

YOU DREAMED OF EMPIRES

A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF SUDDEN DEATH



TRANSLATED BY NATASHA WIMMER

ÁLVARO ENRIGUE

ALSO BY ÁLVARO ENRIGUE
translated by Natasha Wimmer

Sudden Death

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YOU
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of
EMPIRES

Álvaro Enrígue

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RIVERHEAD BOOKS

NEW YORK

2024

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RIVERHEAD BOOKS

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penguinrandomhouse.com



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Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Harvill Secker, an imprint of Penguin Random House Ltd., London, in 2024

First published in Spain as *Tu sueño imperios han sido* by Editorial Anagrama, Barcelona, in 2022

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The English translation of the epigraph is based on Ángel María Garibay's Spanish rendering of the original Nahuatl.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Enrigue, Alvaro, 1969– author. | Wimmer, Natasha, translator.

Title: You dreamed of empires / Álvaro Enrigue ; translated by Natasha Wimmer.

Other titles: Tu sueño imperios han sido. English

Description: New York : Riverhead Books, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023022064 (print) | LCCN 2023022065 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593544792 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593544815 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Tenochtitlán, Battle of, Mexico City, Mexico, 1521—Fiction. | Mexico—History—Conquest, 1519–1540—

Fiction. | LCGFT: Alternative histories (Fiction) | Historical fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PQ7298.15.N636 T813 2024 (print) | LCC PQ7298.15.N636 (ebook) | DDC 863/.64—dc23/eng/20230512

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023022064>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023022065>

Cover design: Grace Han

Cover image: (horse) Detail from *Whistlejacket* by George Stubbs, 1762 / Photo: Bridgeman Images

Book design by Amanda Dewey, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

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*For Aimé, of course.
And for Miquel and Dylan and Maia and Emilio G.*

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Again they asked, “What will the gods eat? Everyone is looking for food.” Then the ant went to collect kernels of corn from the Mountain of Sustenance. Quetzalcoatl met the ant and said to him: “Tell me where you got that.” Many times he asked, but the ant wouldn’t tell. Then the ant said: “Over there.”

—Legend of the Suns, 1558

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A NOTE TO ENGLISH-LANGUAGE READERS

Dearest Natasha:

As promised, here's the new novel. This time around it's a little more polished, which I hope will make the translation process less torturous. With age comes insecurity, and I spend more time revising than writing.

I've smoothed out the spellings of the Nahua names the best I can, but I'm sure there will be inconsistencies and mistakes. Sorry. We can go through them, but the main ones are right: Atotoxtli, Tlilpotonqui, Malinalli, etc. They look as strange to me as they do to you, even though I was born and raised in Mexico City.

Note, for example, that in the novel the stress in *Tenochtitlan* falls not on the *a*, as it would in Spanish, but on the *i*. And the word is spelled with an *x*: *Tenoxtitlan*. It's more or less the name as it would sound in Nahuatl instead of Spanish or English: *Tenoshtítlan*. It has nothing to do with purity—I couldn't care less about that. I just prefer how it sounds: it has the warmth of the language of the ancient Mexicans if you stress the right syllable and pronounce the *x* as *sh*. Same with the other names: *Atotoxtli* is hideous if you pronounce it with a hard *x*. *Atotoshtli*, on the other hand, is easy to say and has a beautiful sound. *Caxtilteca*, the name the Nahua give the Spaniards, works the same way: *Cashtilteca*. And *Caxtitlan*—in other words, Castile—is pronounced *Cashtítlan*, with the accent on the *i*.

The *tl* sound exists in English and isn't hard to pronounce: *Atlantic*, for example; but it's more of a challenge when it falls at the end of the word. In Nahuatl it was common for names to end in

tl. I'm sure you've come across a *Xochitl* (Flower), like Moctezuma's niece in the novel. It isn't pronounced as it's written; we say *Sóchil*. The name *Xochitl* appears only a few times in the novel, but the emperor *Axayacatl* comes up constantly. It's hardly a common name—I don't know any Axayacatls—but by association I would pronounce it *Ashayácal*. Sonorous, succinct, and smooth.

You'll spot an inconsistency: I kept the familiar *Moctezuma* instead of replacing it with the Nahuatl *Moteucsoma*, because I like it better. This is a novel, and in novels—thanks to Cervantes—even the spelling must obey the story. The *c* and the *t* together are a contained explosion, like the character who bears the name.

Don't worry too much about the Nahuatl words you come across. Mexican readers won't know right away what a *macehual* or a *pipil* is either. Let the meanings reveal themselves: the brain likes to learn things, and we're wired to register new words. I don't think it's necessary to explain that *huey tlatoani* means "great lord of Tenochtitlan"—you get that as the story progresses. And I think it will follow logically in readers' minds that *huey Caxtilteca* means a Castilian lord. You don't need experience of parliamentary systems to understand how a European government works when you watch a political TV series made across the Atlantic, do you? And to state the obvious, a *calpulli* isn't the same thing as a neighborhood, and a military academy isn't the same thing as a *calmecac*, though they are alike in some ways. As you read, everything will become clear.

The intention is not to give lessons in Nahuatl. It's simply to recover the sounds of the language in some places. There's nothing nostalgic about it, nor am I driven by ideology. All the spellings and all the Nahuatl terms are open to discussion. I realize that if an English speaker can say *Moscow* instead of *Moskva*, there's no reason I should say *Tenoxtitlan* instead of *Tenochtitlan*, but I'm a writer and words matter to me. They may signify and signal, but I believe they also invoke.

Over to you. *Abrazo recio*,

Á.

P.S.: Attached is a list of characters, with correct spellings, names, nicknames, and roles for reference.

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THE CAXTILTECA

Captains

Hernán Cortés (Hernando, El Malinche, huey Caxtilteca): Captain general of the Caxtilteca expedition

Pedro de Alvarado: Cortés's cousin; second-in-command of the Caxtilteca expedition

Jazmín Caldera: Principal investor in the Caxtilteca expedition and third in command

Luengas, Vidal, Oviedo, Lugo, Olid: Other captains

Translators

Gerónimo de Aguilar: Andalusian priest; castaway and slave of the Maya lord of Akumal; translator from Maya to Castilian

Malintzin (Malinalli, Marina, Tenepal, María del Mar): Nahua princess of Olutla; courtesan of the Maya king Tabascoob; translator from Nahuatl to Maya on the Caxtilteca expedition

THE TENOCHCA

The Colhua

Axayacatl: Emperor (huey tlatoani); father of Moctezuma; dead

Tizoc and Ahuitzotl: Emperors (huey tlatoque); younger brothers of Axayacatl; dead

Moctezuma Xocoyotzin: Son of Axayacatl; emperor (huey tlatoani) and supreme general of the armies of the Triple Alliance, consisting of the cities of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tacuba

Atotoxtli: Princess; empress; daughter of Axayacatl; sister and wife of Moctezuma

Cuitlahuac: Younger brother of Moctezuma; lord of Iztapalapa; general of the Mexica army and next in line for the imperial throne

Cuauhtemoc: Son-in-law of Moctezuma; general of the Mexica army and second in line for the imperial throne

The Mexica

Tlilpotonqui: Cihuacoatl (mayor) of the city of Tenochtitlan and supreme general of the Mexica army

Tlacaelel: Heir to the post of cihuacoatl

I.



BEFORE *the* NAP

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Captain Jazmín Caldera, native of Zarzales, Extremadura, couldn't eat the turkey broth with flowers, though it looked exquisite and he was starving. He had been assigned a place at the table between the priests of Xipe and Tezcatlipoca. Draped like a cape around the shoulders of the former was the decaying, blackened skin of a warrior sacrificed who knows when, while the latter's matted locks, neither cut nor washed since he'd taken orders at the temple, were crusted with many moons of sacrificial blood: quail daily, sometimes turtle or wolf, but on major festival days—of which there was one each month—warrior blood, preferably Tlaxcalteca.

Jazmín Caldera reached out his hand for the fine lacquered cup, into which a woman had poured chocolate frothed in water with honey, chile, and vanilla, and breathed in the scent as deeply as he could, trying to ignore the wolfish aroma exuded by his dining companions. He looked up toward the head of the table. The captain general of the expedition was watching him fixedly, those icy eyes ordering Jazmín to be quiet and eat his soup once and for all.

Caldera turned his gaze to the left. The priest of Xipe was painted from head to toe with black and blue stripes. Under the human skin he wore as a cape, he had on a white robe patterned with shoots of corn in a featherwork design. Two enormous jade disks hung from his ears, set around the edges with gold and silver snakes. They must have been hideously heavy, surely painful. Under his lip was a gold labret: a little dog's head. It slipped in and out of sight each time he took a swallow of soup or chocolate, as if playing in a little skin house.

The priest of Tezcatlipoca was dressed less luxuriously, in a plain red robe. His body, or what could be seen of it, was painted black, except for

the part of his face between nose and chin, which was also red. The ribbon that tied up the towering, malodorous thatch on top of his head could have graced the swanlike neck of the daughter of a Spanish grandee: freshwater pearls, little jade heads, and coral animals chasing each other along a trail of silver thread. His teeth were filed sharp as a cat's.

Jazmín returned his attention to his plate, to his cup of chocolate, and then again to the captain with his unrelenting stare, seated at the head of the table elbow-to-elbow with Princess Atotoxtli. Now the captain raised his eyebrows to punctuate the urgency of his command: Eat! Caldera lifted the cup of chocolate and took a long swallow. Though the drink was possibly his favorite of all the many extraordinary new things he had tried since they had landed, it nearly came back up. It was impossible to dissociate it from his tablemates' reek of coagulated blood.

Even so, the immediate thrill of the cacao, to which the new arrivals were as yet unaccustomed—a tickle at the base of the neck, a shudder of the spine, the tremendous urge to do something, anything—made him suspect that he could handle the soup despite the stench. He picked up the dish, and as he raised it to his mouth, he felt spasms again. He set it down. Now the princess was watching him curiously too.

Jazmín raised his eyes, looking everywhere but toward the priests and the captain general. He gazed directly across the table, past the heads of Aguilar and Malinalli, people he assumed were used to eating even human flesh. He looked at the wall and thought about the city of Selenites swelling on the other side. He returned in his imagination to its temples, canals, and floating neighborhoods ringed by giant rectangular rafts, each identical to the next in shape and size, where the Mexica grew their vegetables and flowers. He remembered his spiritual exercises at the Jesuit school in Trujillo, and in his mind's eye he saw the lake that surrounded the city, preventing the Spaniards from escape if the emperor gave the order to loose his eagle warriors; he envisioned the volcanoes that had been such torture to cross, standing sentry over the Anahuac Valley, scattered with white cities and fortified with towers and temples. Again he saw Amecameca, the start of the Iztapalapa causeway across the lake, the flower arch, mythical

Moctezuma and his retinue, and the moment when the idiot captain general almost sank everything by trying to hug him. They had entered the city; the mayor had lodged them in Axayacatl's palace, so lovely and serene; and they'd been invited to eat right here, in the hall of emperors past, with the princess's entourage. They had come to the very heart of the great, invincible city of Mehxicoh-Tenoxtitlan, and their task was almost complete.

Everything was a little hazy, muddled. All of it an honor perhaps undeserved. They had made it here with staggering effort and lunatic determination, and they had proved themselves to be good soldiers, going on when no one else would have, always betting against the odds. It meant something. But that had been the road, the hustle, a game—played to the death, but a game in the end. Now that they were in the palace and in the presence of the princess, it seemed to Jazmín that the ship might start to take on water anywhere. The captain general—sitting amid such grandeur, such saturnalian figures—suddenly looked like what he'd been back in Cuba: an ill-favored and artless son of Extremadura. They were provincials, nobodies, hicks. One blunder could reveal that they were really a bunch of loudmouth bastards who claimed to have come in the name of an emperor they never had a hope of meeting, when in truth they didn't even represent the adelantado of Cuba, to whom they'd given the slip in order to do what they were doing.

Jazmín sighed. He returned his gaze to the table, but couldn't bring himself to take his plate in his hands. In the calmest of voices, friendly as if he were commenting on the pleasing warmth of the Anahuac sun, he said that they would have to forgive him, but nobody could eat like this.

The captain general smiled slightly, tilting his head. He moved his jaw back and forth a few times. Each time he juttied out his chin, his eyes narrowed a little: a ghastly sight. Jazmín nodded his own head discreetly as if pleading for his superior's patience, but really he only wanted the man to stop making that nightmarish face. He picked up the soup plate again in both hands, breathing deeply to lock in its scent, and again the smell of dried blood and decaying skin got in the way. Lowering the plate, he set his

palms on the linen tablecloth and closed his eyes. He kept his composure. Controlling his nausea and tone of voice, he glanced right and left at the priests. I mean, what is this? he asked. And he smiled at the captain general as if begging for pity.

Cortés took a generous swallow of soup and bellowed his delight. He smiled at Princess Atotoxtli, seated next to him. With a pleasant expression still on his face but with his fists clenched on the linen cloth—his knuckles white with rage at Caldera’s insubordination—he said quietly, almost in a singsong: Shut up and eat the soup, son of a bitch; we are the empress’s guests. Caldera smiled. I can’t, he replied; if only you knew what they smelled like, Hernán, this one here must have eaten mashed-up babies for breakfast. The captain general returned his smile and, as if commenting on the sweetness of the chocolate, said: You think you smell of roses? Shut up and eat, then vomit later all you want. Malinalli, the Nahuatl translator, raised her eyes from her plate. In Maya, she asked Aguilar, the Spanish translator, whether they should translate what Caldera and Cortés were saying for the benefit of the princess and the nobles and priests crowded around the table. He whispered in her ear, also in Maya, that he didn’t think so, it was just conquistador chatter.

Malinalli spoke Nahuatl and Maya, but not Spanish. And Aguilar spoke Maya and Castilian, but not Nahuatl. The conversations between the Colhua and the people she and everybody else called the Caxtilteca still had to pass through a double filter. Now she felt the punch of Princess Atotoxtli’s gaze—the princess was the emperor’s sister but also his wife—waiting for her to translate what had been said. She lifted her face, smiled, and said in Nahuatl: They are saying how delicious everything is. The princess twitched her mouth as if to suggest she didn’t believe a word of it. The translator shrugged. In a bid for patience she said: They are savages, of course; they like the taste of the juice of rotting fruit they bring from their own lands, so they can’t believe there is such a thing as chocolate.

The priest of Xipe, who had just annihilated his soup, burped modestly and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing his makeup a little. He said in Nahuatl, as if talking to himself: They’re imbeciles and

they smell like dogs and caca; I say we sacrifice them now before we get used to them. The princess gave him a reproving look. We'll do what my brother tells us to do, she said firmly. Aguilar cleared his throat to get Malinalli's attention. He asked her in Maya what they were saying. She replied: The priest is asking the princess whether she likes Hernando's looks; she says she finds him handsome but such things are hardly fit conversation for a queen. Aguilar raised his cup of chocolate. With a glance at his comrades, he said: Looking good, Spain. He turned his gaze to Jazmín, over whom he had particular sway, and said: And you, eat the fucking soup, because they won't serve the next course until you finish, and we're all hungry. Caldera considered how hard they'd fought to get where they were, and he managed to put things in perspective. He finished the soup in a single gulp. *Salud*, said the captain general, raising his own glass.

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Badillo had been a stable boy with Hernán Cortés since the conquest of Cuba, and the captain's servant since his student days. He was golden-haired, pink and jelly-like. He spoke little and haltingly, was allergic to everything, and could spend hours gazing at a tree. His limitations, which had tripped him up even before he set foot on the rungs of the military ladder, nevertheless made him an extraordinary animal handler. Captain Alvarado, master of the jet-black steed Tenebra, said that Badillo stuttered in Castilian because what he really spoke was horse. Even Tenebra, who was as mean and disobedient as his master, would do anything with doglike docility if it was Badillo who asked.

The entrance into the city had been orderly and full of pomp, but what came next was more like a scramble. The famous Moctezuma had come out to greet the captain, but the emperor was late to the meeting and they had exchanged a bare minimum of words and awkward gestures before Moctezuma returned to his palace. The truly vast army of enemy warriors that the conquistadores had gathered along the way had turned back. They weren't going to enter the city, and none of the Spanish foot soldiers understood why—without them they were scarcely a handful of lost boys. The mayor—or the person the soldiers had taken to calling a mayor—had brought them in a hurry to the palace where they were now lodged. There was a tumult of nobles and warriors, incense, mysterious ceremonies. No one had any idea what was going on.

Once inside the palace, the mayor had led the captains away. The head crossbowman had divided up the soldiers according to their specialties, and some ladies with feet painted white from the ankles down had taken the different groups of Castilians to their rooms. Everyone acted as if Badillo

and the horses didn't exist, so the stable hand found himself suddenly alone with his animals in what would have been the palace's plaza de armas if things in Tenoxtitlan had worked the way they did in Spain. He was in charge of twenty-seven mounts in total: the horses belonging to the nine captains, the caudillo, and the seventeen cavalry soldiers. He wasn't going to leave them alone. So he headed into the palace with them to look for something resembling a stable. The Mexicans might have the biggest, busiest, floatingest, and prettiest city in the world, but they were hardly practical—they didn't have wheels or stables. It didn't occur to him that this was precisely because there were no horses.

The palace was big and Badillo found it impossible to get his bearings, so he spoke into the ear of Cordobés, the captain general's horse, asking him to bring them to a garden. Guided by the nose of the captain's mount, the animals filed modestly through various halls, passages, courtyards, and even small interior gardens, until they reached an enormous orchard deep in the palace, full of fruit trees and flowers. Tenebra, however, shat in a passageway, and when Badillo went back to clean it up, someone had already mopped the floor.



Lunch with the princess might have come to a satisfactory conclusion after Caldera's soup incident. Communication was had, and neither the priests nor the captains—the party's wild cards, alike in their detachment from reality, or maybe their overproximity to it—made a false move. The nobles, or pipiltin as the Mexica called them; the neighborhood bosses; the councillors; the mayor: all scarcely spoke. The translators carried on the conversation the best they could, and the only fault to be found with it was that there wasn't much of it.

They were on the ninth course—still five away from dessert, tobacco, and a diplomatic exit—when Cortés boasted about the huge Tlaxcalteca, Huexotzinco, and Otomí army backing him. The princess, who had been savoring the aroma of a dish of seepweed cakes in a tomato sauce, replied through the translators, saying that the caudillo had achieved the impossible by uniting people who had never amounted to anything, squabbling for centuries over the same valley, so it must have been sad to see them scatter at Moctezuma's bidding when he allowed the Caxtilteca to enter Tenoxtitlan. Through the translators, Cortés responded that they hadn't scattered, they were waiting at the other end of the Iztapalapa causeway, where the emperor had permitted them to remain for the moment.

The princess exchanged a few increasingly tense words with the mayor. Malinalli stopped translating into Maya and hunched her shoulders. Everyone but the priests stopped eating. The empress pushed her chair away from the table and surveyed her guests, asking another question of the mayor, who tried to soothe her. Then she reared up her head like a dragon, like the mother of all jaguars, like the empress of the unconquered city she in fact was, and pointed to Caldera, saying something that made even the

priests look up. Malinalli whispered the Maya translation of what she had said to Aguilar and he repeated it in Castilian, addressing Jazmín: She says that of all of us, you're the one she trusts most, since you're the only one with the sense to object to sharing a table with the priests, with their reek of poison, but you have an eagle's resolve and in the end you ate. She asks you where the Tlaxcalteca are and she wants you to answer honestly.

Caldera looked at Cortés, who said: Tell the truth. Aguilar and Malinalli translated. They're in Iztapalapa, Caldera said. Atotoxtli was majesty incarnate as she rose from the table. Did I fuck up? Caldera asked Cortés. No, no, said the caudillo, you grew a pair and did what had to be done. And turning to the others: Looking even better, Spain.

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Atotoxtli was a storm cloud when she entered the royal dining hall, where, she knew, Moctezuma—her brother and husband—would be eating alone. For months, but especially since the fall of Cholula and the Texcoco rebellion, the emperor had drawn inward and lost interest in everything.

He didn't leave his quarters, didn't see to affairs in the throne room. He spent all day in his nightshirt, smoking and—it was whispered in the salons—ingesting more and more magic mushrooms. The conversation of the pipiltin, who had once kept him company as he ate—sitting at a distance, their heads draped with heavy cloths—now seemed irrelevant and unbearable. In earlier days, he had paid close heed to it, because the position of the Colhua emperor in this Mexica city was always a touch fragile.

Atotoxtli was still wearing her headdress. Putting it back on had been her only nod to ceremony before leaving the palace of Axayacatl. Her eagle guard, who were being attended to in the kitchen, had had to hurry after her, along with the lords, councillors, chiefs, and priests who rose from the table with her.

She had left the Old Houses, as the Colhua called the palace of the former emperors. With her retinue behind her, she had crossed the temple citadel, striding like a jaguar, and entered the new palace, where her husband—and brother—governed. The petitioners—nobles, traders, and diplomats waiting in vain for an audience with the emperor—barely had time to bow their heads and cast their eyes down as Atotoxtli blazed past on her way into the labyrinth of passageways, courtyards, and rooms in which

her brother lived out of sight of anyone but close family. She took off her sandals without stopping, one in one passageway and the other in the next.

Moctezuma was raising a grasshopper taco with avocado sauce to his mouth—the imperial ring finger and little finger cocked—when the princess crossed the threshold, entered the dining room, and stopped short at the far end of the extremely long table where no one but her brother had ever sat to eat. She pulled off her headdress dramatically and threw it to the ground.

