and then your work begins. 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. *All of her people...*