The tlatoani's head was bent, his taco still in the air. The serving girl who attended to all his needs—a niece to them both, her name Xochitl—was standing with her head bowed in a corner of the room. The emperor took a bite of taco, all the while gazing slantwise at his sister. He chewed the first mouthful, the second, and was done. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. Only then did he tilt his head, though keeping his eyes obliquely on Atotoxtli, his chin now between his clavicles because he didn't see as well as he used to. I could have you hanged for this, he said. He went on, still calm: What will they say, everyone who saw you pass? That I came to you in tears, she replied, because you've lodged those beggars from Caxtitlan in my rooms in Daddy's palace.

The emperor stuck the nail of his pinkie into the space between two teeth where the husk of a grasshopper had gotten stuck. Daddy died twenty years ago, he said; Uncle Tizoc ruled from the Old Houses for five years and Ahuitzotl for another fifteen. You didn't complain when he sent you to Malinalco and moved into your rooms. And you are the empress: you belong in my palace.

When Moctezuma had decreed that no one without royal blood could work in his administration, he had also demanded that his sister be his only consort. The idea was to finally put an end to all the other wives' haggling. As so often among the Tenoxtitlan nobility, his marriage to Atotoxtli was purely symbolic: it proclaimed that Moctezuma would not alter the laws of succession, and his heir would be no son of his own but rather, in time-honored fashion, a warrior of renown, descended in a direct line from the Colhua queen wed to Emperor Acamapichtli, the first emperor. The new emperor would be a mature Colhua: seasoned, disciplined, and graduated

with honors from the calmecac. In other words: Cuitlahuac, Moctezuma's younger brother. When Cuitlahuac died, the Colhua line would be extinguished in his generation, and a descendant of Emperor Acamapichtli and his Tenochca slave mistress would come to the throne. The new emperor would be an undefeated Mexica warrior: seasoned, disciplined, and graduated with honors from the calmecac. In other words: Cuauhtemoc, Moctezuma's nephew by blood, and his son-in-law by marriage to his eldest daughter. Everybody was the same after two hundred years of intermarriage, and by now there was more Mexica blood in the family than ephemeral Colhua heritage, but the system avoided civil war and functioned seamlessly. To the people of the coast, who didn't understand these genealogical subtleties, they were all Colhua. That was what they had told the conquistadores along the way: Go to the city of the Colhua. To those who lived in the towns around the lake, the residents of the island at its center—Mehxicoh—were Mexica. The islet inhabitants themselves identified as Tenochca, the descendants of Tenoch. The English historians of the nineteenth century, who really had no clue, would call them Aztecs to solve the problem, and it stuck.

Until her marriage to her brother, Atotoxtli had been the wealthiest and most free woman in the empire, choosing never to take a husband. This was permitted in deference to her status as daughter of a Colhua emperor. Now she had been obliged to move palaces, give up her lovers, adopt the priests' impossible protocols, and learn to tolerate feast days with their shameless bloodbaths and cannibal luncheons. In revenge, she had spread the rumor that Moctezuma had made her sleep with him to produce a son in his likeness. Moctezuma was scandalized by the gossip when he heard it, but he soon realized its usefulness: the concubines—all of them queens, many rich and influential—could focus on discussing whether the pair would be fertile rather than which of their own infinite Little Moctezumas might aspire to the throne.

But why in my chambers? asked the princess. The Old Houses are full of rooms, you could have put them somewhere else. Her brother said:

Because your chambers are always ready in case you're sent back for being an idiot. Then he rang a little silver bell.

The princess was about to reply but she restrained herself, in part because the emperor had just revealed the magnitude of her privilege—generally, when someone left the palace they weren't sent home but to the bottom of the lake—and in part because the serving girl was approaching her brother to take his plate.

Xochitl, who did all her work without ever raising her head or turning her back on the tlatoani, took the plate that had held the grasshopper taco. The emperor waited for her to leave the dining room before he met his sister's eyes. What did you really come to tell me? he asked. You can't truly be angry about where I put the Caxtilteca, you knew I was going to do that from the start. Atotoxtli gazed down at her toes, considering how to phrase what she wanted to say without further incurring his wrath; he had been especially volatile for weeks. The huey Caxtilteca, she said, boasted at the table that you gave the Tlaxcalteca permission to stay at Iztapalapa. Moctezuma raised his face and gave her a long, dangerous look. Since when are enemy armies your affair? he asked. She hunched her spine a little more. Well? I asked you a question. Atotoxtli stammered. It isn't my affair, she said, but what made me angry was that Tlilpotonqui denied it; he said that he was the cihuacoatl, the head of the city, and that by no means was it true, that he'd been there with you when the Caxtilteca arrived and you ordered the army to disperse. I asked a Caxtilteca and what he said made it plain that Tlilpotonqui was lying to me.

The girl came in with the next dish: turkey leg in ten-chile sauce with chocolate. She set it down and waited for the emperor to smell it. He sank his index finger into the sauce and stirred, contemplating the ripples in the waxy surface. He turned to the girl and said: The mole is good, but I don't want turkey today; bring the next dish. The maiden made a reverence and picked up the platter. As she was about to exit, walking backward with her head bowed—no easy task—he said: Little Cousin. She halted and he continued: Send an eagle to escort the princess to her rooms, where she can reflect on her conduct.

Atotoxtli uttered a shriek of frustration as the girl vanished down the hallway. The emperor pointed a finger still covered in sauce at her and, his calm unshaken, said: There'll be no scandal in this house, and if I have to erase you, I will. Chin high, she picked up the headdress from the floor and advanced toward the dining room exit. She didn't turn her back either; she knew that what her brother had said was absolutely true. Moctezuma asked: Did you get the Caxtilteca settled, at least? She murmured: I left before dessert, but the cihuacoatl saw to them before lunch. The emperor turned red as a tomato. Atotoxtli feared the worst, but only tears came. Go, he said, I'm alone; the empire is falling to pieces and you can't sit through a meal with my guests or show them their rooms. Go before the guards come; you deserve humiliation, but the empire doesn't. Go. She made a reverence and ran.



Captain Jazmín Caldera was struggling with a buckle on one of his breastplate straps when the caudillo asked where he was going in such a hurry. He froze for a moment, poised uncomfortably, the strap with holes in it in one hand and the strap with the buckle in the other. Luengas and Vidal had stopped wrestling with their own armor, turning toward the captain general. He heard Hernando say: I think we can let down our guard a little, can't we? Lunch with the princess was a success; once we get through our conversation with the emperor, they're in our pocket.

Jazmín was more cautious than the others. He was a close friend of Cortés and they talked a lot, though never about strategy or military affairs; they were both readers. Caldera had invested enough capital in the expedition to be practically untouchable, but he often bore the brunt of the caudillo's mercurial mood shifts, partly because he was the only one in the company who had been born rich, which led to resentment, and partly because if anything went wrong, it was always his fault or Aguilar's due to their predilection for boys. He said: You know best, Hernando, but we should review the troops, see whether they've been fed, check that the horses are well grazed. There's no harm letting your guard down a little, insisted Cortés; here we are at the heart of the empire, we've set the empress and the mayor against each other, and we're nearly at full strength. Jazmín chose not to say that the trouble had never been how to get into Tenoxtitlan but how to leave once they were in.

The nine captains, the caudillo, and the translators had been left alone in the dining room of Axayacatl's palace after the princess's outburst. They proceeded to finish the remaining courses, slightly unsettled, until Malinalli said through Aguilar that there was no need to worry; the Colhua were

melodramatic and short-tempered, always on edge because they believed that enjoying anything would tempt the wrath of their gods. Cortés looked at Aguilar and the latter shrugged. I'm not acquainted with the Colhua lords, said the translator, I've never been in their lands. The caudillo thought it over and arrived at a conclusion justifying his sloth: She knows best. Malinalli got up from the table, made a slight reverence, and added in Maya that she would skip dessert if they didn't mind; she couldn't wait to take a bath. Aguilar translated and Cortés nodded.

Once dessert was over, the captains lounged around the dining room. Cortés had prohibited wine until they were sure that Moctezuma's hospitality was sincere, so they called for more chocolate, indicating the lacquered cups to one of the women who was clearing the table. It never occurred to them, of course, that half the sauces of the dishes they had just eaten were moderately hallucinogenic, and thus their delectable sense of relaxation was in truth a welcome to the esoteric between-place where the Colhua permanently resided. The caudillo pushed his chair back with hands and feet. It slid over the polished cedar as if on wheels. Alvarado, who was sitting next to him, got up and went to lie on one of the benches of volcanic stone with cushions of cotton and feathers.

It was then that Jazmín Caldera signaled with his eyebrows at Vidal and Luengas. The three of them rose and went to retrieve their weapons from the stack where they'd left them when, on their way into lunch, they'd seen that the Colhua's chairs were barrel-shaped, woven of wooden strips with leather-covered backs, no place to hang a sword. When Cortés had seen the chairs and noted that neither the pipiltin nor the neighborhood bosses were armed, the Tlaxcalteca hadn't been invited, and the priests were harmless, he had taken off his breastplate and sword and left them where they'd be easy to access in case of an ambush. The other captains had followed suit.

As they'd taken off their armor—which was neither easy nor quick—Aguilar had explained that this kind of chair was called an equipal. The chairs were an invention of the Colhua and were designed precisely so that no one could sit armed at table, which was considered inexcusably rude. These people, he said, halt their battles at midday so that the opposing

armies, each on their own side, can sit down to eat and take a nap. Lazy bastards, Alvarado had whispered into the captain general's ear.

Jazmín returned to his equipal, dropped into it—there was something uterine about it—stretched out his legs, and turned his attention to the space they were in. It was a big hall, with high ceilings crossed by cylindrical beams. Clay tiles kept it cool on hot days and warm on cold ones. The floor was cedar, polished to a degree of perfection that he hadn't seen even in the Florentine palaces he had once visited during his employment as secretary to a Spanish nobleman. There was a central opening from the corridor, and the walls were whitewashed plaster. The lower part of the walls was covered with a red skirt a shade darker than the floorboards. There were high windows that let light through without allowing anyone to see in from outside, and the noise of the city was dampened by the tree-filled garden between the building and its defensive wall. Jazmín stretched out his arm and touched—almost stroked—the wall. Smooth as a royal baby's bottom, he said. No one paid him any attention except Aguilar, who said: The Maya temples are even smoother, whiter and brighter. Running along two of the four walls was the ubiquitous stone bench, L-shaped and carved with designs that looked like butterflies—maybe moths—and birds. Caldera felt a mixture of sadness and shame when his gaze passed over Alvarado, who was sprawled on one of the benches; Alvarado's boots, clotted with the mud of the road and the blood of their enemies, rested on the white cushions. Braziers burned in the four corners of the hall to keep the room warm and give light once night fell. It was November; the air was cool.

Alvarado sat up on the bench and said: It is a nice palace, as pretty as the one in Mérida. He looked at the captain general: Aunt Candela took us to see it, do you remember? Soon enough, any conversation with Alvarado came around to his upbringing with Hernando; they were cousins. As the only one of the captains who hadn't invested in the expedition, Alvarado felt the constant urge to explain—though no one ever asked, because everyone already knew—why he was second-in-command instead of Caldera, who had put in almost as much money as Cortés himself, mostly because he had been terribly bored on his plantation in Cuba.

The captain general yawned like a lion, his eyes closed, part in exhaustion and part in yearning. He said: It's much bigger than the palace in Mérida. Granada; it looks like Granada, the courtyards with fountains in the middle. The rooms they had been assigned were arranged around two courtyards with pools that the serving girls had filled with flowers for their baths.

Caldera raised his eyebrows, scratched his neck. He was the only one who had taken the route of the Levant before heading to the Indies. He had seen Valencia, Barcelona, Marseille, the Two Sicilies, and the Adriatic coast before traveling by land to Florence and Rome. Aguilar, the friar-turned-translator, had traveled too, had even seen Paris, but he wasn't inclined to talk about it. It's like Venice, said Caldera, because of the canals, but bigger, better fortified. His eyes still closed, the captain said: It's like Venice, but in hell. As if he'd been to either. Aguilar looked at Jazmín. He whispered: Let's hope he's wrong.

After a sticky silence, Luengas spoke up. Hernando, he said, I know my place, but with all due respect, I'm worried about the horses. No reason to be, the captain said. Alvarado said: Badillo must have taken them to the stables, mustn't he? The captain general raised his eyebrows and looked at his cousin. What stables? He turned to Caldera and ordered him: Go, then, after all. Vidal, Luengas, and Caldera sprang up. Go armed, said the captain general, God knows what you'll find.



Moctezuma was still snuffling and wiping away tears with his index finger and thumb when Xochitl came in with the next platter. Trout wrapped in papalo leaves in a pumpkin seed sauce. She stopped just as she reached the doorway, when she heard the huey tlatoani crying. Come in, Little Cousin, he said. She stepped forward. As she held out the dish, the emperor choked back a sob and said: No guards, after all; let no one interrupt me. She set down the plate, which clattered a little before it lay still on the table. Why are you shaking? Moctezuma asked. Didn't you call the guards? She shook her head contritely. He tried to get a whiff of the fish in pipián, but his nose was plugged. He persisted: Did you not call them because you forgot, or were you trying to protect the princess from humiliation? She was silent. Speak without fear, he said. The princess is my father's sister, said the girl; she cared for me when I was little. Whose daughter are you? asked Moctezuma. Your brother Centli's. I don't have a brother Centli. He was your father's son, not your mother's. Moctezuma smiled at her and stroked her cheek. Run and find another Little Cousin to wait on me, he said, and you go to the guards, tell them you are to be executed in private. The girl screwed up her face, holding back tears. What's wrong, Little Cousin? asked the emperor, lifting her chin. He looked her in the eyes. Her own eyes widened; she had never seen the face of the man who had just sentenced her to death, and she imagined that her father, executed in the purges at the beginning of his reign, must have looked like the emperor. She replied with more sadness than anger: You don't even know my name; we've lived in the same palace for twenty-three years, as long as I've been alive; you're my uncle; your father is my grandfather; I've served you every meal for five years; you're sending me to be executed and

you don't even know my name; I will rise like fog and no one will remember my passage through this world.

The emperor turned his gaze back to his plate and reached for a tortilla. He rolled it and dipped it in the pipián. Little Cousin, he said. Her eyes grew even wider. Go now, he said, and tell them to execute you in public.

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Malinalli plunged into the water and remembered the day when her pact with death was sealed. Maybe sealed. Probably sealed. More likely than ever sealed, from the moment she made her triumphant entrance into Tenoxtitlan with the foreigners. She had stepped into a pool in the Cintla River with the chaplain of the expedition and he had said to her, as Aguilar later explained, that her Christian name was María del Mar. Marina. She liked it so much she gave up her original name—Tenepal—and took it as her only name, though she couldn't pronounce it properly yet. Malina. Or Malinalli in the affectionate diminutive, like the goddess of flowers. The Colhua called her Malintzin, Doña Marina.

She hadn't had an easy life, but it was the one she'd had. She'd been born the eldest and only daughter of a lord of Olutla, in the deep, sweet, ancient lands of the Gulf, and that was why she spoke an antique Nahuatl, as if out of the old songs. She also spoke Popoloca, the mother tongue, source of fundamental words: *chile*, *cacao*, *chichi*, *hule*. Like someone speaking Castilian in public and Latin at home. To the lords of Tenoxtitlan, she was an apparition, an emissary from the past. Aguilar had tried to explain to Caldera the Colhua's awe and unease at hearing Malinalli translate for the messengers of Moctezuma on the way to the capital. It was as if Ovid had asked for salt at Pope Leo's table; as if one day in Plato's symposium somebody had raised his hand and talked like Achilles. They called her Malintzin, Doña Marina, because she was connected to the very root of everything. In fact, by the time they reached the city she was more famous than Cortés: no one knew that his name was Hernando—Helnantzin, they would have called him—because to them he was the huey

Caxtilteca, spokesman of Castilla and companion of Malintzin: El Malinche.

Tenepal's father had died young and her uncle had inherited the realm of Olutla, complete with wife. When her mother got pregnant by the new ruler, Tenepal's stepfather rid himself of the girl to ensure that his own child would be next in the line of succession—a common practice. After adventures that she preferred not to recall, Tenepal had ended up in the court of the Maya king Tabascoob, who was defeated by the Caxtilteca in the battle of Cintla. There she was handed over to the conquistadores with nineteen other young slave girls. By then she was already trilingual.

Aguilar, who spoke Maya, was the one to communicate with the slaves. He soon discovered Tenepal. She wasn't the best tortilla thrower, but in addition to Maya she spoke Nahuatl and Popoloca. He told Cortés that if they worked with her they could translate the language of the Colhua of Tenoxtitlan; she from Nahuatl to Maya and he from Maya to Castilian. She was the missing piece. Cortés brought her into his entourage and his hammock. He ordered the expedition's chaplain to give her the most proper of baptisms, and so they performed the Cintla River ceremony, calling her María del Mar, Marina, Malinalli, because her flesh was like the deep Antillean sea: it touched all worlds.



When Caldera, followed by Luengas and Vidal—the three of them armed to the teeth—set out along the corridors of Axayacatl’s palace to look for Badillo and the horses, so silent and somber were the parts of the building not prepared to receive them that they seemed to be strolling along the seafloor. It’s like it’s Sunday, said Vidal, and yesterday was too, and the day before. Luengas, less inclined to flights of fancy, said maybe it really was Sunday. Caldera scarcely heard them. Though he of all the captains was the one who had deemed idiotic the order to always wear breastplate and helmet no matter how hot or humid it was, he kept touching them to make sure they were well fastened. All this emptiness and silence gave him the jitters.

Caldera thought it best to return to the main entrance and begin their search for the horses there, so they retraced their steps to the passageway leading to their rooms in order to orient themselves. This was the direction the mayor had brought them, so they walked the opposite way from how they’d come when they arrived.

They reached the throne room, where they had been welcomed to the palace with an incense ceremony on their arrival. The incense of the Colhua was particularly heavy, and during the rites they had been perfumed so thoroughly and zealously that Hernando was seized by an awful coughing fit. Led by the mayor, they had exited at a run, leaving behind a crowd of nobles, warriors, and priests who had been invited to the celebration.

Caldera and his two men halted in the very center of the throne room, now empty. That morning they had seen causeways bustling with people, floating neighborhoods packed with people, boats almost sinking under all the people who had come out to get a look at them, and, once they had

entered the city itself, people overflowing squares and the roofs of buildings, the hectic design itself dizzying. They had entered the palace in a mob and then everything had been a rush until lunch, so there hadn't been time to process the contrast between the hubbub of the city outside—clamor and filigree—and the hushed asceticism inside. The endless passageways empty of furniture or paintings, the cells with cot, small table, and brazier, the immense halls with at most an oval table and five or six equipales, long walls with no more adornment than the wall skirt or ubiquitous built-in bench.

The hall where they had been received and where they now found themselves again was rectangular. There was a modest inner doorway, across from an identical opening on the other side of the rectangular space. There was also a main entrance, which led to the courtyard in front of the palace and the palace's defensive walls. This opening was framed by two columns and a stone crosspiece carved with what might have been the story of a war. The hall, as they'd been told before the ceremony, had been the emperors' receiving room until the ascension of Moctezuma. It was painted blue—a luxury that in Europe only the king of France might dream of—with tall ocher skirts. The ceiling was of white cedar, as highly polished as the floor. Other than the brazier in each corner, the only thing in the room was a dais, also of wood, where the throne of the old emperors sat.

Fucked it up, didn't he, the captain general? said Luengas as they looked over the throne once more, this time at their leisure. Vidal laughed. Caldera smiled and motioned for them to lower their voices. Though the dining room had been left behind deep in the palace, it felt as if a stray remark could travel endlessly along these passageways. Which was worse? asked Luengas in a whisper. Him trying to hug the emperor on the causeway, or the fuckup here? Vidal swallowed a laugh. Here was *peccata minima*, he said. The hug I'm still not sure how we survived—they could've killed us all right there.

That morning, after the mayor had welcomed them to the palace and before the incense ceremony, it had been one of Moctezuma's councillors who informed them that the chair was the throne of Acamapichtli, a sacred

relic. All four councillors were of the very highest rank: in addition to shaping and informing the decisions of the emperor, they chose his successor from among the males of the royal family. As explained by Aguilar, who in turn had gotten the explanation from Malinalli, this old man had been councillor to two emperors before he had selected Moctezuma, and his title was He Who Watches Over the Pathways of Precious Stones and the Silver Ribbons That Wreath the Corn When It Is But the Smallest Gem. In fact, explained Aguilar, in addition to being a councillor he was Minister of Water—a weighty position in a floating city. The old man had spoken tenderly and reverently about the throne, and at the end of his address he'd said: You are surely weary, Malinche, from the hardships of the road. May you rest in this humble dwelling place as if in your own house, and sit on the throne if such is your desire, and govern over us poor ignorant souls in your great wisdom. Hernando should have thanked him for the offer and said that any humble mat would be good enough for his bones, or that he was unworthy of this sacred seat of great emperors, but instead he'd said: All right, then—and tried to sit on it. The mayor had intercepted him before he could plant the stamp of his buttocks, poorly wiped over months of campaigning, on the quetzal-feathered cushion.

Still holding Cortés by the arm—so that he wouldn't try his luck again and get his neck broken by the warriors present—the mayor had explained via Aguilar and Malinalli that the councillor's words were merely polite formula, to which the captain general replied that it was a pity; the last leg of the journey hadn't been long but he was tired because Moctezuma had made him wait so long at the gate to the city, and the horses, skittish in the crowd, had fucked up his hip. He Who Watches Over the Pathways of Precious Stones and the Silver Ribbons That Wreath the Corn When It Is But the Smallest Gem had demanded a translation from Aguilar and Malinalli, and when he heard it his eyes had grown as wide as saucers, which was no mean feat: he must have been one hundred and ten years old. Another aged councillor, He Who Opens and Closes the Floodgates of Light When the Drum Is Played in the Temple of the Hummingbird Who Feeds on Our Blood and Flies Across Obsidian Mirrors, had said, according

to Aguilar's and Malinalli's translation: Perhaps it's best if we proceed to the incense ceremony.

Empty of bodies, plumes, and armor, swords, helmets, and feather capes, Taino slaves and artillerymen, arquebusiers, lancers, crossbowmen, foot soldiers; empty of palace servingwomen with white-painted feet, and neighborhood bosses in cloaks and shirts scarcely more luxurious than the servingwomen's, the hall looked even bigger and more imposing. There's room enough for a roundup, said Luengas, if Badillo hasn't let all the horses escape. Let's go, said Caldera, and they crossed the hall hearing only the clack-clack of the soles of their boots on the palace floor.

They went out the interior doorway across from the one they'd entered. On the far side they found another hallway, more cells, more courtyards, all in identical reverse order to the sequence of their own rooms. The only difference was that the courtyard pools weren't filled. They walked to the end of the corridor and came to what would be the equivalent of Hernando and Marina's room. Here they turned right and crossed the next courtyard with its empty pool. They calculated that they had reached the corner of the building opposite their quarters, so they were surprised, once more, to find another passage running both ways. They turned left, intending to reach the outer wall on the side of the palace opposite theirs. More cells, more halls, more courtyards, more empty pools, the clack-clack of the soles of their boots. They turned left twice more before realizing they were totally lost.

They kept walking anyway, somewhere between numb and terrified—maybe a spell had been cast on them to make them believe the palace had no end—until they smelled cacao being ground, with those seeds of maddeningly delicate and generous scent, a scent that awakened the appetite even when one had eaten oneself into a stupor: the scent of an oil made from seeds that they had dubbed *vainilla* because they grew in a rattling handful of long pods, scabbardlike *vainas*. They followed the Ariadne's thread of scent.



When Moctezuma had finished eating, his mood was mildly philosophical but mostly foul. Send for the cihuacoatl, he ordered the new Little Cousin, who was clearing the table. And bring my tobacco to the yard, he added, smoothing his tunic.

He crossed the room and the corridor and went out into a whitewashed courtyard. In the middle was a pool fed directly by water from the springs of Chapultepec. The water flowed along open channels, so that the sound of its passage mingled with birdsong and the murmur of leaves if a breeze sprang up. The usual stone benches were set into the walls, but here they were green, brought recently from Oaxaca, his latest conquest.

He sat down on the shady side of the yard to digest his meal. Though it was well after midday, an intense, almost toxic fragrance rose from the tubs of flowers: the serving girls had watered and shaken them before he sat down to eat, in case he chose to take some fresh air before proceeding to his nap.

He watched one of the lesser serving girls approach with his loaded pipe and a little jade plate holding a glowing coal and golden tongs. The girl advanced with lowered gaze. She handed him the pipe and the little plate. He took them. He set the plate on the bench and put the pipe in his mouth. Then he took the coal in the tongs and lit the pipe. When he looked up, intending to ask the girl what her name was and whose daughter she was, she had already left.



Since crossing the lake over the Iztapalapa causeway, Caldera had noticed that the only way to tell apart the floating neighborhoods—calpulli, Aguilar called them, and they all looked alike—was by smell. He and Aguilar had been assigned to ride side by side as usual, and the friar-turned-Maya-slave-turned-conquistador-turned-translator explained that he had some notion of how the city worked, from the stories of traders he'd heard when he was a slave in Akumal. He translated the smells that he recognized or associated with memories of conversations with travelers in the south, who spoke of Tenoxtitlan with mingled outrage and delight. Each calpulli was a collection of artificial islands—chinampas, Aguilar and Malinalli called them. The calpulli were spacious and settled, each with a modest temple, a little square, a public administration building, and labyrinths of houses and yards where the common folk—the macehualtin—lived. Each calpulli had its own trade, and the macehualtin labored on the chinampa where they lived or on others raised on pilings around it. They were at once neighborhoods, towns, garden plots, and guilds.

The Spaniards had passed the notorious calpulli of the collectors of human waste, used as fertilizer and to tan hides; the calpulli of the butchers of venison and rabbit; that of the turkey farmers; and that of the gatherers of a kind of algae—a wild seepweed that tasted exquisite and smelled of swamp—eaten in little duck-egg sandwiches. They passed the calpulli that was home to the flower growers—their chinampas packed with garden beds stretching one after the other into the distance, seemingly all the way to the coast—and that of the planters of all kinds of tomatoes, including the original magic variety, which brought on dreams; also the cough-inducing square islands producing every variety of altiplano chile.

When, almost at the end of the causeway, they reached the arch that led to the natural islet at the heart of the empire—it's like the Cité in Paris, said Aguilar—they were met by Moctezuma's party. Capes of iridescent feathers and cloaks in colors they hadn't known existed; men in the shelter of canopies, and, behind them, hieratic maidens more simply dressed but made up as if they had just arrived from another world and were still adjusting to this one. The warriors wore skins and headdresses representing their guardian animals. Caldera's crested helmet—so bold and dashing, so gallant and Spanish—seemed about as majestic now as a bagpiper's bonnet. There were priests dressed up as dragons; warriors with feather plumes as lofty as temples. The pipiltin, civilian and military, carried little bunches of flowers, which they constantly brought to their noses, the delicacy of the gesture in contrast with the lunatic bellicosity of their attire. The conquistadores deemed it a charming custom, never thinking to associate it with their own reek.

All were barefoot, even the priests, because the emperor was going to make a rare appearance outside the palace. Not that their feet were in any danger, because from the arch all the way into the city the causeway was covered in a carpet of flowers, refreshed by industrious and nearly invisible macehualtin whenever the shuffle of feet left a spot bare. At the head of them all, in a white cloak, a silver diadem with a spray of feathers around a jade piece, and a cape emblazoned with a broom and a dog, was the mayor of the city, the cihuacoatl, the second most powerful man in the empire, according to Aguilar.

Cortés exchanged some niceties with the mayor. The latter said: Welcome to your city and your kingdom, which you and the all-powerful king who sent you will find at your disposal; you and your friends must be weary from the road, so make our house your own, poor as it is; take what you need and we will serve you as best we can. After listening to Malinalli's and Aguilar's successive translations, the captain general replied: Hot under this blazing sun with the damp from the lake, isn't it? Moctezuma is nearly here, I hope?

Cortés didn't get off his horse, didn't bow his head before speaking, as the other man had done. It certainly never occurred to him to take off his boots in respect for the customs of the city to which he was being welcomed. Aguilar's translation, thought Caldera, must have been more gracious than the captain's words; no one seemed offended.

The huey tlatoani, it was true, was taking his own sweet time. He was borne in under a canopy, perched on his throne and parting the waters of pipiltin, priests, and warriors. The bearers who carried him aloft—pipiltin of such pipiltude that they were all Colhua—lowered him carefully, and once down he set foot on the ground rather distractedly. He smoothed his tunic, shook out his cape, and scratched the back of his head, knocking his headdress sideways and failing to straighten it, maybe because it made no difference: it was a glorious riot of feathers. Cortés dismounted and—despite how much he would have liked to make a spectacle of his arrogance and bad manners—dropped to one knee. He was, after all, in the presence of the most famous man in an entire world. The emperor approached him and motioned for him to rise. Cortés did so, taking off his helmet. In a formulaic and lazy way, as if the captain general were one of his own bureaucrats, Moctezuma said: This is your city, Malinche and huey Caxtilteca. This is your house and we are your servants; enter and take possession of it in the name of your king; rest, for we have prepared lodging for you in the humble house of my father. It was then that Cortés, as if transported by the presence of a real emperor, a character out of the novels of chivalry of which he was so fond, tried to hug him.

Moctezuma's generals leaped forward in unison to kill him. One, younger than the others and later introduced to them as a general and the emperor's son-in-law, was the first to reach him and would have severed his jugular in a single bite if the mayor, always a step behind Moctezuma, hadn't moved between them and escorted the captain general back to his horse, motioning for him to mount again. Before he did so, Moctezuma said through the translators: Forgive General Cuauhtemoc, he is still very young, and he loves flowers so much that sometimes he cuts them too hastily in his rush to smell them. Cortés either didn't understand or didn't take the hint.

With a glance at the general, he said, A pleasure, and got back on his horse. Then came the negotiations—strained and too hasty—regarding the Tlaxcalteca troops, and the announcement that Moctezuma would visit them at the Old Houses after the evening meal.

The emperor went back the way he'd come just as arrogantly as he had arrived. He gazed at the nails on the fingers of his right hand as he sat down again on the imperial litter. When his pipiltin lifted him up, he crossed one leg over the other to pick off the flowers stuck to the sole of his sandal.

In the end, the encounter was mostly disappointing, neither memorable nor fruitful. It left no one satisfied. The conquistadores were disappointed by the brevity of the ceremony and Moctezuma's blatant lack of interest in hearing the message from Charles I, and the Mexica were confused that the huey tlatoani had finally decided to leave his chambers only to meet this pack of clowns. If there's anything Spaniards and Mexicans have always agreed upon, it's that nobody is less qualified to govern than the government itself.



Tlilpotonqui, the cihuacoatl, was lounging on his bed and had just put out his pipe when one of the serving girls told him that Moctezuma wanted to speak to him; he was expected in the courtyard of the royal dining room. He was already in his nightshirt, ready for his nap, so he sighed. He was the only man in the whole empire who would sigh; the only one—counting all the princes of the land, friend or foe—who would fail to consider this the best or worst moment of his life. It wasn't that he was a cynic, or that he didn't like his work and position, or that he had some fundamental difference with the huey tlatoani, but he was no longer as flexible as he'd once been; putting his breechcloth and cape back on made all his joints ache. And it hadn't been a good day. He would have to give an accounting.

He took his time. He performed his ablutions, put on his breechcloth, and sat on the bed to clean the wax from his ears in the time it would have taken him to offer a little blood to the gods—a highly recommended act before an audience with the tlatoani. The usual thing was to bleed one's calves or earlobes or even the penis with a maguey spine. He feigned some sounds of distress in case the emperor's messenger was waiting for him outside.

He got up and looked out. There was no one there; his grunts had been in vain. He went back inside, threw his cape around his shoulders, and stepped into the hall.

When the huey tlatoani and the huey Caxtilteca had met that morning at the end of the Iztapalapa causeway, the foreigners had been followed by the vast and genuinely intimidating army they had gathered along the way. Tlilpotonqui had spoken briefly to El Malinche, and through their

translators they had decided who would set foot on the islet and who would not. When it had been learned what day the Caxtilteca would arrive, the tlatoani had given a direct and summary order: Make sure at all costs that the lords of Tlaxcala and the horses are kept here.

The cihuacoatl had settled things the best he could: the four lords of Tlaxcala, their personal guard, and all the Caxtilteca rode on to the palace of Axayacatl on the islet, and the bulk of the troops, who from a bird's-eye vantage looked to be the full Tlaxcalteca army plus a sea of warriors bearing grievances against Tenoxtitlan, turned around and went back to Iztapalapa, where the causeway began. The two elder lords of Tlaxcala—there were always two elders and two youths—remembered Axayacatl as a temperate and generous man in victory, so they accepted, despite the misgivings of the younger lords, who would rather have said Fuck diplomacy and gambled everything, marching in with the full army then and there.

The procession into the city was strange. To some extent, it meant defeat: the empire's enemies had reached the gates of Tenoxtitlan. And yet they hadn't come after a conquest on the battlefield, but because they were bringing with them a group of foreigners who interested Moctezuma. No matter the circumstances, it took the form of a victory parade. The cihuacoatl, who in addition to being the mayor of the city was the commander-in-chief of the Mexica army, marched at the head as if returning triumphant from a war, followed by the foreigners. People came out to watch, as always, with little white paper flags and bunches of flowers that they tossed at the feet of the newcomers, grateful because ultimately the strangers would take their turn on the sacrifice stone, offering up their blood to the patron gods of the city.

During victory marches, captured enemy warriors walked along as proudly as they could—death by sacrifice guaranteed prosperity in the afterlife—but with their hearts in their throats: dying on the sacrifice stone was no picnic, and before getting there they sometimes had to spend months in a cage in the yard of the warrior who had captured them. With white-lipped stares, their eyes darting reflexively here and there, they would

watch the crowd waving their little flags and tossing flowers, imagining that eventually one of these bastards would buy a strip of warrior arm or loin in the marketplace to eat in magic tomato salsa on a tostada.

The four Tlaxcalteca lords and their guard understood what was going on, so they proceeded nervously, uneasy at having joined the parade without their whole host. The Caxtilteca, meanwhile, strutted along, picking up bunches of flowers, sniffing them, and handing them back to people with big smiles—utterly clueless.

It was when they were well into the city and Moctezuma had gone off to his own palace—the cihuacoatl was to continue to the Old Houses with the foreigners—that General Cuauhtemoc came to inform Tlilpotonqui that the enemy army had halted at the end of the Iztapalapa causeway and was setting up camp at the foot of the Hill of the Star.

In a less complicated diplomatic situation, this gesture of defiance would have been considered an act of war, but it wasn't entirely unexpected. The real surprise was that it was Cuauhtemoc who had brought the message and not Cuitlahuac, Moctezuma's younger brother, heir to the imperial tiara, top eagle commander reporting to the cihuacoatl, and—most important—king of Iztapalapa. Where is Cuitlahuac? asked Tlilpotonqui, realizing that he hadn't been in Moctezuma's retinue either, where he should have been the highest-ranking warrior. It was a clear rupture of the chain of command, and evidence that a piece was missing. No one paid any attention to him—everyone was too skittish, on edge. And anyway, it had been a while now since people trembled when he spoke to them; lately they viewed him with some condescension. As if having turned seventy disqualified him from certain things.

There was no way Cuitlahuac would have allowed the Tlaxcalteca to linger in his realm, Tlilpotonqui thought, and only then did he realize there was something very ominous about the warrior's absence from the meeting of El Malinche and Moctezuma. His presence signified the continuity of the empire. Where is Cuitlahuac? he asked again, and neither Cuauhtemoc nor the councillors paid any attention to him.

The presence of the Tlaxcalteca in Iztapalapa and the absence of its king not only were signs of Colhua weakness but also sent an intolerable message to the people of Tenoxtitlan. The Hill of the Star in Iztapalapa was the place where the New Sun ritual was celebrated every new year's eve, and the presence of the enemy on the slopes of the mountain meant that when the moment came, the Tlaxcalteca could climb to the summit, to the temple atop it, and hang on to the celestial orb, not letting it come out and thus precipitating the twilight of the empire.

Tlilpotonqui understood that this New Sun thing was a superstition and the sun didn't give a damn whether the Colhua sacrificed quail and warriors in the Great Temple of Tenoxtitlan, but he also understood that the reason his office had invested so much in these rituals was that the Tenochca believed in them—or pretended to believe, because they brought wealth to Tenoxtitlan, gave the world solidity, and permitted the flow of magic mushrooms and vision-inducing cacti that made life tolerable in a city where everyone worked without cease. The festivals with their severed heads, dismembered bodies, and rivers of blood flowing down temple steps were disgusting, but they also brought feasting, music, dances, intoxication. They united families and were the only occasions when the daughters and sons of macehualtin belonging to different calpulli could meet; without festivals, Mexica blood would be diluted, would produce monsters; festivals were a break in the succession of days and they boosted pride. The people were pacified and the priests—always discontented and quick to take offense—were kept well fed, drugged, and happy.

Tlilpotonqui never knew whether Moctezuma believed in the sacrifices, the sun, the corn, the rains. The tlatoani was twenty years younger, and ever since he was a boy he had struck Tlilpotonqui as skilled, brave, and unpredictable; a formidable strategist—the best he'd ever known—but at the same time an extraordinarily opaque figure. He was a religious man, but to what degree, the cihuacoatl wasn't sure. He had been priest of Tezcatlipoca during the tumultuous reign of Ahuitzotl, before being chosen emperor himself. It wasn't that the young Moctezuma had been particularly fit for the job of priest, but the temple of Tezcatlipoca, to which he was

appointed in a secret session of the Council, was a safe place where the Tenochca's favorite general could survive the purges of candidates for emperor that usually followed coronations. In those days he had learned to use the priestly caste as a militia, but the cihuacoatl was never clear whether he was a believer or not; whether he truly thought that ripping the heart from someone and feeding the earth with blood would get results.

Tlilpotonqui remembered Moctezuma as the very serious kid sitting at Axayacatl's feet while the tlatoani granted audiences on the throne. He remembered him as the best novice at the calmecac—the military school—and also as the boy who was made captain at fourteen for merits other than his father's rank. They had spent their lives side by side as princes, and both would sincerely say they were already joined in friendship when in due time each assumed his respective mantle of city or empire. Moctezuma couldn't imagine governing without the subtle machinations of Tlilpotonqui, and Tlilpotonqui felt confident operating because he knew that Moctezuma could get out of any fix with a brilliant strategic move.

The families of both men were connected in any number of ways. Tlilpotonqui's father, a descendant of Tlacaelel, the first cihuacoatl, was Moctezuma's maternal grandfather once removed, and on Moctezuma's father's side the tlatoani was a direct descendant of the Emperor Acamapichtli—the first of the Colhua to govern Tenoxtitlan. Though their blood was thoroughly mixed, there was an unbridgeable gap between the two lines: Tlacaelel had been a man of the people, and his ancestors and descendants considered themselves Mexica. Like Acamapichtli, Moctezuma was Colhua, from the line of the kings of Tula and Teotihuacan and the ancient lords of the Gulf. But all were Tenochca, and the glory of the city was their only object.

Their official duties were at once complementary and clashing. The tlatoani was lord of the land and governed over all the conquered territories—everything but the islet of Tenoxtitlan. The cihuacoatl presided over the city and protected the rights of the Mexica; he was the local lord. The emperor governed under the blazing sun of Huitzilopochtli, patron warrior god of the Triple Alliance—a young, restless god, hasty, hot-tempered, and

bloodthirsty. The cihuacoatl ruled under light-giving Metztli, the moon, guardian of waters and of the fertility of valleys—an old goddess, comfortable with herself. Moctezuma was the guiding force of the kingdom, and Tlilpotonqui was the source of his strength, controlling the perfect wealth- and fear-producing machine that was Tenoxtitlan.

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On their expedition around the palace of Axayacatl after lunch, Caldera, Vidal, and Luengas couldn't find the kitchen, but they did find a courtyard, almost identical to the other five or six they had crossed—stone bench, empty pool—with stairs leading to the upper floor, where the palace ladies had lodged the soldiers who had no claim to a private cell or a courtyard with a pool. They went up the stairs, thinking that by now the troops had likely figured out the building and knew where Badillo and the horses were. The upper rooms were even more labyrinthine than the lower ones, but the ungodly racket their companions were making led them to a few of them at least.

The major of the arquebusier company was slow to heed their call because he was cutting his toenails—perhaps the only act of hygiene considered vital on campaign. Tell him to put on his boots before he comes to me, ordered Caldera, with the thought that his soldiers could be mapped by smell as well as sound. They went to wait for the major in the gallery overlooking a nearby courtyard, an empty pool below.

Leaning on their elbows on the wooden beam that served as balustrade, they pondered how easy it would be to get back to the stairs they'd come up by, with Luengas claiming it should be no trouble; ever since they'd discovered what they judged to be an outer wall they had made only right turns. It was a matter of retracing their footsteps, that was all. Caldera agreed, though his anxiety was not lessened: they were lost in a labyrinth in the middle of what was perhaps an enemy city. He stepped back into the corridor leading to the arquebusiers' rooms and shouted an order: when the major came, he should bring ten armed men.

It took a while. Cutting one's toenails with a dagger is no easy thing, let alone putting boots back on with bleeding fingers, but finally the major appeared, limping just a little and with all the men under his command—thirty-four armed arquebusiers. Better safe, said the major, and the captains nodded.

Each right turn they took was discussed, voted on, and approved by Caldera, Vidal, and Luengas—the major of the arquebusiers just shrugged when they turned to look at him—but they couldn't find the stairs they'd come up. When they reached what they thought was the outer wall, it seemed they'd missed a turn, so they went back and immediately happened upon a wall so long that it could have been the one they were looking for if it hadn't happened to be in the opposite place from where they'd expected it to be. Also, they had the sense that the corridors and cells they'd been wandering through were getting narrower and narrower. At one point they even heard the voices of other Spaniards. They called and the voices replied. It was the eighty-seven foot soldiers. They were on the other side of the long wall, but Caldera and his men couldn't figure out how to get to them despite walking the length of it several times. They did come across the carpenters and the Taino slaves, in rooms so small it was as if they were back on the ship, and they brought them along. They never found the cavalry soldiers or the crossbowmen and artillerymen, but they did find the twenty lancers, who, armed and hungry, had ventured out in search of a dining room or a kitchen as soon as they were shown to their rooms and had been wandering the building ever since.

They continued to traipse through cells and hallways until one of the carpenters noticed that a certain stretch of wall was warmer than the others. It must be the east wall, with the sun shining on it all morning, he said. At this point, the corridors were so narrow they could walk only single file, so they passed the news from one man to the next until it reached the three captains, who corroborated the information by touching one wall and then the other. We must go straight, said Caldera, and again turn right only when we reach a corridor wider than the one we're in. Luengas and Vidal nodded, despairingly. Following this method, they at least found their way to the

opening and balustrade over another courtyard. They felt relieved, because for some time they had been walking in almost total darkness. There was no stairway down, but there was one that climbed to the roof. We're sure to get our bearings up there, said Caldera.

They didn't know whether there would be eagle guards on the roof. It was likely, though they had spent a while confirming at every turn that the palace was abandoned. Caldera summoned three arquebusiers to lead the way and went after them, followed by four lancers to cover him in case of a fight when he reached the roof.

The arquebusiers took a good long time loading—the powder horns and buckshot shook in their hands. When they were ready, they advanced. They would provide cover and open fire if they encountered resistance above. Then Caldera would come up, surrounded by the lancers, to somehow explain that they were simply looking for their horses. He said to himself, If only I'd brought Aguilar; and he appointed Luengas the leader of the expedition if the worst came to pass. He checked that his breastplate was well fastened, counted down from five on the fingers of his right hand, and made a fist.

The arquebusiers went up the stairs one by one, slowly and silently, crouching deeper and deeper as the sheltering wall got lower at each step. The man in front pulled his helmet down tight on his head and peered over the edge. He rose immediately and turned. No one, he said. Luengas murmured: God damn, Caldera, no guard on us at all, they must think we're bunny rabbits. Caldera replied that maybe this was good news, and he strode up to the roof. The lancers scurried after him.

Luengas and Vidal positioned the rest of the troops before they climbed up themselves, taking their time. They found Caldera standing with his hands on his hips in the middle of the roof. The building was big, but not big enough for them to have gotten so lost. There were just six courtyards and a central stairwell that, according to Jazmín, led directly to one of the entrances of the blue throne hall—they had already gone up and down it. He pointed out the white wall that encircled the palace. The towers were

unguarded and so were the gates. You're right, he said to Luengas, they think we're bunny rabbits.

Opposite the archway leading into the building was the orchard, which really was immense. And there were the horses, calmly ravaging stands of flowers and an incredible variety of fruit trees—surely valuable, Caldera thought. Others were drinking water from the canal that flowed directly from the springs of Chapultepec. Badillo sat watching them with torpid gaze, a piece of straw in his mouth. He wasn't even armed, and he looked ready to take a nap, or as if he'd just woken from one. Out of the twenty-nine horses they'd had when they disembarked, twenty-seven were left—one had had to be put down after a skirmish on the coast, and another was killed in combat when the siege of Cholula was broken. From his perch, the captain counted eighteen, but signs suggested that others were at rest under the fruit trees.

Caldera got the stable boy's attention with a shout. Badillo waved with a listless smile. It took him a while to understand that the captain wasn't out for a stroll and that he wanted to speak to him. Finally he rose lazily and said: At your orders, raising a rather limp hand to his breast. He's a pudding, said Vidal; a sloth, added Luengas. Is everything all right with the horses? the captain asked. Are they all here? Badillo looked at his hands. He spread his fingers, focusing intently on them, and replied proudly: Here, all ten of them.

Caldera ordered Luengas and Vidal to take a count, horse by horse. They were to have Badillo bring them out one by one until they were sure that all twenty-seven were present. If any were missing, he said, they should wake him before they let Alvarado know. He turned and headed down the stairs to the blue throne room on the way back to his cell.



The shade, the meal he'd eaten, the tobacco, and the depths of autumn, about to subside into the darkness of the solstice—the masked days, as the shortest days of the years were called—sent a shiver down the emperor's spine. He could have moved to the sunny side of the courtyard, but he was out of humor, and to be a pain in the ass he requested the goose-feather cape he wore in his rooms when it was cold. Etiquette demanded that he donate whatever tunic, cape, and headdress he wore at his public audience each morning, so he never appeared there in his white feather cloak, which he loved. He wore no earrings, necklaces, or lip plug. The tunic he had on now, also white, was embroidered with a simple border of flowers and sea snails. He was wearing plain sandals, adorned only with pearls—the gold-and-gem-encrusted sandals he'd worn to receive El Malinche were dazzling but very uncomfortable. He'd left them under the courtyard arch to feel the floor of swept clay under the soles of his feet. The feeling brought back the happy times before he'd entered the calmecac, when he could run for the fun of it with his cousins and the nursemaids' children along the corridors of the Old Houses, without having to think about the Tlaxcalteca besieging the city, the demands of the traders, a surfeit or a dearth of warriors to be sacrificed in the temples, infinite ambassadors presenting well-wishes and requesting a discount on the latest tribute due from their cities, or testy gods blithely doling out droughts, earthquakes, defeats, and invasions.



Malinalli was floating in the middle of the flower-clotted pool when she heard the captain general bellowing for her. The pool in the courtyard adjoining the room she shared with the caudillo was bigger than the pool assigned to the nine captains, just as the room was bigger than theirs.

She'd had time to explore because she'd returned while the others were still sitting around the table, and she'd had to pass their rooms to reach the last room, which came after a turn in the corridor and was thus more private. The fact that it was the only one with its own pool and that so many rooms preceded it—the captains occupied only the last nine—made her imagine that at some point a queen had lived here. It was a fate that might have been hers. One that might still be hers if she skillfully played the doubtful hand that fate had dealt her when she was baptized Doña Marina.

She plunged into the water one last time and swam to the steps, at the top of which a serving girl had left a cloth for her to dry herself with, and a huipil of much finer cotton than the one she'd worn to lunch. The token bestowal of clean clothes was a courtesy and a claim typical of the Colhua: so long as she was there she would be treated like a lady, but it was also expected that she rise to the level of those hosting her when the occasion presented itself, whatever it might be.

The days to come were as impenetrable and opaque as an obsidian mirror, to say the least. They were inside the capital of the empire, in a palace that seemed deserted except for the rooms furnished for them. The kitchen worked, since they had lunched with the princess in what was once Axayacatl's dining room, and there were invisible serving girls who took care of the cleaning, but there were no guards, no officials—it seemed there

was no one here but them. Neither she nor the Caxtilteca knew where the four Tlaxcalteca lords and their guard had gone; Hernando had thought they would be lodged together. If the emperor ordered the bridges raised that night, they would be caught in a trap.

They had a cannon, crossbows, and horses, but everyone knew that the reason they'd gotten this far was the alliance of the four lords with the Huexotzinco and Otomí, to which Cortés had attached himself mostly as a diplomatic novelty, given that Moctezuma was seemingly besotted with the idea of bringing him to Tenoxtitlan. On their own, the Caxtilteca were scarcely a couple of hundred soldiers. They were fierce and well armed, but there weren't many of them and they didn't entirely understand what was going on. If the huey tlatoani decided to attack the palace, their allies could eventually build new bridges and cross the lake, though it was hardly likely they would choose to besiege the island. If they did and they succeeded, it would surely be too late for those inside once the fighting broke out.

On the other hand, the rebel army that Cortés relied on really was vast, and there was a rumor that Texcoco was about to leave the Triple Alliance to join them. If Texcoco split with the league that ran the world, many Mexica would have no reason to remain loyal to the Colhua, and without the backing of Tenoxtitlan the empire would collapse in a matter of hours.

And there remained the mystery of Moctezuma's motives. He was genuinely obsessed with the Caxtilteca. Since he'd learned it was gold that interested them, he'd been planting gifts for them deeper and deeper into his territory; he hadn't had them arrested and brought to the city to be sacrificed when it would have been possible, if difficult, and he had pardoned them for the taking of Cholula. If he'd stopped at nothing to bring them here, he wouldn't attack them now, not right away. He wanted something they could give him.

As she dried the insides of her ears with the linen cloth, Malinalli calculated the odds that the captain general would come out on top when the spoils were divided and she would once more be the lady of a realm. The Tlaxcalteca lords' dealings with Hernando appeared to be in good faith, and for the moment her translating skills were indispensable. All she had to

do was steer him right, persuade him to forget his nonsense about the king from over the sea, make him understand that if he played his pieces in the most practical way, they could take a city for themselves.

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Upon seeing the pair of sandals cast aside, Tlilpotonqui mused on his emperor's sad humanity. Then, before setting foot in the courtyard, he saw the man himself. Dressed all in white, barefoot, sitting with his head bowed, elbows on knees and surrounded by flowers, he looked like an elegant version of the naked god of the Caxtilteca, sad and hanging on a stick. His shock of hair, never combed, was short. It was strange hair, unlike anyone else's: curly. Since he was a boy he had borne it like an omen, proof that he'd been touched by the gods. It was gray now, and while still a marker of status, it gave him a vulnerable air, like an old man softened by pulque, the village madman. His shoulders were broad and his legs sturdy, but he was getting a belly. Above all, he had lapsed into melancholy.

It was something that ran in the family, maybe an occupational hazard. Past a certain age, the descendants of King Acamapichtli got a little beaten down, developed fears and sorrows. Men who were used to setting temples ablaze, crushing cities, and ripping hearts out like tomatoes one day awoke and thought twice before picking up a precious stone from the ground. No, they said, not another war, because then there will be no room in the temples to keep all the young men for sacrifice; talk to the rebels, double their tribute if you want to humiliate them. And then they moved on to the next thing. They died younger than they should have, from illness or killed in ridiculous accidents, seized by sadness and imperial rancor—some strange malady, some paralysis, maybe caused by having known no limits until their own bodies were beset by them.

Huey tlatoani, said Tlilpotonqui when he saw Moctezuma draw himself erect. He spoke the full imperial title tenderly, as if to remind him that he was the first and most beloved of all the Tenochca, that tens of thousands of

Mexica would die for him if only he opened his mouth to say: Onward, children of the sun.

Tlilpotonqui went on: Now you're in low spirits again. Not for nothing, replied the emperor, rubbing his eyes—he was tired. Then why did you let them come here? Moctezuma shrugged in exasperation. To have them to keep, he said, how many times do I have to explain it? He clasped his hands behind his neck, to stretch but also to cradle his head. They're rosy-skinned, he said, their eyes are pale, and they have hair around their mouths instead of on their heads; if we don't take them for ourselves someone else will. I've always been on your side in this, replied the cihuacoatl, I only mention it because of the Tlaxcalteca. Moctezuma didn't hear him, or chose to ignore him. Where did they put the *cahuayos*? he asked. They set them loose in the orchard of your father's palace. Don't let a single one die, said the emperor; they were brought here unharmed at great cost. What worries me, said Tlilpotonqui again, is that the Tlaxcalteca are in Iztapalapa and no one can tell me where Cuitlahuac is.

The tlatoani shrugged. It had to be done, he said, it was to you El Malinche said that if we dispersed, the Tlaxcalteca he wouldn't enter the city; and we've spent a lot to bring those *cahuayos* unharmed this far; we didn't know they would send my gifts on to their king; it was my treasure—my mother's jewels, Axayacatl's feathers—and those fools sent them all to the sea. What's that got to do with anything? asked the cihuacoatl. Moctezuma replied: Cutting off the Tlaxcalteca lords on the causeway would have been a declaration of war, and if we had fought there, the *cahuayos* would have ended up at the bottom of the lake. Tlilpotonqui persisted: What does Cuitlahuac think about you sending the Tlaxcalteca to him in Iztapalapa? He went on: It's a slap in the face; why wasn't he at your meeting with El Malinche? Moctezuma raised his head and gave Tlilpotonqui a long look. He ran his tongue over his upper teeth, beneath the down on his lip, like a manatee coming up for air in the mangrove glades of the Gulf. The cihuacoatl knew that look; he wasn't going to answer. Instead Moctezuma asked: Did you see them settled in? Tlilpotonqui replied that he had left the Caxtilteca in their rooms, well fed

despite the scene the princess had made. She had her reasons, said Moctezuma; you shouldn't have lied to her. The old man paused to think, scratching his head. Finally he said: What I don't know is who found a place for the Tlaxcalteca; they weren't at lunch.

The four lords and their guard, stern and formal, had marched in behind the foreigners and entered the city proper. The emperor's entourage and the newcomers had parted outside the palace walls. The emperor had gone on to his quarters to eat and rest, and Tlilpotonqui himself had led the others to the Old Houses.

He had seen the Tlaxcalteca in the courtyard when he introduced the women who would wait on them—all of noble birth, Mexica pipiltin of much higher status than the guests. The Tlaxcalteca were stiff, as if carved from wood, in their coarse-woven gala attire. They had also been present, he was sure, when El Malinche made a fool of himself before the throne of Axayacatl and during the incense ceremony.

It had been a clumsy, muddled, complicated business. The princess, who hated her diplomatic duties and had a sensitive nose, had to be presented to the Caxtilteca, who smelled of sweat, urine, and shit. There were also the priests, who stank of death—and they had arrived tonsil-deep in mushrooms and dressed in their ceremonial best, as if the lunch's final act would be to rip out the newcomers' hearts. The princess requested that everyone be thoroughly fumigated before her arrival, in the hope that the trail of smells could be improved.

The lunch was politically delicate for reasons that had nothing to do with the presence of the foreigners. For the past year, news from the empire had been bad or disastrous, and the huey tlatoani was increasingly withdrawn. The chiefs of the calpulli who had been invited were angry: more and more Mexica were being requisitioned to fight the Colhua's wars, fewer and fewer returned, and the emperor never showed his face. It was an open secret that the councillors—also present at the table—no longer had access to the tlatoani and were convinced they had lost their standing because of the princess. The princess thought the councillors were pedants and fools and that the Mexica calpulli chiefs were failing to show the

loyalty demanded at such a difficult moment. The priests did as they liked—Moctezuma had given them too much power—and now they could scarcely put two and two together, afflicted with the shakes from excess consumption of leg of sacrificial victim, and high as kites from stuffing themselves with mushrooms, cacti, and magic tomatoes.

The incense ceremony had been thorough, to say the least. The priests were used to the copal smoke—people perfumed them everywhere they went and they took it as a tribute to their sainthood—but the Caxtilteca weren't, so El Malinche, his captains, and his translators began to cough as if rocks of copal had been planted in their lungs.

It was during this episode that Tlilpotonqui had last noticed the presence of the Tlaxcalteca. The priests grandly receiving their smoke tribute; the Caxtilteca doubled over coughing. He had hurried to rescue the huey Caxtilteca so he wouldn't choke to death, and led him, followed by his captains, to his rooms, where the palace maidens had prepared a pool thick with sweet-smelling flowers so fleshy they looked like fish. They had also left mantles and fine sandals on the wooden bench at the foot of each bed. He indicated through the translators that they should feel free to bathe and change, and El Malinche had thanked him, saying that nevertheless they didn't want to keep the princess waiting, so they would settle in quickly and join everyone in the dining room. The women, as they later reported, had led away the rest of the troops, and a very strange Caxtilteca had endeavored to find quarters for the *cahuayos* all on his own. When Tlilpotonqui returned to the dining room, the princess had pointed out that the place settings of the four Tlaxcalteca lords had been removed because they wouldn't be coming, and he hadn't thought to ask whether they had been lodged somewhere.

The cihuacoatl said to the tlatoani: I don't know whether the Tlaxcalteca are in the Old Houses or not. Moctezuma rubbed his face. I'll take care of that, he replied. You make sure the *cahuayos* stay where they are. Tlilpotonqui bowed his head in assent.

The emperor got up and walked around the pool to the sunny side of the courtyard. He stopped by the wall covered with creeping night-blooming

jasmine on which the last autumn flowers were fading. His attention was fixed on the hysterical throbbing of the bees. He reached out for the vine and a bee landed on his finger. He blew on the bee and it went flying off, but it came back to circle his very white feather cape. He let it. The cihuacoatl saw his chance and tried again. The *cahuayos* and the Caxtilteca are where they're supposed to be; give me a few hours to find the four lords and their guard. The huey tlatoani half turned. I'm talking to them this evening, he said, after supper. The Tlaxcalteca? The Caxtilteca, corrected the emperor; we'll deal with the Tlaxcalteca later. He reached out his finger again and the bee landed on it once more. He raised his finger to his face, peering at the insect and then at the cihuacoatl. He said: These are days of blood and shit.



Long before the arrival of the conquistadores in the city of the Colhua, even before they had set foot on the continent, and before they had learned there was a great emperor called Moctezuma in a city like something out of a book, its name Tenoxtitlan, the Maya lords of the isle of Cozumel had turned over Friar Gerónimo de Aguilar, for whom the captain general had paid a ransom. The future translator of the Hernán Cortés expedition was wearing nothing but a breechcloth when he was brought to the captain's ship, so the chaplain of the expedition had hastened to the hold to lend him a robe and the spare sandals he had packed in Cuba.

Cortés had heard that the friar and another Spaniard had been shipwrecked among the Maya across the strait, and he had paid for the liberation of both. Aguilar arrived in the company of other slaves tossed in as a gift by the Maya lords of Akumal so that the Spanish would once and for all go back to where they'd come from.

None of the conquistadores aboard the expedition's lead ship thought that Aguilar was anything but one of the Maya kneeling on the deck awaiting Hernando's approval. All of them were pierced, brown-skinned, and tattooed, their heads shaved. It wasn't until Cortés gave the order for them to rise that Aguilar stood out for his height. Alvarado said: I think that's the Andalusian we heard was serving in Yucatán. Scratching his shoulder, Aguilar spoke: The very same, as if it were a Tuesday and they were at the market in Écija. Cortés, who wasn't easily impressed, stared with his mouth open. Aguilar was a bundle of muscle, his skin inscribed with words written in the impenetrable Maya alphabet from skull to shin. In some places, the drawings had been made from the scars of wounds that must have hurt greatly when they were inflicted. He shaved his face and

head every day to stand out less, since he was fair-haired; he was as burnished as a guitar from his work laying stone for the building of temples; he wore earrings, a coral lip plug, and a ring in his nose.

We were told you were a priest, ventured the captain general, still taken aback. *Sum id quod sum*, replied Aguilar in the tongue of the popes. Cortés glanced at the chaplain, who ran to the hold for his robe. There was another prisoner with you, said Cortés. Gonzalo Guerrero, replied the friar; he wasn't a prisoner or a slave like me, he's a warrior, he has a wife and children, he chose to stay, told me to tell you that if you set foot in Akumal he'll cut your throat himself. Always nice to meet a grateful man, said Cortés, and he asked: If you had been a warrior, would you have come? Your throat would be cut already, Aguilar replied calmly. The priest returned with the garments and Aguilar bowed his head and said *Gratias ago*. He touched the robe with something an optimist might mistake for tender feelings. Then he took the two parts of a pipe from his breechcloth, pulled off his earrings, the nose ring, and the lip plug, put on the robe in front of everyone, and stuck the pipe in the pocket. He slipped his feet into the sandals and covered his head with the hood. That's better, said the captain general. Before the lord who had brought him returned to his vessel, Aguilar made some request of him in Maya, and the lord gave him a sack of tobacco and a hug.

Friar Gerónimo never attended the religious services held by the chaplain, though he lived like a priest in every sense of the word. He was always praying, he spoke Latin and Greek, he was learned in church doctrine, he refused to wear military garb, he slept, ate, and drank as austerely as a Carmelite, and he bedded only handsome youths. Nevertheless, his tracery of tattoos and the fact that he continued to shave his head and beard every day made the leaders of the expedition mistrust him—though the common soldiers loved him as if he were a ghost who had joined forces with them to fight their cause.

He was assigned to the lead ship because he spoke Maya. He was always on the heels of Cortés and Alvarado, who had learned to respect him, never inquiring about the mysteries that tormented him. Things

happened to people when they got to the Indies, anyway. The prospect of owning human souls without any accountability brought out the dark side in some: they set their dogs on their Tainos for the slightest fault, watching with glee as they were devoured. Others, given their own room and bed in the Indies for perhaps the first time in their lives, embarked on erotic journeys that in Extremadura would have led to beatings and public shamings at the very least. Others turned mystical, believing that the inhabitants of the land belonged to the lost tribe of Israel. In this context, Aguilar's eccentricities—tattoos aside—were even praiseworthy: he bathed every day, he abhorred alcohol, he dosed himself with mushrooms, which made everyone happy, and not magic cacti, which drove them mad.

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Tilipotonqui advanced along the corridors of the royal chambers with the ceremoniousness and hauteur his post demanded. After years operating in a court where anyone could disappear from one day to the next, never to be mentioned again, he was able to maintain a perpetual appearance of equanimity even if inside he was about to lose his shit. He graciously acknowledged the reverences of the few ladies-in-waiting and officials moving silently along the corridors—all too young; all related to him, however distantly—thinking meanwhile that Moctezuma was either losing his grip or had decided to take him out of the game. And it was the riskiest game the two of them had played in their lives. Tlaxcala at their neck, Texcoco at their back, half the empire risen up, a prince missing, four enemy lords and their guard loose in the city. If in previous years they had faced a single one of these calamities, there would have been nighttime purges, the tolling of war drums, the lighting of torches in the temples. And now nothing was happening, or the tlatoani was acting as if nothing was happening, because the only thing he cared about was getting his hands on the *cahuayos* at any cost, with or without the Caxtilteca—seemingly he wanted to talk to them before coming to a decision on the latter point.

The light was fading. The winter solstice was approaching, so the days were short. It was time to act, make whatever moves they could so that when the huey tlatoani finally shook his obsession with the beasts, the city would be ready to face a possible invasion. The nap, however, was the nap. He returned to his rooms to abide by it.



The huey tlatoani clapped his hands. The new serving girl stepped into the courtyard with her head lowered. Little Cousin, he said, might there be any more of those mushrooms I had the tiniest taste of earlier? The girl made a reverence. Bring me a spoonful for dessert, no more, to summon the sleep my fool of an uncle drove away, said Moctezuma. He laughed: Can you believe he's lost Cuitlahuac and the four Tlaxcalteca lords?

II.



MOCTEZUMA'S NAP

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The afternoon of November 8, 1519, Moctezuma did exactly what he always did after eating, even if the whole world might change forever from the moment he woke up. He lapped the paste of magic mushrooms and honey from the Oaxacan black-clay spoon handed to him by the serving girl, and sat in the sun until he felt his eyes closing. Amid a now absolute silence he walked to his room and his bed. He took off his cape, his mantle, and his breechcloth, and got under the goose-feather coverlet. He pulled it up to his eyebrows and fell asleep.

The silence his nap demanded was imperial. Nothing moved in the palace between the moment he entered his room and the instant he opened his eyes again and rang the royal bell to ask for something from the latest Little Cousin.

The request didn't matter. What mattered was the peal of the bell. Brief, elegant, muted: it woke up a whole world. It woke the palace and its courtyards, its kitchens and infinite offices. The sound woke the priests in the temple and their sentinels, who set to beating the drums that woke the birds and the dogs. It woke the grand houses of the pipiltin that surrounded the emperor's palace and it woke the chinampas that nourished them. It woke the children in the floating neighborhoods, who made an impossible ruckus that woke their mothers and fathers, their grandparents, the herons and the fish.

It woke the cookfires and with them the traffic on the causeways; it woke the watchers at the gates of the city and the guards on the series of fortifications that climbed up the mountains and all the way down to the sea. It woke the enemy: in kingdoms subjugated and free, and in those that

Moctezuma had ordered to keep at a simmer for the hunting of sacrificial warriors when the season for war came again.

It woke everything, even if almost every day for many months now, after waking and ringing the bell, the huey tlatoani had gone right back to sleep.

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Aguilar, perched in a corner, was smoking his crude Maya slave pipe when he heard the voice of Captain Jazmín Caldera saying: If they're going to end up sacrificing us, let it be in clean clothes. Aguilar looked at him, or at least turned his cowl-covered head toward him.

The friar was squatting in his cell, like the macehualtin: ass on heels, forearms resting on knees. Draped in his robe and smoking as he was, he looked like a baby volcano. Caldera stood leaning in the doorway. If you're sacrificed, Aguilar replied, you'll go stark naked with nothing but a breechcloth to cover your balls, so you won't need clean clothes; it'll be a fancy breechcloth, though. I haven't had the pleasure of seeing a sacrifice, said Caldera; as you know, that boor Cortés has been prohibiting them wherever we go.

The translator didn't move. A plume of smoke issued from his hood. I've seen many, he said, and they aren't edifying. He asked: What do you want from me? Caldera smiled. Help me with Malinalli, he said. I want her to teach me to ask in Nahuatl for my clothes to be washed. The friar shrugged without shifting position. He said: I'll ask her when she's done attending to her bedroom duties with the asshole who by some miracle has managed to keep us alive up until now. Jazmín understood that Aguilar, by far the most experienced man in the group, was asking him to show some respect. It wasn't clear whether the conquistadores were guests or prisoners, and maybe this wasn't the time to split into factions or bandy around quips.

Caldera bowed his head and took the scolding, but he didn't move from the doorway. The translator, ready to finish the tobacco in his pipe and then pray or take a nap or masturbate, or all of the above, one after the other, asked: Is there anything else I can help you with? Caldera smiled shyly. I

don't want to be left naked when they wash my clothes, and they've set out breechcloths and some splendid tunics on the little table, but I don't know how to put them on.

Aguilar raised his face for the first time, and Jazmín saw that he was in a good mood. The little table is a *pe'c*, he said, which means dog to the Maya; they call it *itzcuintli* here; the robes are for you to wear. And he went on: Leave your clothes on the floor; we're guests of Moctezuma till the moment they sacrifice us, and they'll be taken away before you know it and returned to you clean and folded by the evening meal; when you get out of the water, go back to your room and put the tunic on; if it makes you nervous to walk around with your balls hanging loose, you can put on the breechcloth. And he concluded: Your real problem isn't being seen half naked around the palace but being spotted wearing the tunic by the captain or Alvarado, but I imagine they're asleep right now.

Caldera's and Aguilar's rooms, like all the captains', were square chambers of modest dimensions considering the size of the palace, but large compared with a monk's cell, which was what they most resembled, though there were no reading desks under windows, or doors that opened and closed; in Mexico no one had conceived of the hinge.

None of the captains, the general included, was a career soldier or politician, except for Caldera, who had seen some diplomatic action. During the campaign they had spent a few nights at the houses of the local nobility, but only in passing. Occupying a palace was a new experience for all of them. None had ever taken part in anything like the operation they were suddenly embarked upon: a sojourn half military and half political in a great fortified city under the guard of a professional army. They had put up money or supplies for the expedition, and that was how they found themselves in captains' quarters. All of them, of course, had the experience of the conquest of Cuba: they hadn't been tested on the battlefields of Europe, but they were hardly ignorant of the principles of war.

Alvarado was in the last cell before the turn in the corridor leading to Cortés and Malinalli's room. Jazmín was in the first, which delighted him: the only time he'd have to cross paths with the second-in-command was at

meals and when the captain general issued the call to arms, if that ever happened. He hated the way Cortés's cousin looked at him, the disdain in those strikingly blue eyes that God had wasted on a stunted and resentful soul. He was sure Alvarado would have cut his throat that first night on board the ship if Hernando had not esteemed his conversation since the days of the conquest of Cuba—they both had a passion for the political ideas of Petrarch, they both thought *Orlando furioso* was better than *Amadís de Gaula*, and they both adored Livy.

Back at his room, Caldera stood for a moment on the threshold, hands on hips. There was a bed, maybe not as heavenly as his bed had been in Cuba, but definitely tempting. It was simple and elegant—a wooden structure with four legs, no headboard or posts, the frame covered with a feather pallet and a heavy spread, both white, on which he didn't want to lie down until he had bathed and had his clothes washed. The bed looked like a cloud, and the road from Veracruz to Tenoxtitlan had left scrawls of mud and blood on his shirt, breeches, and stockings. When he mentioned it later to Aguilar, the translator said the beds were like those of the Maya priests and it seemed only logical to him that a culture that had invented the goosedown quilt would have no conception of the hinge: doors were created for restless sleepers.

In addition to the bed, there was the pe'c, where three mantles and three breechcloths, all simply magnificent, had been left for him as they had been for all the captains. In two of the four corners of the room there were braziers: nobody had invented candles either. He imagined that when night fell, someone would come to light them: in the impossible heights of the Anahuac Valley, the temperature dropped like a brick when it got cloudy, never mind during the nights, which had been cold since they'd left Cholula to scale the snowy volcanoes and enter the valley.

That entrance, that first sight, kept coming back to Caldera like the best page in the best book. Now that he had lived to see it, nothing that came after would matter. The lakes, the rivers, the pine forests, the valleys scorched by the first autumn frosts, the unimaginable cities splashed everywhere.

He picked up the mantles and breechcloths, sniffed them, and set them on the bed so he could lay his dirty things on the table, careful as he took them off not to sully the impeccable weave of the coverlet with their grimy map of war. He didn't even want to sit on the bed to remove his boots, so he pulled them off on the floor and left them to the side with his helmet, breastplate, and sword.

He was on his way out when it occurred to him that if he was going to cross the hallway naked in what might be an enemy palace, he had better bring along a weapon, just in case.

He exited with his sword in his right hand, dragging the point along the floor so that it left a little trail as warning; his left hand was firmly on his balls, making it clear they were a handful. He walked down the deserted hallway until he reached the opening into the courtyard and stepped out.

He dropped his sword noisily at the edge of the pool and went carefully down the stairs into the water. The floating flowers were intensely scented. He dove under and swam to the other side. Coming up, he rested his elbows on the rim, the sun still strong on his shoulders and arms. He laid down his head and closed his eyes to concentrate on the smell of the flowers, paddling gently to dispel the juices accumulated in the nest of his nether regions.

He was so close to bliss that he didn't hear Aguilar come into the courtyard until the latter cleared his throat, as if asking permission to interrupt his reverie. He turned. Naked, the priest and translator looked even more daunting than he did in a breechcloth or robe. His cock, long and thick as an eggplant, was tattooed to look like a butterfly. Noticing Caldera's curiosity, he said, When it gets hard it turns into an eagle, and slid into the water. They didn't speak again. They never talked much, though of all the captains, Jazmín had by far the longest conversations with the translator.

Caldera floated on his back, watching the clouds move across the rectangle of cobalt sky over Tenoxtitlan. It occurred to him—as perhaps it did to Aguilar in his staunch silence—that this sky was the last thing he'd see if he was taken to the sacrifice stone. The plan had never been for Cortés's expedition to end up in the lion's den.

They had come to map, explore, and prepare the groundwork for bringing macehualtin from the continent to the islands, because the plantations were running out of slaves. Like everyone else, he had put money into the scheme, and that's what he'd thought they would do. He had parted with his brother and nephews, saying, I'll be back soon if the weather holds; take care of my cows for me.

It was when they had landed to reprovision on the Gulf coast after Aguilar and Malinalli joined the expedition that Hernando decided, with the blessing of the other captains—and the gallows for those opposed—that it would be an expedition of occupation and settlement instead, which was why they had founded a town they called De la Vera Cruz, and why they'd gotten ahead of the governor of Cuba by sending a letter to the king explaining it all. Since they were now a township on a settlement expedition, they could dub their leader a general, and they headed inland. No one had any thought then of reaching Tenoxtitlan, but they really had no clear idea about anything. Caldera never had the feeling of being forced into anything. They were making things up as they went along, with extraordinary results.

There had been battles, terror, deaths; wounds and scars; sicknesses and pus; but above all there was always the feeling that the exciting thing was to go on—not only was no single defeat crushing enough to make them turn around, there was never even the need to consider it, because more and more armies were constantly flocking to them.

And there was the game Moctezuma had played with gifts, which no one entirely understood. The gifts were so lavish they could be read only as an invitation, but they always came accompanied by words of discouragement: the emperor was sick, there wasn't enough food at the capital, Tenoxtitlan was unworthy of receiving them. In the endless discussions among the captains, Aguilar's voice and Malinalli's corroboration always prevailed in the end. These messages weren't attempts to dissuade them but rather Colhua-style diplomacy: my house is your house; it's a poor place (rich as it might be); come and we'll receive you the

best we can, undeserving as we are of your visit; meanwhile here are some insignificant little gifts.

Though Cortés didn't quite understand this brand of courtesy, he was good at bluffing, and he had doubled down, claiming to bring a message from King Charles that he alone could deliver to Moctezuma. Thus he gained another day, more gifts, a few more leagues, without it mattering much whether they reached Tenoxtitlan in the end. Ultimately they came to believe in their own ruses. And their victories were so glorious, and the army of Colhua-hating nations had grown so large, and the promise of the Anahuac Valley's splendor was so seductive that they had ended up here and as a result had no choice but to pretend they weren't scared, and believe their allies would come to their aid when the moment arrived.

If the expedition had been anything, it had been intense, fun, wild, the experience of a lifetime and perhaps of a nation's entire history. Floating, watching the rectangle of sky that is practically night-blue even during the day in the mountains of Mexico, Jazmín imagined—as surely they all were imagining now that the noise had died down—that between his body and their allies' army were thousands of Tenochca warriors all dying to take a nibble of his leg. The idea, uncomfortable as it was, turned him on a little. Then, too, the causeways the Tlaxcalteca would have to use to enter the city had movable bridges. And maybe Moctezuma had seduced them for reasons unknown and had led them into a trap, leaving them with no choice but to think they could still take the cheese.

He heard shouting and a tumult of bare feet approaching. Though the voices were clearly Spanish, his first reaction, as usual when faced with any socialized display of masculinity, was to withdraw. He sank underwater and swam to the side of the pool where he'd left his sword.

It was afternoon now. Scarcely a third of the courtyard was still under the sun's dominion, and this included the slice of water alongside his sword, through which rays of light filtered. He tilted his head so that only his nose was above the surface. The floating flowers cast tubes of shadow like foundering crippled ships, rootless islands promising nothing but disease.

He grasped the edge and turned away from it, leaning on his elbows, tossing his hair back, letting the sun fall on his closed eyes.

There was something childish about the shouting, a lack of awareness of where they really were: in a royal palace they didn't deserve, faced with the proximity of an extraordinarily cruel death. Aguilar had cleaved to the other side—the shadowed side, more in keeping with his personality. He seemed to read Jazmín's thoughts. He said: They're dumb mutts, but they're ours.

Then they appeared in the entrance to the courtyard. Eight soldiers marked with recent scars, faces and arms sunburned, chests and bellies pale, the fair men fairer than ever and the dark ones practically Neapolitan by now, all seasoned by the hardships of a nine-month expedition. They were filthy, tanned, handsome despite (or because of) the cattle-like racket they were making.

They scattered into the water, somersaulting or catapulting, landing as thunderously as they could. What they'd done to the islands, Jazmín thought, could not be allowed to happen in the Anahuac. Even if they were his people and they would go to their deaths defending each other, it was neither fair nor beautiful nor good to impose themselves by dint of horsemanship and ballista fire—and maybe not even possible. He thought, too, that they were splashing too much for what they already were in his mind's eye: a pack of ghosts.



Malinalli was drying her hair in the sun when Cortés got back from bathing in the pool the two of them shared. Sitting in a patch of light on the floor, she was leafing through one of the books he carried in his campaign bag. The captain general gave her a look, and though he knew she wouldn't understand, he said: *¿Ahora ya lees en castellano?* She turned to look at him with her usual seriousness and said: *Pronto.*

Cortés stared at her as if she were an apparition. He raised his right hand to his beard and sat down on the big bed in the middle of the cell. He stroked his jaw and screwed up his eyes to peer at her again, taking her measure. He was weighing whether her intelligence was an advantage or a curse. How long has it been since you've understood what we say? he asked. She shrugged. I don't understand, hardly, she replied, but there's something you should know. He raised his eyebrows, inviting her to continue. When Atotoxtli got up from eating all angry and everyone went with her, one of the priests said something. Who is Atotoxtli? asked Cortés. The princess. I see; and what did the priest say? The priest pointed to a wall and said: This wall has eyes.

The captain general scratched his beard. No wall has eyes, he said; we were there for quite a while, all nine captains, and there were no eyes in that wall. I too saw nothing, said Malinalli, but the priests see things not seen. Cortés considered this. Could they tell that you speak Castilian now? No. So there—they don't see everything.

The conquistador got up from the bed and retrieved the bag of his things from where Malinalli had left it after getting out the book she was looking through. He found some breeches and sat on the bed again to put them on. What he'd said in the throne room was true: waiting so long for Moctezuma

on his skittish horse had fucked up his hip. He turned to look at Malinalli. Don't tell Aguilar you speak Castilian, he said. She bowed her head.

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Aguilar opened an eye. He had been snoring away, like all the other captains: a bath sent them straight to la-la land, like children. He closed his eye and opened the other one. Then he opened both eyes and looked irritably up at the ceiling. Jazmín Caldera was shaking him gently. Gerónimo, he whispered, Gerónimo. The translator reached an arm out from under the coverlet and rubbed his eyes with two fingers. He said: Did Hernando call? No, replied Caldera, they're all in their rooms sleeping off lunch, I think, and I wanted to ask you something before they wake up. The translator closed one eye again, weighing whether the situation merited a violent response. Being a man of experience, he curbed his initial impulse and asked: What? Caldera said: Will you show me how to put on the breechcloth and mantle before they wake up? Sympathy won out. They're nice-looking, aren't they? Beautiful, said Caldera. The friar smiled. Go and get yours, he said; I'm not going to lend you mine.

Jazmín, who was in nothing but his breeches and underthings after bathing, came back with a tangle of cotton in one hand and sandals dangling from the other. Aguilar was sitting up in bed, naked. He scratched his head, stood, and crossed the distance to the pe'c in five steps. He took the breechcloth from the top of the pile they'd left him and said: To clothe your loins with this, first you strip; they call it a maxtlatl. Caldera tried and failed to repeat the word.

It was a long swath of cotton so fine you had to look hard to see the weave. The fabric was smooth, with a faint shine, so delicate it seemed as if you could take it by one end and the other would float up to the ceiling. It was the width of a good scarf and all along the length of it—eight or maybe ten palms—there were embroidered flowers and a fringe. Aguilar took the

garment by the plain side and held it with one hand to his upper-left pelvis. Then he took the rest of the cloth and wrapped it three times around his hips, tighter each time. He tucked the remaining fabric through the loop at the small of his back, and passed it down and over his private parts. He repeated the motion, this time loosening and tightening the cloth until he had made a little pouch. The balls shouldn't dangle, he said, but they shouldn't be hiked up either. He wrapped the cloth around twice more, smoothing it dexterously with his thumbs, and made a knot in front, pulling on the fringed part to cover the groin area completely—the flowers standing in delicately for the hidden manhood. There you go, he said.

Jazmín unfastened and dropped his breeches and took off his underthings, secretly delighting in the tickle he got from undressing in front of a glorious specimen of masculinity like Aguilar. He repeated the motions as the translator watched impatiently. You have to make it tighter. Now you pull it through. Not like that, or it'll come apart once you've taken three steps. That's it. When he was convinced that the breechcloth was on securely, Caldera looked down, feeling for an instant as if he'd gained a new body. He imagined it coppery, shiny, and hard, like the bodies of the macehualtin he'd seen dressed the same way, drop-dead gorgeous. What he actually saw was enough to make him run for his dagger to slash his own throat: tanned forearms and white biceps, a pale little mound of a belly beneath a hairy rib cage, then skinny legs, underdeveloped and bowed as they became when a man was constantly on horseback. And finally his feet, deformed by his boots: two moldy claws. Even so, he threw out his arms like a child. Aguilar was standing in front of him in nothing but his breechcloth: muscular, brown, tattooed. There you have it, he said to Caldera, his pity plain. He added: It'll look better with the mantle, you'll see. Caldera tilted his head, studying the other man's body. He smiled. Son of a bitch, he said; you shave your chest and belly. The priest shrugged. When in Rome, he said. Now for the mantle.

The one Caldera had chosen was yellow. It was embroidered in cotton thread with vegetable motifs: ears of corn, pumpkins, flowers. The priest told him he had to tie it at his neck and wear it pulled slightly back because

he was a soldier. That's how the sons of the pipiltin wear it when they're in school, to show they've become warriors. What are the pipiltin? Jazmín asked. The nobles, said Aguilar. The ones who work in government and aren't warriors anymore wear it tied under the left shoulder; mine is tied under the right, because I'm a priest.

Jazmín tied his and shivered in it, as if stricken by a chill. He looked down and felt a little better; it looked marvelous on him despite his sad, European body. It's exquisite, he said. Aguilar touched the embroidery. No, he said, it's a fine mantle—Totonac, among the best in the empire—but not like the ones they make here. He went on: If they considered us their equals, it would be embroidered with feathers.

Then Caldera slid his feet carefully into the sandals. The side of the sole in contact with the foot was of hide, with rubber beneath. He had never felt anything like it. It's like floating, he said. The laces were braided cotton, and the knot between the big toe and the second toe was topped with a little jade serpent's head that he thought looked like a dragon. Amadís de Gaula would have loved these, he said; he would have worn them to stroll through the palace in moments of repose. Aguilar smiled. He said: Amadís de Gaula never existed. Of course he did, replied Caldera, and he whispered as if telling a secret: I read it in a book. The friar laughed and made a motion with his right arm that encompassed his cell, the palace, the city, everything. When somebody puts what's happening to us now in a book, he said, they'll think it's more chivalric romance bullshit.



Moctezuma opened his eyes, thinking he'd better go hear petitions on the throne, meet with the heads of the calpulli to renew the pact between Mexica and Colhua—the Texcoco uprising had the Mexica leaders nervous, for good reason—and review with the eagle generals what forces they had inside and outside the city. Then he thought better of it. The throne room seemed far away and cold, and if word spread that he had begun to give audiences again, the members of the Council would send yet another emissary, the ten millionth since what had happened in Cholula. And he would have to change clothes, put on a headdress, jewels, make a few blood offerings.

He decided to stay in bed and smoke. Anyway, the only person he urgently needed to see was his sister, and since she was his wife, it would violate neither the etiquette nor the laws of the motherfucking gods if he received her lying down, his hair matted and dried trails of saliva at the corners of his lips. He reached for the little silver bell on the table and rang it to call his new Little Cousin. Rubbing his eyes, he asked her to send Atotoxtli to him, but not until she had woken from her nap. Make sure she's had a smoke before she comes, he said; I can't stand her when she's in a mood.

III.



AFTER *the* NAP

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In the courtyards, hallways, and chambers of officialdom, the usual calamities awaited the cihuacoatl, supercharged by the succession of political catastrophes that Moctezuma had agreed to swallow to guarantee the arrival of the Caxtilteca. Just by walking past and nodding to the people awaiting audiences—people he would not be receiving, though he didn't tell them so—he learned that venison was very expensive because Otomí warriors were hunting now in the Anahuac; mountain dwellers hadn't been able to leave their houses for months because wolves and pumas had taken over while the Tenochca warriors neglected their work to shepherd from afar the slow, stupid expedition of the Caxtilteca; the fishermen's calpulli was fed up because the Texcoca civil war—between those siding with the Colhua grandson of King Netzahualcoyotl, supported by Moctezuma, and the followers of a reckless, irascible Texcoca general who claimed that Texcoco should be governed by a Texcoca—was affecting the sweet-water part of the lake; the supreme priests of Cholula, now taking refuge in Tenoxtitlan, had the people under a spell, and their interpretations of the favorable dates for just about everything in the calendar conflicted with the imperial priests'; and under the Cholulteca priests' influence, the cult of Quetzalcoatl, which had been so difficult to contain, was on the rise again, and at night there were secret ghost dances proclaiming the god's imminent return.

It was all genuinely urgent, though the cihuacoatl—who had seen everything before, even if never simultaneously—was less disturbed by the demands themselves than by what pulsed beneath them. A vague complicity, an almost imperceptible and perhaps even flattering suggestion that maybe the rebel Texcoca were right and the Toltec-descended emperors

had lost their touch; maybe they were irrelevant and the hour of the Mexica, headed by Tlilpotonqui as cihuacoatl, had come to Tenoxtitlan. The lords of the Tlaxcalteca were Tlaxcalteca and the leaders of the Maya were Maya, so why should the Mexica and the Texcoca be governed by the Colhua? No need to be a genius to link rumors like these to his own feeling that Moctezuma no longer fully trusted him.

Tlilpotonqui arrived at his receiving chambers in Heron Hall less like a man on his way into work than like someone seeking refuge. Awaiting him were his secretaries: docile, overworked, and tending to incompetence.

Since the ill-fated day when Moctezuma had begun to feel persecuted by everyone and ordered all public employees expelled from his palace, replaced by Colhua pipiltin with some blood relationship to him, the cihuacoatl's job had become hopelessly complicated. His nephews and godsons were diligent and would give their lives for him and the emperor, but that was exactly the problem: they had been educated at the calmecac to capture warriors in open combat and offer them up in the temple, not to check lists of tributes and mediate in boundary disputes. Their instinct was to solve everything by beheading one of the contending parties.

Tlilpotonqui's three assistants leaped to their feet when they saw him come in, and the highest in rank—his ridiculous official title was Secretary of the Lunar Founding of Tenoxtitlan, which Tlilpotonqui hated and avoided using—said: The members of the Council are waiting for you in the hall; they brought their equipales, so I had yours taken in. The old man glanced at the dais, empty now, where his seat for receiving petitioners usually stood. He said: Neither the emperor nor I summoned the Council, as is our prerogative. They all came in together, replied his secretary, each with his bearer behind, carrying his chair. So? replied the cihuacoatl. I thought they'd been summoned by the emperor, and I carried yours in myself. These days the emperor can't even summon his own waters when he wants to piss, replied Tlilpotonqui, allowing ill humor to loosen his tongue. His nephew didn't laugh at the joke: the fact that the cihuacoatl was the only one who could say such a thing wasn't enough to make it funny. Tlilpotonqui met his eyes, saying: You can't make decisions like this about

my schedule without consulting me. We missed lunch because we had to report to the Eagle College, replied his secretary in plaintive tones; the generals called us up, saying the Tlaxcalteca were at the Hill of the Star and the four lords and their guard were at Axayacatl's palace, meaning we could be called to battle at any moment. Tlilpotonqui peered at him curiously. Is that what they told you? he asked, raising his brows. Those were their exact words. They said the Tlaxcalteca were in the Old Houses? Exactly. The cihuacoatl considered for a moment, then replied: It's nothing but the truth; so then what happened? With what? The Council members. His assistant explained: When we got back from our naps—without having eaten, as I mentioned before—the elders were already here, with the bearers carrying their equipales. I sent for you to let you know and I was told you'd left lunch with the princess to talk to the huey tlatoani, and since we'd been called up I assumed you must have ordered the meeting of the Council. Good thinking, the cihuacoatl said, you have a future in public administration, and he scratched his neck as if anticipating an insect bite.

We have many petitioners, his nephew whispered. Two halls and three courtyards full, said the Secretary of Petitions and Requests, whose job was to attend to the needs of the claimants while they were waiting. Go and talk to them one by one, said Tlilpotonqui, and see what you can settle among yourselves without me—he said this knowing they had no clue how to settle anything—and cancel all my meetings without explanation. The secretary bowed his head, and when he looked up again he met his boss's raised eyebrows, which made him realize that this was no time to stand on ceremony but time to go and do his job.

The Secretary of the Lunar Founding of Tenoxtitlan, who was called Metztli—Little Moon—to save everyone the trouble of uttering his detestable title, and the Secretary of Maps, Boundaries, Tributes, and Other Things stared at him as if waiting for him to cast a spell to fill the alarming void of power left in the city by the absence of the huey tlatoani. If the rumor was that Moctezuma had woken from his lethargy and summoned the Council and called his warriors to arms, that was good, Tlilpotonqui thought. Also, it would give everyone something to talk about for a few

hours while he looked for Cuitlahuac and the Tlaxcalteca. He could get rid of the Council quickly and turn without interruption to the problem of the missing lords.

He asked the Secretary of Maps if he had been called up too. I was at the college, the secretary replied. What did Cuauhtemoc say? Nothing. Did he make any sign? He's Cuauhtemoc. What do you mean by that? I've never seen him make any kind of sign. What about Cuitlahuac? asked Tlilpotonqui. Cuitlahuac wasn't there. The cihuacoatl grimaced. Go back to the Eagle College and ask whether anyone knows where he is, and while you're at it, look into who sent the order to call up the warriors; let it seem as if we don't think it came from Moctezuma. It didn't come from Moctezuma? asked the secretary in alarm. It did come from Moctezuma, as I told you already, said Tlilpotonqui; no one but he or I can issue the call. I just want to know who sent the message, because I was going to do it later, so as not to interrupt your lunch.

He turned to Metztli. You'll have to do your duty as Secretary of the Lunar Founding of Tenoxtitlan, that's all there is to it; set your equipal on the dais and attend to the petitioners who agree to see you in my place; tell them you were at the Eagle College and I'm in with the Council; if they ask whether the emperor attended, play coy, but imply that he did. The emperor won't be coming to the Council? asked Metztli. What do you think? said his boss, and he shut down any further conversation on the matter, saying he was going to meet with the elders.



Atotoxtli came in without her maxtlatl. She had on only the huipil she had worn for her nap, the cotton so fine it was see-through. She had fixed her hair. Moctezuma, who was huddled in bed with the quilt pulled up to his nose, lifted his head a little, noted the scantiness of her attire, and ducked back under the quilt. Put something on, he said; I think I left my cloak on the pe'c. The princess looked to see whether the two ladies who had accompanied her were gone before she put it on. She had sent them away with clear instructions: no one was to come near the emperor's room while she was there.

She put on the cloak and sat on the stone bench opposite the head of the bed, against which her brother did not seem disposed to prop himself even though she had covered herself. I think you went too far ordering Xochi to be executed in public, she said. Who is Xochi? asked Moctezuma, still not sitting up. Your Little Cousin. She challenged me, the tlatoani replied, and that's how it goes—it's as if you'd never lived in a palace. Atotoxtli crossed her legs. It would be more practical and she would suffer more if you gave her as a gift to the Caxtilteca. Certainly not, poor thing, said the emperor. The princess scratched a scab on her knee as if to signal the insignificance of her idea: Of course, she's better off dead, but she might strike up a friendship with Malintzin, who is the person closest to the ear and mouth of the huey Caxtilteca. Her brother finally sat up a little, though not enough to fully raise his head from the bed. She must hate me, he said. I'm sure she does, said Atotoxtli, but if I save her she'll do whatever I tell her to do. The emperor thought about it for a moment. I don't think it's necessary, he said at last, and when people find out I've pardoned her they'll say I'm weak. They're saying it already; they've been saying it since you decided to let the

Caxtilteca ally themselves with all your enemies while your army protected them from a distance on their way to the city. Moctezuma shrugged. Then let them think I'm weak and cruel; I need a little more time. And sitting up now, he said: Did you talk to my son-in-law? She smiled. Of course, she said, he issued a call to arms while you were distracting the cihuacoatl. No one opposed him? No one opposes anything Cuauhtemoc says, she replied, and everyone trusts that if he says something, it's true. The emperor nodded. Atotoxtli concluded: As soon as this is over you'll have to send him on a long campaign; you've given him too much power and he's too young. Father gave me power and it turned out all right. You were his son, not his son-in-law. Right now I need him, said the emperor; we're in such a bind that if we don't do everything all at once, Tezcatlipoca's revenge will be upon us; when we're done I'll send him to win back Cholula and pacify the coast. Yes, she agreed, and what about Cuitlahuac? The tlatoani gave her the opaque look that meant risk of death. I told you not to even mention his name. She acquiesced, covering her mouth. She got up from the stone bench, but before she left she repeated that he should allow her to free Xochi and send her to talk to the translator of the huey Caxtilteca. No, said the tlatoani, I don't need more rumors or breaches, but it's a good idea; forget about Xochi and go talk to her yourself; find out what we need to offer her to betray El Malinche if it becomes necessary. Atotoxtli nodded. And if you can, he added, ask her to take you to see the *cahuayos*, tell her you've never seen one up close; count them, count the guards with them, have them show you the seats and how they put them on. She bowed her head to show she understood, and set off to do his bidding.

She was on her way out when Moctezuma called her back. Atoto? he said. She turned, raising her eyebrows. He had called her that when she was a girl, but never since she had become an empress. In the voice of an ailing old man, unsuited to someone of his age and vigor, he said: But first find the chamber-shaman and ask him to come and talk to me, in secret, along the passageways of the priests; I want him to commend me to the gods before I talk to El Malinche.

Atotoxtli stood leaning in the doorway. She crossed her arms and twitched her mouth, a gesture the emperor recognized from when she was a girl—his favorite sister among Axayacatl's multitude of children. What is it? he asked. She looked at the ground. Before she spoke, an image flitted through her mind of the sacrifice stone in the temple of Huitzilopochtli. It would be a quick, hygienic death, by decapitation rather than having her heart torn out. She would be dead by the time they cut off her arms and legs and tossed the pieces from the temple. Thinking of the sacrifice stone had become a frequent practice. Any boldness she had felt in recent years was due in large part to the knowledge that as she was the sister of the sun of the empire, her death—though it might not be from natural causes—would be like that of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, decapitated by her brother. It was unbearably mortifying to think of her own naked, dismembered corpse tumbling down the steps after her head, but she wouldn't be there to see it happen.

Huey tlatoani, she said. She didn't say Moctezuma, or brother, or husband. He replied warmly: What is it? Tenoxtitlan is unshakable, she said, but we are only passing through. He raised his eyebrows, acknowledging that what came next would be hard for her to say. Go on, he said. I'm the smallest of the small; I'm not a member of the Council, for good reason—I'm a poor ignorant woman. And? I don't think you should eat mushrooms before you speak to El Malinche. Moctezuma smiled. I want the priest to commend me, he said; it's a work meeting, I have decisions to make, and I promise you I'm not going to eat mushrooms before I talk to him. By all the gods? I swear by the gods—all of them who are on our side these days. So all is well? Go and see Malintzin and have her take you to visit the *cahuayos*, then rest, you've had an exhausting day; close your eyes and trust that the huey tlatoani knows what he's doing, whatever the rumors say, and you'll be borne safely on his shoulders. Atotoxtli bowed her head.



The four members of the Council looked up when Tlilpotonqui came in. They would have risen if their bearers had been there to help them stand and get them settled again. It wasn't until he saw them in full somber regalia, each with a headdress befitting his role on the Council, that he realized he should have changed before entering the hall. At the round table, rough-hewn and solid, his equipal stood ready, but as he had suspected, no one had brought in Moctezuma's.

Without alluding to the bureaucratic blunder implied by a Council meeting convened by someone other than the emperor or himself, he clasped his hands at his heart. He said: Forgive me for appearing before you without a headdress—he gestured at his head—I had no time to prepare; forgive me any disrespect, and trust that I am as ever your most humble and lowly brother. He added: I've just come from the emperor's quarters, and then paused. No one batted an eyelid. I bring news of the huey tlatoani that will fill your hearts with joy, and I didn't want to waste time stopping by my rooms, even though I'm dressed in a manner unworthy of your presence. He paused again. No one seemed to care that he'd just seen the emperor; no one started or showed the least concern, which meant that the call to arms hadn't come from the Council.

If the order to ready the eagle warriors had come from somewhere else and—considering his own presence—the summoning of the Council without the emperor's consent fell short of full insurrection, he need not waste his time with the elders. He didn't sit down. He said: The emperor tells me he's going to meet with the Caxtilteca. So what? said one of the elders. Tlilpotonqui held his hands palm up, signaling that it was self-evident. He's going to meet with someone, he said, and maybe afterward

he'll come here. No one seemed impressed. I think we can wait a little longer for him and meet when he's able to join us, he went on, so if you'll forgive me, I will go because I have a lot to do, but first let me pray that the gods bestow fortune and strength upon you, and let me assure you that the age of flowers will soon be upon us again. He turned and headed out. Before he crossed the threshold, he glanced back at the table and asked: By the way, who called this meeting?

The councillors whispered among themselves, and the eldest—though they were all ancient—waved him toward his seat.

Tlilpotonqui ignored him. The largest army ever to approach Tenoxtitlan is on the Iztapalapa shore and its generals are nowhere to be found, he said; half of Texcoco has risen up and the emissaries of an unknown empire are in the Old Houses, armed to the teeth. There's also a line of petitioners stretching all the way to Tlatelolco, and Cuitlahuac, who will probably be your choice to succeed our lord Moctezuma when he departs, has disappeared with the Tlaxcalteca occupying his city; do you really think it's a good idea to sit down and talk at a time like this?

The eldest of those present shrugged and again waved him to his seat without a word. The cihuacoatl stood firm. If I didn't call the Council, he repeated, and Moctezuma didn't call it, who did? The old man pointed him yet again toward his seat.

He came back into the hall but didn't yield. He remained standing, his hands resting on the back of his equipal. He Who Looses the Rain of Words and Governs the Songs Lest We Be Like the Flowers and Bees That Last But a Few Days gave a toothless smile that was more sad than happy—devastatingly sad—and said: Come now, it was you yourself. Tlilpotonqui doubted his own sanity, but he managed to keep a neutral expression. The councillor said, I was summoned by your son Tlacaelel, who came running from the calmecac—what a big boy he is; marvelous. The cihuacoatl had to muster all his experience not to ask: My son Tlacaelel? And then He of the Sun That Falls Like an Eagle So That Jaguars, Moths, and Scorpions Live Only a Scarce Few Hours a Day said: Yes, so grown-up he is now, and so handsome; he takes after his mother. The cihuacoatl smiled as pleasantly as

he could. Scamp, he said, I told him to send a messenger, but he loves you so much he paid me no heed. As he was saying it he calculated how many months it had been since the last time he'd seen Tlacaelel—ten, fifteen, one hundred? Be that as it may, said He Who Looses the Rain of Words and Governs the Songs Lest We Be Like the Flowers and Bees That Last But a Few Days, now we're all here and we have something to say to you, because there are too many dangerous rumors about, or so it seems to us. Yes, indeed there are, replied Tlilpotonqui, so many that I had to pluck my son out of midair. They laughed. He pulled out his chair.

It was an exquisite, hundred-year-old piece. The cane frame had been carved with marine and lunar designs. The back was jaguar hide, painted with a yellow dog's head crossed with a lance and broom, the emblem of the descendants of Tlacaelel, founder of the empire and Tlilpotonqui's eldest son's namesake. The cihuacoatl sat down and ran a hand over his face. Did my son say anything about Cuitlahuac, he asked, or the Tlaxcalteca lords? The eldest and wisest of the councillors smiled. The meaning of his smile was unclear. Any information is vital right now, insisted Tlilpotonqui. He Who Looses the Rain of Words and Governs the Songs Lest We Be Like the Flowers and Bees That Last But a Few Days replied: That's why we must sit and talk. And he slid his spectral hand into the little sack hanging from his shoulder at chest height and extracted his pipe and tobacco. Then he noted, rather philosophically: This is serious business, we'll have to start from the beginning; and he began to laboriously assemble the pipe.

Tlilpotonqui gazed up at the ceiling beams and took out his own pipe and tobacco. He put the pipe together, filled it, and walked to the brazier, which was flanked by a pe'c holding little plates and tongs. What is the beginning? he asked, picking up a coal and carrying it to the table to share. He sat down and went on: The fall of Cholula? The uprising in Texcoco? The landing of the Caxtilteca? The emperor's marriage to his sister? The decree that filled government posts with incompetents? He sprawled in his equipal, thinking it was a miracle the empire still existed. The elder said: The beginning is the moment the first sun was lit. Never had a cihuacoatl's

eyes bulged as much as Tlilpotonqui's did just then, but the elder went right ahead with the song of the Legend of the Suns, which was extremely long.

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Cuauhtemoc was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the Eagle College courtyard, the afternoon sun striking him full on the face. He wore no adornment, no cape, not a trace of paint on his face or body. He was in his breechcloth and nothing else. He had pulled his hair into a knot on top of his head, which was shaved from the temples down. When other generals, warriors, or novices emerged from inside, they changed course, taking the long way around under the arches upon being confronted with that mountain of muscle basking in the sun. It seemed as if he had stopped breathing—or, as the elders said, as if he was breathing from his eyes.

Moctezuma opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep again after sending Atotoxtli for the chamber-shaman. He had been dozing off more and more frequently, and he didn't blame the obvious: his age—he was fifty-two by now—or the happy ingestion of hallucinogens he had embarked upon ever since the wars had become so numerous that he no longer joined in the fighting in order not to neglect one battle for another. He hated ordinary naps—the kind not induced by the shaman's little 'shrooms—because waking up disoriented him.

It took him a moment to realize that he was in his room and that the new Little Cousin had left on the pe'c supplies for his afternoon bath. He closed his eyes and opened them again to confirm he was awake.

Cortés, in his own bed, dropped the book he was reading. For days now, since he'd learned Moctezuma would receive him at the gates of the city, he had returned to the much-thumbed pages of Livy's *Ab urbe condita*. Diego Velázquez had given him his own copy when he presented his letters of introduction upon arriving from Extremadura. They were about to embark on the conquest of Cuba, and the adelantado had said: If you're going to be

my secretary, you'd better read this to understand what we're doing in the Indies.

Three nights ago, camped on the edge of Tlalmanalco, from which they had a view of the lake and its cities, the captain general had found himself alone for a moment with Aguilar and the chaplain, and had asked them for a prayer book to bring him peace on the eve of their advance into the mouth of the jaguar. The glimpse he had gotten of what lay ahead had led him to admit that he was anxious, afraid, unsure of what to say and how to say it when it was time to meet the emperor. After some reflection, the translator had said: If you want a book of hours, you can get one from the chaplain, but you'd best return to the Livy I saw you reading when we landed—it will be of more help; leave the prayers to us. The chaplain had agreed.

Moctezuma sat up, clutching the quilt to his chest. He rubbed his face and reached out for the little bell again. He needed something sweet before he got out of bed. Then he remembered that he had dreamed he was back on his throne holding audience, terrifically bored, as always, when a fat man was brought in. He was huge, this fat man, the tallest and fattest man he had seen in his life, with the lidded eyes of a toad. The emperor pulled his hand back and tucked it under the quilt, covering up the rest of his body too. He pulled the quilt to his forehead and closed his eyes.

The fat man in the dream was dressed even more strangely than the Caxtilteca, though they were akin somehow. He was wearing chest-high blue breeches of coarse cloth hanging from straps. His shirt had no frills of any kind, just a drooping collar like the wings of a sad bird. Over it all he was wearing a dun-colored jacket with many pockets. Yet it was his height, his belly, his bulging eyes that were most impressive. He'd been found walking around the Tlatelolco market and he'd been arrested—he was so big that several guards were needed. In his dream, Moctezuma watched him enter the throne room escorted by four guards; people made way for him. The warriors accompanying him forced him to kneel down. The fat man raised his head. He looked Moctezuma in the face, to the horror of the court. His eyes were big and staring, partly because they were that way naturally, but also because he was in the grip of a terrible fear. Don't make a

mistake, he said, spreading his very long arms. Then the emperor looked all around, following the sweep of those fat hands, shapeless as sacks of grain. There was no palace, no temples where the fat man could be sacrificed, no Tenoxtitlan, nothing but smoke and ashes; in place of the usual members of his court there were masses of Tlaxcalteca, Texcoca, and Caxtilteca roaming the ruins.

Before reading Livy and falling asleep, Cortés did what he'd learned to do since he played his part in the conquest of Cuba. To stifle the nagging unease he felt when faced with the problem of sitting down to talk to the emperor, he lashed out. Being where he was, he couldn't set the dogs on a Taino or have a soldier hanged upon summary trial, so he dragged Malinalli up by her hair from where she sat in the patch of sunlight with her comb and a book on her lap, pushed her onto all fours, pulled off her maxtlatl from under her huipil, and sodomized her. It seemed to him that this way he was killing two birds with one stone: restoring his courage and punishing her for not having told him sooner that she spoke Castilian and was learning to read it. He felt proud of himself.

He finished quickly and lay down on his bed to read, content in his triumph. Malinalli, who knew him well by now and was growing very tired of his vulnerabilities and the way he handled them, adjusted her huipil without putting the maxtlatl back on and went out to the pool in the courtyard. Upon reading two paragraphs, Cortés fell asleep. He dreamed that Jesus said: Tell him about me.

Cuauhtemoc often sat cross-legged at the Eagle College on the eve of battle and on solemn occasions. That afternoon he had called up the warriors on the emperor's orders—or rather the empress's, because Moctezuma hadn't seen or spoken to anyone but the cihuacoatl and the princess for months. No one who stepped out into the Eagle College courtyard was surprised that the general was—as he said himself—turning his gaze inward. The Tlaxcalteca and the Huexotzinco were stationed in Iztapalapa, the Otomí in the hills, the Texcoca on their side of the lake. There was sure to be blood; the only question everyone had was where and when it would begin to flow—according to the rumors, it would be as soon

as the Caxtilteca decided what side to take. At the moment the general sat down to concentrate, the word all over the city was that Moctezuma would meet with El Malinche that very afternoon.

No one ever talked to Cuauhtemoc unless he spoke to them first. He was the type of person who is only feared. People imagined he must talk to his wife, the emperor's favorite daughter, but they didn't have children, so it was impossible to say for sure. The emperor treated him like a blood relation. No one knew, then, that he was gazing inward not in preparation for a battle he had yet to be ordered to fight, but because as he was walking to the Eagle College to call up the warriors, he had come upon a man in front of the temple of Ehecatl who was as dark-skinned as he was, but with a mustache as thick as the Caxtiltecas'. He was dressed in a baffling way. He wore long breeches, down to his boots—though they weren't exactly boots, because they didn't come up to his knees, but more like padded sandals. His torso was covered with even more indescribable garments. A shirt like the Caxtiltecas' but without ruffles, and a cape without folds: tight-fitting, with sleeves and buttons—the most amazing invention, to tell the truth. From his neck hung a shiny belt like something made of feathers, though it was just fabric. The foreigner, who was swaying and seemed to have been drinking pulque, said: *Cuauhtemoc, young grandfather, hear my praise, only hero at the height of art*; and he turned and left. The general called up the warriors, then sat down to try to understand the message.



While He Who Looses the Rain of Words and Governs the Songs Lest We Be Like the Flowers and Bees That Last But a Few Days was singing the interminable Legend of the Suns, Tlilpotonqui remembered the moment when, at the end of the previous fall, the pipil sent by the emperor to the Gulf coast had returned with confirmation that the sporadic visitors from beyond the Mayapán had landed in imperial territory.

Sometime before, when Ahuitzotl was still tlatoani and Moctezuma was a formidable general more or less exiled to the role of head priest of the cult of Tezcatlipoca, there had been talk of the arrival of an unusual number of people from the islands begging for refuge from the Maya, because a cruel people from over the sea were ravaging their land. The Taino, who had braved the Gulf in their canoes because anything was better than remaining on their islands, had said the foreigners were ordinary men, but when there were many of them they became terrifying.

Then came the first Caxtilteca. They had appeared clinging to trunks or in broken canoes, starving, freezing, and scared to death. They hadn't impressed anyone until one day they began to arrive in boats like houses, full of themselves. The first few times, they were spied from land. Then they landed in Cozumel and dared to cross the strait and loiter in the Mayapán. Finally they had sailed along the coast, setting foot in Totonac territories recently incorporated into the empire.

By the time of their landing on the Gulf beaches, rumors had been spreading for a while. It was said they had even founded a town beyond Lake Nicaragua; there was talk of fire-sticks and dogs and deer without antlers. This had interested the tlatoani, who at once understood that tame deer would be a strategic advantage. He saw himself riding into

Tzintzuntzan, proud capital of the Purepecha, on deerback, forever to be known as the greatest Mexica emperor, he who broke the spine of invincible Michoacán.

When the bearded ones landed on the very shores of the empire, the huey tlatoani, the Council, and the cihuacoatl decided by common accord to send the Majordomo of the House of Darkness—another obtuse and irritating title—to the coast to greet them. At the meeting where this encounter was planned, Moctezuma said nothing about his interest in the deer. If anybody else realized it wasn't the crossbows or fire-sticks but the beasts that were most valuable, they would be snatched away en route.

As He Who Looses the Rain of Words and Governs the Songs Lest We Be Like the Flowers and Bees That Last But a Few Days was reciting his poem—they were on the second sun now; three to go—Tlilpotonqui thought back on the moment when, in his opinion, Moctezuma's luck had turned against him.

He remembered how vehemently he had argued against inviting Atotoxtli to their private briefing with the Majordomo of the House of Darkness upon the envoy's return from his meeting with the Caxtilteca. He argued that if they weren't inviting the Council, they couldn't invite anyone else; he said that if Moctezuma invited his sister, he should invite Cuitlahuac too; he said it was best to proceed as they always had: the two of them coming to an agreement and then manipulating the councillors to recommend what they had already decided to do.

The tlatoani refused to budge: as a woman, Atotoxtli couldn't inherit the crown, and she had no children on whose behalf to intercede, nor would she ever have any; like the tlatoani and the cihuacoatl, she was concerned only with the welfare of the empire. She already had everything she could possibly want. In the end, as always, Tlilpotonqui could find no objection to make, and of course Moctezuma was the emperor and could do as he pleased. The cihuacoatl grudgingly accepted the princess's presence.

The Majordomo of the House of Darkness left and returned, and the conversation with him happened in two parts. The first took place in a garden, with just the emperor, the cihuacoatl, and the princess. There was

no etiquette: the majordomo, like Atotoxtli and Tlilpotonqui, was barefoot, but the three parties were permitted to address the tlatoani without bowing their heads. All four were standing and at one point they sat down in the grass. They smoked. Moctezuma wore only a tiara and his mantle. The second conversation took place later on, in the throne room, with the councillors, the generals, and the heads of the calpulli, and protocol was strictly observed, so that it was less a conversation than a performance.

At the meeting in the garden, Moctezuma questioned his emissary with lawyerly firmness, framing and reframing the questions he wanted answered. Mostly he asked about the deer—which weren't deer, he knew by now, but a different kind of animal that the coastal people already called *cahuayos*. When it seemed to the cihuacoatl that Moctezuma was overwhelming the emissary with his barrage of questions, he stepped in with a light remark or two. Ever since the coronation of the huey tlatoani, they had played the game of good cop, bad cop—Moctezuma was always the bad cop, obviously. The princess didn't say anything, but it was clear she was there to listen and take note of whatever her brother failed to notice, so that when the moment came she could sum up what had been said. The tlatoani returned over and over to the number of Caxtilteca, their weapons, the *cahuayos*, the alliances they might make, the interest they had shown in meeting him, and their likely intentions, beyond the message they claimed to bring from the tlatoani of Caxtitlan. At a certain point, Moctezuma said: All right, I'm hungry, goodbye. He got up. As he brushed the blades of grass from the back of his mantle he met the majordomo's eyes and said: When you speak before the Council today, after the nap, don't mention the possibility of alliances or put any emphasis on the *cahuayos*. What's more, he went on, tell them that some of the strangers are people like us and others are men from the waist up and deer below; I don't want anyone calculating the advantages of the beasts; talk about those fire-stick things to distract them, say they're horrifying, they crash like thunder, people swoon at the very sound of them; say the bearded ones might be envoys of Quetzalcoatl, to ensure they make it untouched to Cholula.

Tlilpotonqui looked at Atotoxtli and smiled. The emperor's strategic genius was intact. She pressed her lips together and twitched her mouth.

Once Moctezuma and the majordomo had gone, the cihuacoatl asked the princess what was bothering her. My fool of a brother, she replied. He's already made up his mind, he's going to bring them to Tenoxtitlan. That's all right, isn't it? asked Tlilpotonqui. If anyone is going to have them, it should be us. She harrumphed. Cuitlahuac and Cuauhtemoc tell him what he wants to hear, she said, so he doesn't realize the eagles are exhausted by the campaigns in Oaxaca, the generals in Texcoco are ready to leave the alliance because it's too expensive to support the Colhua, the Totonac are about to rise up at any moment; all of this we can control, but not the newcomers, we don't know how they think, how they fight. She concluded: He's obsessed, and everyone will be drawn in; the priests will spout nonsense, fear will spread, our enemies will seize their chance. Tlilpotonqui said maybe she was right, but she knew the tlatoani: if he wanted his *cahuayos*, he would have his *cahuayos*; that was how it was, and they would have to work with it.

The cihuacoatl—utterly absent from the Council meeting at which his body was present—considered what might have happened if he'd had the sense to listen to the princess, if he'd gone running after the tlatoani and asked him to think carefully, make a deal with the Totonac to ambush the Caxtilteca in a clearing; so long as a few *cahuayos* survived they could have bred them, problem solved.

As Atotoxtli had predicted, the Caxtilteca had fucked up the imperial equilibrium; even he had fallen into the trap. He had lost the Tlaxcalteca lords while the newcomers were being fumigated with incense; he had no idea where Cuitlahuac was. Maybe they had all vanished to make deals with the Texcoco rebels. The end of the world. Or, in his pique and melancholy, Moctezuma had smelled rebellion in his own city and had had his heir killed, leaving the future of the empire in the hands of Cuauhtemoc, disciplined and effective on the battlefield but too young to govern a kingdom in crisis.

He'd still had one more chance to divert the emperor when, that same afternoon, they'd had the formal meeting—pure protocol—with the majordomo, the four members of the Council, the captains of the army, and the top leaders of the calpulli. On that second occasion everyone was in full regalia: capes, headdresses, jewels. Each set of remarks began and ended with the endless, ritualistic pleasantries established almost a century before by old man Tlacaelel, the pivots on which the imperial choreography turned.

When the emissary they had sent to the coast had finished giving his report, saying he was the humblest of the emperor's subjects and he hoped his service would be fortunate enough to burnish the smallest of the lesser jewels in the huey tlatoani's tiara, Moctezuma, who was presiding from his throne, took the floor to say he had a humble suggestion to assist his councillors in the difficult choice facing them—in other words, a command. He said: I want the Caxtilteca; it may be risky to bring them here, but their presence has only increased since we first heard of them, which means that ignoring them is not just a risk but a real danger. If anyone is going to have them, it must be us, and if we civilize them they will be an ornament for the city; if we teach them to be brave, their fire-sticks will help our troops.

This argument seemed good to the heads of the calpulli, who accepted it implicitly by remaining silent—none, anyway, would have dared contradict the tlatoani. The members of the Council whispered among themselves before concurring. One of them, He Who Watches Over the Pathways of Precious Stones and the Silver Ribbons That Wreath the Corn When It Is But the Smallest Gem, asked how they could help make the enterprise a success. Moctezuma suggested—again, just another order—that they should summon his brother Cuitlahuac and send him to the coast with a considerable army to clear a path for the Caxtilteca, tempt them every so often with ambassadors laden with gold and jewels, and cause rumors to be spread among the people: let it be said everywhere that in Tenoxtitlan it was believed these newcomers were descendants of Quetzalcoatl—mortal enemy of the Colhua gods—so they would reach Cholula unscathed. Brilliant, said He of the Sun That Falls Like an Eagle So That Jaguars,

Moths, and Scorpions Live Only a Scarce Few Hours a Day. And he went on: As it behooves us, we shall call upon your younger brother Cuitlahuac, the smallest of the fruits of Axayacatl, and we shall inform him of this decision reached among all of us after great deliberation. To which Moctezuma replied: Very good, then, time for a nice drink of chocolate.

The elders bent their heads as low as they could and slipped out one by one, walking backward so as never to face away from the tlatoani. Each had his own words of farewell, uttered at the threshold of the hall. They were always the same: Let not the murmur of turtledoves trouble your sleep, or Let your refreshments bring you peace and contentment for the clarification of the mind and the strengthening of the body. Then the councillors followed the heads of the calpulli, who in meetings like this tended not to speak other than in greeting or farewell. The last to leave the hall was always the cihuacoatl. He uttered the correct farewell for the kind of meeting that was ending: Rest now, eagle among eagles; may you dream of flowers and hummingbirds, knowing that when the time comes I will crush your enemies in your name. To which the huey tlatoani replied: Not yet. And he followed with the formula that set the cihuacoatl apart from all the other powerful figures in the empire: My soul does not rest, because the eyes of the dead have no eyelids; stay a moment longer with me so that together we may receive the shower of blood and snot about to be loosed on me by the gods; if your voice joins mine, perhaps we may pacify them. The ladies hurried out. Once they were alone, Tlilpotonqui raised his head and met Moctezuma's eyes. He took off his headdress and settled onto the stone bench built into the wall, saying: Tell me.

Sitting stiffly on his equipal in the Council Hall nine months later, his chin propped on his fist as he feigned absorption in the story of the suns being sung by the eldest of the emperor's councillors, Tlilpotonqui remembered what Moctezuma had said to him. The emperor had doubts; the princess had been convincing. Above all, she had argued that the situation in Tenoxtitlan was less secure than he realized. The cihuacoatl asked the tlatoani what the heart of his question was, and Moctezuma thought hard. Finally he said, Do you think I have time to get the *cahuayos* before

everything Atotoxtli is worried about happens? Tlilpotonqui could have replied, Yes, but we have to break Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco before they get there to prevent an alliance. He could even have said, Let them advance and we'll cut them off in the jungle at night, taking care that as many animals as possible survive. But he said: I think once we have the *cahuayos* we'll be able to regain everything we lost bringing them here. The emperor gave him an order that at the time seemed like a blessing: So be it, but you're in charge. I don't want to meet with the Council or receive the heads of the calpulli or talk to the ambassadors or do anything until I have the *cahuayos*; they're going to complain relentlessly about me bringing them to the city. I'll handle it, said the cihuacoatl, not knowing what was about to hit him.

And now here he was, with Cholula lost, Texcoco split, the chain of command broken, an infinite army at the gates of the city, its captains conspiring with persons unknown in the calpulli, his own son—wretched Tlacaelel, he thought—giving orders in his name, and an old dodderer on the Council reciting an interminable poem for reasons he failed to understand. He closed his eyes.



Atotoxtli hurried to perform the task she had been assigned. Hurrying didn't mean canceling her afternoon bath, of course, just cutting it a little short.

She had her own wing of the palace, with her own kitchen, her own dining room, her own pool, plus endless rooms for the concubines and their progeny, the wives of visiting heads of state, and the emperor's personal servingwomen. She lacked for nothing, and she had many women who had once been queens to do her washing and weaving. But her discomfort at being obliged to move into her brother's palace when they married stemmed from the feeling that she had been forced to live in another woman's house.

Even if her chambers in the Old Houses were much more modest, they had always been hers: they were the rooms where she'd lived with her mother during the less tumultuous reign of Axayacatl. In Moctezuma's palace the princess's wing was bigger and more private, with a garden and a terrace on an upper floor that overlooked the city, but it had been built to be occupied by a series of principal imperial concubines—who, until her arrival, had followed swiftly one after the other depending on the exigencies of the alliances necessary to expand the Colhua empire.

Ever since she had arrived with her own serving girls and cooks, her stacks of mantles, her baskets of sandals and jewelry, her little goddesses of colored stone, she had felt that sooner or later she would be replaced. In the conversations in which the cihuacoatl and the Council had begged her to accept the role of empress—in order to stave off the internal hordes of potential successors, if nothing else—she had been firm about accepting the odious role of first concubine only on the condition that she would be the

last. The Council and the cihuacoatl had said yes, but they were politicians; they said yes to everything. Moctezuma too. That was precisely the idea, he had said: No more wives. But he had said it distractedly, with the sometimes pathetic and sometimes touching condescension with which he always treated her. They might be the rulers of the universe, but before that they had been big brother and little sister.

Like everyone else in the world, Atotoxtli occasionally fantasized about the end of her brother's rule; about attending the funeral rites and returning to the Old Houses or going into discreet exile in Malinalco, where she had lived until the emperor Ahuizotl died and Moctezuma was anointed; about being done once and for all with the ritual and hostility of daily life as an empress. It was a lot of blood, too many wars left unfinished from one year to the next so that more victims could be harvested for the temples, too much power concentrated in a single person who listened less and less to his councillors and more and more to a caste of lunatic priests who reveled in an intoxicating power that no previous emperor had granted them.

Atotoxtli couldn't remember the slightest thing about her father's reign, but during Ahuizotl's rule she had served as a lady-in-waiting in the country court of Malinalco. She remembered the former tlatoani's impatience with the priests and his acknowledgment that, unbearable as they were, they had to be supported because they ran the festivals that made the Tenochca happy. No one had ever imagined that an emperor would truly believe their tall tales, that he would live in their world of winged serpents and blue jaguars. And Moctezuma was listening to them now more than ever.

It was the stamp of his life story, so predictable that the cihuacoatl had told her there had been arguments in the Council before Moctezuma was chosen: he had been the supreme priest of Tezcatlipoca and he had grown used to seeking truths in the other world. No one liked that about him. But he was also the captain who had won his first war at fourteen and never lost another; if he hadn't become huey tlatoani, the people would have risen up.

It was during his years in the temple when he got hooked on the incoherent talk of the shamans, began to make decisions for the benefit of

the gods, developed that cruel, empty, esoteric gaze he had increasingly been turning on her and everyone else.

People said that in recent months, ever since things had gotten out of hand, he had turned too frequently to the opaque wisdom of the gods. That was why he didn't trust anyone anymore, why he shuffled between pool and bed, why he no longer let himself be seen; it was the reason for his mood shifts, for the nights he was spotted wandering like a ghost in his nightshirt through the palace gardens, or talking to himself in a hall where the braziers hadn't been lit.

Despite her fantasies and her worries, Atotoxtli remained loyal. Moctezuma, strange as he might have become, was still her older brother, whom she had adored ever since she could remember—even if that adoration was wedded to terror. He had been Axayacatl's favorite, the most beloved by the Mexica, the handsomest and strongest. And until recently, the one who had always returned victorious—his sole presence ensured triumph in war.

If Atotoxtli's only mission had been to go and summon the chamber-shaman to help Moctezuma commend himself to the gods, she would have gone full-queen, crowned in flames and heaping scorn on whoever saw her, but when she emerged from her bath she chose a simple huipil, plain sandals, and an unadorned shawl to cover her head, ready—after talking to the shaman—to play her part in the amusing plot to discover what the price might be for the loyalty of the huey Caxtilteca's little whore, and to observe the conditions and care of the *cahuayos* that so obsessed his highness.



When He Who Looses the Rain of Words and Governs the Songs Lest We Be Like the Flowers and Bees That Last But a Few Days finished singing the Legend of the Suns, Tlilpotonqui opened his eyes and said: Beautiful and comforting, thanks. Now tell me why we're here. The elder replied: This is why. What do you mean? To recite the song of the suns and remind you of the story of the ant. Ant? What ant? asked Tlilpotonqui. Quetzalcoatl's ant, replied the elder. Ah, of course: illuminating; any other reason? He of the Sun That Falls Like an Eagle So That Jaguars, Moths, and Scorpions Live Only a Scarce Few Hours a Day said: Did the legend seem short to you? No, no, said the cihuacoatl, and he asked, Can I go now? Go on, replied a third councillor.

Tlilpotonqui got up and walked toward the door, even more confused than when he had arrived. When he reached the exit he turned and asked again, Are you sure it was my son Tlacaelel who called the Council? The eldest councillor woke from the stupor the recitation had left him in, and gazed at him with eyes narrowed by the years—eyes like reflecting pools that surely didn't see much anymore, or anyway not much in this world. His eyelids were scored by experience. His choice to look directly at the cihuacoatl was significant: no one in the palace ever met the eyes of anyone else, lest some day they should accidentally look up without permission in the presence of the huey tlatoani. At times like this, one has to begin at the beginning, he said. Consider the ant. And he put his pipe in his little bag without taking it apart.

Tlilpotonqui walked to his office, mulling over what the elder had said. He had studied the Legend of the Suns in the calmecac with all the other essential songs, but unlike the other pipiltin he hadn't learned it by heart.

He didn't need to: he was the eldest male descendant in a direct line from the first cihuacoatl, and if he wasn't killed in combat he would be cihuacoatl when his father died. If only I had paid attention, he said to himself for the second or third time in recent days. He even stopped for a moment in the hallway to try to recall the substance of the song, but what he remembered was so vague he couldn't determine the sense of it. There was an ant, a cave, a mountain, a kernel of corn. He scratched his neck and heard raised voices in the distance, too loud for the palace. The world has gone to shit, he said to himself, and he thought that when the petitioners had left he would ask one of his secretaries about Quetzalcoatl's ant.

As he took the last turn in the corridor, his train of thought was derailed when he realized the voices were coming from his office. Before he went in he pressed his temples, breathed deeply once, twice, thrice, seven times, straightened his spine, and stiffened his brow and jaw, intending to make an entrance that mimicked the majesty and impatience of Moctezuma's, however remotely. It didn't come off well. Everything was confusion when he stepped in: his secretaries and the heads of the calpulli were engaged in a heated argument, chaotically milling around. He stamped the heel of his sandal and everyone stopped talking and turned to look at him. In Mexico, authority has always flowed from the smack of a flip-flop. What's going on here? he asked.



Malinalli raised her huipil and gathered it neatly as she stepped into the pool and then lowered herself into the water. She sat down carefully on the steps to soothe her inflamed anus. She decided not to take all her clothes off this time. The rape had made her feel vulnerable, and the words of the priest of the temple of Xipe echoed in her mind: These walls have eyes. She let out a fart, surely melodious, though it couldn't be heard since her ass was submerged. She gazed at the bubbles produced by the expulsion of air, to make sure there wasn't a wisp of the captain general among the threads of blood. Just wait, son of a bitch, she murmured in Popoloca, just wait.



The secretaries and the heads of the calpulli who were crowding around all took a step back. Metztli laid his hands on his belly in a show of contrition and bowed his head, explaining to the cihuacoatl that the gentlemen had jumped the line because they had to get back to the calpulli. Tlilpotonqui glanced in the direction of the bosses, his brow still set. The most willful among them, the representative of the calpulli of obsidian carvers—particularly recalcitrant because their occupation made them essential suppliers of the war industry—took a step forward with his head lowered and said: Let the sun never strike you on the neck as you advance, grandson of Tlacaelel, and let your fingers never be soiled when you wipe your ass. The cihuacoatl recalled that this was the salutation of the calpulli of the collectors of human waste, not the blade-makers, but he chose not to react because the important thing was to figure out what was going on. You're welcome here, head blade-maker, he said, and you may do as you please in this house. When the boss opened his mouth to explain, Tlilpotonqui raised an authoritative hand to silence him and everyone else, and asked what all the yelling was about. Finally we're invited to an imperial lunch, said the boss, emboldened by his sense of injustice; and not only is the emperor not there, but the princess gets up from the table without taking her leave, and then we find out it was because the Tlaxcalteca are in Iztapalapa and Cuitlahuac isn't there—our very own general, beloved by the people, our partner in business. Tlilpotonqui fixed him with a look of scorn, almost disgust—and this time it was effective. No one in the royal house is obliged to drink chocolate with you, he said, much less the huey tlatoani or his wife; or to inform you of anything. The head of the calpulli understood the implicit threat in his words and adopted a

pleading tone: The people are rising up, my lord; no one has seen the emperor in ages. And when he does make an appearance, it's to welcome the Tlaxcalteca and let them camp their whole army on the lakeshore; we're on the front lines, it's our sons who are being killed in the wars, and if our General Cuitlahuac isn't here anymore to lead them, so much the worse. Are you telling me you know better than the emperor what the emperor should do? asked Tlilpotonqui. I'm telling you respectfully that we need help, and you speak for us because your family and ours were here when the Colhua arrived; talk to my lord Moctezuma, tell him to come out and reassure the Mexica who love him and defend him with their blood, because otherwise they'll go running off to Texcoco to join the rebels there; or let him at least send Cuitlahuac, whom we haven't seen since he was assigned to the Gulf to do who knows what.

The cihuacoatl realized that the boss's position was complicated and it was his job to provide a response. In the first place, he said, the huey tlatoani came out to welcome the Caxtilteca, not the Tlaxcalteca. So? He thinks they're important strategically, and the Council and I agree. The bosses whispered among themselves and then the boss of human waste ventured a salutation and said: But they're only a couple of hundred fools on deer. The cihuacoatl replied: Explain to your people that they have weapons of interest to us; the tlatoani is going to meet with them and then he'll make a decision about the Tlaxcalteca. Another murmur arose, which he silenced by saying: The eagles have been called up; ask my boys. The three secretaries gave martial nods though no one was looking at them. The cihuacoatl went on: The emperor will decide what to do with the Tlaxcalteca after speaking to El Malinche today and no later; you can tell your people that. There was another murmur. He noticed that the head blade-maker was still dissatisfied; the man turned to scratch the back of his knee, stealing a glance at the bosses behind him, who were clearly pressing him to keep demanding the presence of the emperor. The cihuacoatl decided to bait him: The huey tlatoani will make an appearance at the next festival, in just a few days; then the eternal pact between the Colhua and Mexica peoples will be renewed. The boss fell into the trap: Our loyalty isn't free

and it isn't eternal, he said angrily. The cihuacoatl turned a little, glanced at his assistant, and raised his eyebrows. The Secretary of the Lunar Founding of Tenoxtitlan was a terrible clerk, but like every pipil his age, he was a killing machine. All Tlilpotonqui had to do was incline his head slightly toward the man he was arguing with, and the secretary immediately leaped on him and pinned him to the floor. With a knee on the boss's back, Metztl stuck both hands in his mouth. He asked: Should I break his neck? The cihuacoatl took his time comparing Metztl's icy glare with the bulging eyes of his terrified prisoner. All he had to say was yes for his neck to be broken, snapped like a clay straw. No, he said, take him prisoner; I think we'll need to have a conversation with him. Then he looked at the other bosses and said: Someone must go to the calpulli of the blade-makers and tell them they'll have to choose a new father; this one has served the empire so long and so well that he'll be granted the supreme honor at the next festival—sacrificed by the emperor himself in front of all his brethren. The secretary got up from the floor and whisked the prisoner away in a puff of air. The other bosses bowed out, each uttering his own salutation. They were in such a hurry that they all spoke at once in an unintelligible flurry.

Once it was quiet again, Tlilpotonqui was left alone with the Secretary of Petitions and Requests and the Secretary of Maps, Boundaries, Tributes, and Other Things. He said: Wait a moment, and went out after Metztl, catching up with him quickly. He said: On your way back, find Cuauhtemoc and ask him to come and see me; bring him to the office, but take the back way. Both the secretary and the prisoner stared at him wide-eyed. Cuauhtemoc? asked the secretary. Yes—the general; the tlatoani's son-in-law. The prisoner said: I can help you, easy. How? the cihuacoatl asked. Shit attracts shit. Tlilpotonqui smiled. Another riddle, he said under his breath; first ants, now shit; the damage my great-grandfather did to this people. He raised his head and said to his nephew, as if the boss weren't right there with them: He's said what he had to say; don't bother to put him in a cell; instead take him to a courtyard and kill him like a dog, then throw him in the lake so that his body is found tomorrow, when the calpulli has already chosen a new leader.

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Jazmín Caldera made sure the other captains and the translator were resting in their cells, and tiptoed back across the hall to the pool, careful not to make a sound.

He had taken off the breechcloth and cape and put on his underthings, but he didn't change the sandals—they were heaven after nine months in boots. He walked toward the pool with a basin in his hand holding scissors, a razor, and the little quicksilver mirror that was precious to him. Also a brush and the greasy glob of olive oil and ash that the barbers and washerwomen in Extremadura, where he was born, called Castile soap. Checking that no one was coming, he removed his tools from the bowl and filled it with water, dunking the glob in the bowl to soften it and splashing water on his face. He set the soap down, raised the basin, and immersed his beard in the milky liquid. Then, using the little mirror, he cut the hair on his face as close to the skin as he could with the scissors and emptied the basin in the pool to wash everything away.

He filled the bowl with water again, and dunked the soap once more. Scrubbing his cheeks until they were sudsy, he opened the razor and shaved the stiff hairs, cleaning the blade each time he ran it over his skin.

Getting down on all fours, he stuck his head fully under the water and, using the scissors, sheared the curls from his pate until his hair was short and uneven. He dunked his head again, withdrew it, shook it, and looked in the little mirror. What he saw was hardly the face of a macehual, but his sun-ravaged Extremaduran skin plus his clean-shaven face and short hair might pass muster if nobody looked too hard. He washed his things, thinking that if Alvarado made any comments about his changed

appearance, he would say he had shaved and cut his hair to look more like the Roman centurions Hernando was always reading about.

He returned on tiptoe to his cell, and after making sure that everyone was still either sleeping or reading or praying, he put on the breechcloth and cape, and with his sandals in his hand, he walked to the throne room. There he put the sandals on his feet and—the picture of elegance—exited to the courtyard, the gate, and the causeway.

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Once the calpulli bosses were gone, Tlilpotonqui asked the Secretary of Maps, Boundaries, and Other Things what he had discovered about the whereabouts of Cuitlahuac. No one has seen him since the emperor sent him after the Caxtilteca, he replied; at the call-up, people were surprised he wasn't there and outraged that in his absence the tlatoani let the Tlaxcalteca make camp in Iztapalapa. So who issued the call to arms? Cuauhtemoc, on the emperor's orders. It should have been Cuitlahuac, insisted the cihuacoatl. The captains are worried, said the secretary. What are they saying? Purge? Rebellion? Nobody's saying anything, they're scared to death. The old man nodded. There's nothing to fear, he said; the tlatoani can be hard to read, but he always knows what he's doing.

As he said this, Tlilpotonqui hid his own anguish at his son Tlacaelel's sudden emergence to summon the Council. If Moctezuma had asked Tlacaelel to call a meeting, it obviously meant the emperor no longer trusted Tlilpotonqui. Therefore he would be the next leader to disappear. The fate of Cuitlahuac was a warning sign. There was one prospect left, but it was so horrible he preferred not to think about it. Maybe when he went to arrest the Tlaxcalteca lords at the house of the chief waste collector, he would also find the rebel Texcoca general, Cuitlahuac, and his own son. He would be obliged to have them killed.

The secretary said: The emperor is like the ant. The cihuacoatl turned and stared at him as if he'd seen a ghost. What ant? he asked. Quetzalcoatl's ant. I haven't heard that song for a long time, said Tlilpotonqui; what is it about the ant? He doesn't speak, said the secretary. And later? Later he does speak.

The cihuacoatl had neither the presence of mind nor the time to work out the metaphor. He weighed whether to keep questioning his secretary, but he was in a hurry. And something in the air told him that talk about the ant could be taken as treason, with things the way they were. He slid his hand into his breechcloth and touched his balls with Chichimeca elegance and dignity. Don't repeat that, he said gravely. Why? asked the secretary. We're Mexico and people expect us to be superstitious, replied the cihuacoatl.

He calculated his next move. He said to the secretary: Run for your brother Metztli, who must be disposing of the body of the chief blade-maker by now. Tell him to bring what I asked to my private garden, not to the office, and tell him he must use the tunnels, in utter secrecy. The secretary bowed his head. Run, said the cihuacoatl; Metztli may be the worst Secretary of the Lunar Founding of Tenoxtitlan since the founding of Tenoxtitlan, but he can't be beat for these other little jobs.

The cihuacoatl was left alone with the Secretary of Petitions and Requests. I must go; anything urgent? the mayor asked. Eighteen ambassadors are waiting. Anyone important? The secretary gave him a list of four or five—at this point only the emissaries from the farthest-flung places didn't know that Moctezuma wasn't receiving anyone. The old man waited distractedly for him to finish and said: The tlatoani won't be seeing people today either; anyone I should see myself? There's a Zapotec chief from Ixtlán, which borders a rebel city; it might be good if he saw you or the princess for reassurance. Tilipotonqui nodded distractedly. Never mind the princess, tell him it would be an honor to have him dine with me in my rooms, if he likes. Give the others the runaround until they leave.



Like all the rooms of the priests attending to royal needs, the chamber-shaman's were in the remotest part of the palace. Though the officiants in the emperor's house were of low rank compared with the priests in the residences attached to the temple complex, they lived according to the same norms of reclusion and murkiness. No one, not even the huey tlatoani, passed through the doorway connecting the priests to the rest of the palace, guarded by a blind, foul-smelling old man. Almost no one, much less Atotoxtli, visited those rooms, where even the courtyards had been covered so that total darkness reigned. She stopped at the florists' hall for a bunch of sweet marigold, and with flowers in hand, she followed the smell of copal, blood, flies, and grease leading to the officiants' quarters.

By the time she reached the doorway, the smell was unbearable, and even as she asked the elderly guard to call the chamber-shaman because she had a message from the emperor, she held the little bunch of sweet marigold to her face.

As she waited for the old man to blunder around in search of the priest responsible for Moctezuma's health, she remembered how, when she was a girl, she used to escape from the Old Houses when her mother and the other concubines were working on their weaving or drunk on mushrooms in the pools. She would slip between the legs of the guards and the ministers under the complicit gaze of her uncle Tizoc, who watched her flash through the throne room like a ray of lightning in a huipil. She would cross the courtyard crowded with petitioners and visitors and run, braids flying, out of the building and along the edge of the canal to the gate of the calmecac, where she would tell another blind old man—or maybe the same one, a

thousand years old by now—that she had important news from the palace for General Moctezuma.

Most times a novice would come out and tell her that the general was busy and that he, the novice, had been asked to take her on a canoe ride along the canals of the florists' calpulli, which she loved, or to the imperial aviary, or wherever she liked. She would accept, dazzled by the beauty of her brother's assistants, their capes embroidered with iridescent featherwork designs, their crests of hair, their arms as strong as branches. But other times, very exceptional times, Moctezuma himself would come out: an energetic young man in his twenties, always in good spirits. He came out when he had no pressing duties, so he would be wearing no finery of any kind; just plain cotton clothes, no armlets or anklets, his hair a wild tangle, as ever.

Her brother always proposed going to Tlatelolco, to the market, to see the animals brought from the jungles of the Mayapán and beyond to be sold in the city. She preferred the performances of acrobats and dwarfs in one of the rough calpulli, where a princess couldn't go alone because she would be snatched away and sold in the stony wastes of Greater Chichimeca, beyond the known lands of the empire.

What the general liked about the market wasn't the animals but the anonymity. The Tlatelolca had their own army, with their own eagle college and their own generals—never quite as dazzling—and most of the vendors were foreigners. Only other soldiers would have known what Moctezuma looked like, because when they returned with a triumph for the Triple Alliance, each army marched through its own city. The two of them could spend the afternoon out shopping like an ordinary brother and sister.

Atotoxtli liked to go to the pleasure calpulli for precisely the opposite reason: the children of Axayacatl were recognized there. As a girl-child in the palace, the littlest of all, she was used to waiting on others, so she adored it when the people on the street made way for them in reverent silence as they walked by hand in hand. People bowed down to the ground in waves, bringing a tiny bit of dust to their mouths as brother and sister walked past. In the palace they did that only when her uncle went by. She

also loved the offerings of flowers, sweets, toys, and cheap gemstones that people pushed into her hands.

Moctezuma would whisper in her ear that she should accept only the flowers, and then he would look at the people and say, raising his voice—the same one that thundered on the battlefields—he was greatly enjoying this walk with his sister and they appreciated the gifts, but he and Atotoxtli were just two weary bodies seeking solace by watching the street performers, and everyone should please go about their business as if they weren't there.

Then they would enter the main square of the calpulli, where the general would buy a little pot of boiled corn with epazote, salt, and chile, and they would choose a show. He would lift her up onto his shoulders. Though everybody was feigning normality, she knew the musicians were playing their flutes and drums for her alone, the acrobats were leaping for her benefit, and the dwarfs were doing their comic routines just to get a glimpse of her nine-year-old's uneven corncob teeth.

Neither warriors nor children could be out in the street once the drums of the temple of Ehecatl sounded, so when they left the square they were always making their way against the sea of people just arriving. Now was the time the prostitutes came out, the old men passed around pulque, and the dancing began. Invariably, Atotoxtli would beg her brother to stay a little longer. Moctezuma would say he had grown old and tired, and please would she let him put her down so they could go walking back to the palace. He would raise his hands as if to lift her off his shoulders, and tickle her. Nearly peeing from laughing so hard, she would squeeze his neck between her thighs, shouting no, no, if the weight of the city rested on General Moctezuma's shoulders, surely he could carry his little sister too. And they would return, she up on high, watching the seas of people bowing as they passed, her chin resting on the giant spray of flowers that was her brother's curly, untamable hair.

The chamber-shaman finally emerged. He smelled horrible. Atotoxtli pressed the flowers to her face and said: I hope you aren't tired, because the huey tlatoani wants to see you in his rooms; he asks you to take the back

way. Omitting the standard courtesies, the priest asked: Again? He wants to be commended to the gods, replied the princess; he's going to talk alone with El Malinche. The shaman made a face. He wants more mushrooms, he said. What do you mean, more? asked Atotoxtli. He's been up to his ears in them since his morning bath, said the priest. Well, don't give him more, she said. He's the huey tlatoani, said the priest, the empire rests on his shoulders and I am nothing but a bringer of light. Atotoxtli threw down the bunch of sweet marigold, turned, and stormed off to the emperor's rooms to have a talk with him before she went to the Old Houses. If the conversation cost her a trip to the sacrifice stone, so be it; she wouldn't be the first to consign her body to the priests for the good of the empire—only the least docile.

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If Jazmín Caldera had existed, if he had crossed the threshold into the throne room of Axayacatl's Old Houses at almost five in the afternoon on November 8, 1519, he would have seen before him—past the garden, past the arch in the palace's outer wall, past the bustling street—another, lower wall: the wall of the temple citadel of the city of Mehxicoh-Tenoxtitlan.

If he had been able to leave the Old Houses undetected—his olive skin shades darker after nine months on campaign, and attired like a Colhua lord—he would have departed from the site today occupied by the Monte de Piedad building and turned south a little past the spot where the present-day monument to Enrico Martínez stands; and, following the citadel wall to what is now the start of Avenida Cinco de Mayo, he would have found the gate and the stairs—how many there were, we don't know—leading to the temple court.

Once he was inside the sacred citadel, the first thing he would have noticed, his head bowed to escape attention, would have been the paving stones beneath his sandals. The stones were white, and so bore more of a resemblance to those in the squares of Venice or Rome than Salamanca or Florence. Like everything in the temple court, they were individually covered with stucco, so that they reflected the golden light of the sun now low in the sky—in Mexico City around the time of the winter solstice, night doesn't fall, it spills. The tiles weren't marble and they weren't cut in geometric shapes, as in Europe, but they were huge and they had been chiseled to fit together in winding patterns. The outlines weren't stuccoed over, maybe the better to reveal the beauty of the design.

Caldera would have watched his telltale pale sandaled feet treading the paving stones, and then he would have raised his eyes to see the temple square from within instead of from a distance, as he'd seen it thus far. It was a huge expanse, bigger than the Piazza San Marco, with eight or nine temples—or cúes, as Aguilar would have told him to call them—all overlooked by a massive central one, almost as tall as the temple of Cholula.

Inside the citadel there would have been some movement, though most of the tumult would have remained outside, on the causeways leading to the bridges and the chinampas. All around him, Caldera would have seen novices hurrying to perform the administrative work of the cúes, as well as sweepers, cooks, and cleaners coming and going from the priests' houses. He would have seen warriors young and old bringing offerings for the eagle temple and the jaguar temple; pipil lords and ladies arriving to offer donations and private sacrifices; sculptors, florists, and metalsmiths delivering their goods; and painters heading home after working on the inside wall of some chamber of gods or priests.

The first cu Caldera would have seen was the shrine to the only spring on the islet. It was a temple he would have liked and recognized at first glance, because it had a familiar classical look: it was red and white, low, regular; a broad rectangular basin with a reflecting pool at the bottom, walled by wide steps up and down; a Greek theater enclosed on four sides, with the pool as proscenium, much broader and shallower than the ones in the palace. To see the spring, one had to scale any of the four sides. Caldera would have climbed the steps, peered down, seen the channels carrying water to the priestly houses and the courts for the warriors stationed at the citadel—the rest of the island relied on water flowing from springs in the Chapultepec heights. In the reflecting pool, he would have seen the cobalt-blue mountain sky, a fat cloud drifting by.

Once up there, he would have turned to get a clearer sense of the expanse of the citadel, a space at once exterior and interior. He would have scratched his head, gazing at the rest of the temples and trying to situate them. It's a Colhua Roman Forum, he would have said to himself. At this

point he would have noticed what most preoccupied the Spanish if you heed their first dazzled accounts of the temple citadel on the islet of Tenoxtitlan: there were no dogs, no beggars, no food stalls; the ground was so clean you could lick it.

Jazmín Caldera, who has to be a learned conquistador—like Hernán Cortés or, to a lesser extent, the surgeon Bernal Díaz—for this novel to work, would have admired the geometric design of the citadel. He would have seen it not as a proliferation of towers, which was how his European contemporaries saw it, but as an emblem or a contemplative vision—which is what it was. From the weighty base to the temples built on top, the structures were architectural variations on descent and ascent; on the passage from the earthly to the aerial. They were like stairways, up which mass was shed on the way to the plane of the gods. Only priests and their sacrificial victims went up these stairs, and to ascend the temple was to lose all earthliness until abandoning oneself in the paroxysm of death. When bodies rolled down the steps it was without their hearts, deadweight.

The almost subterranean quality of the spring—a mirror to which you descended; the origin of everything, since without it there would have been no Tenoxtitlan—was repeated in the next building, which was also a walled pit: the ball court, associated with the underworld and with the descent and ascent implied by the cycle of death and rebirth. The pool temple was a shrine to what lies beneath; the ball game was a shrine to what rises from the depths to the surface. Caldera would have seen action on the sacred court: a match attended only by priests of various ranks, trying to puzzle out some portent from the results. He would not have approached, so as to preserve his anonymity.

He would have seen, rising on his left beyond the court, the *cu* of Ehecatl, the fertile wind that lifts the water from the ground to the sky. Another set of steps. He wouldn't have paid any attention to it because it was modest compared with the others, though it had a peculiar circular base and the temple on its aerial level was the lightest in the complex, constructed of palm leaves instead of stone and cedar. At that time of day, before the setting of the sun, the temple of Ehecatl would have been dead

silent. Soon it would begin to seethe with processions of priests accompanied by drum-carrying novices from the schools at the rear of the citadel. Soon the cultists of the air would be waiting sternly, fervently, for the sun to drop behind the crest of the Great Temple. Then it would be their time to shake, rattle, and roll, letting everyone know that the emperor, his warriors, and the priests of the other temples were about to take refreshment and therefore any subsequent activity, even if tolerated, would necessarily have to be inconspicuous.

Caldera would have walked on north—full of foreboding, his heart thumping—to face the thing he wasn't sure he wanted to see: the huey tzompantli of Tenoxtitlan, alluded to in fearful tones by everyone they had met once the company made landfall and decided to set out for the city. The various Mexica colonies and military bases they'd encountered along the way had tzompantlis, but there was only one—the one he was about to see—that merited the label of *great*, or *huey*. He would have approached it with reverence and curiosity.

It occupied the center of the citadel and was a rectangular platform some thirty yards long and ten yards wide, enclosed on the east and west by two whitewashed walls. Approaching it curiously, almost like a tourist, Caldera would have heard first a sound like seeds inside a dried gourd. Then he would have discovered that the two walls were connected by an obsessive number of poles and posts strung with thousands and thousands and thousands of skulls, perforated through the temples. Twelve poles joined each post to the next, from top to bottom; twelve poles each hung with six or seven skulls. Ten identical racks followed. And then another section and another and another. According to his rough calculations, there must have been some forty thousand skulls, many with a few vertebrae dangling to make them more effective rattles. Sound—like smell and taste—was a form of prayer for the Mexica.

It would have been amazing if while Caldera stared at the huey tzompantli, lost in the malign daze produced by this display of the banality of life, a breeze had sprung up: the gentle clatter of the skulls and vertebrae would have become a clacking buzz, a roar, a clamor of flutes and rattles;

the depraved music of a priestly caste and a political class anointed by fear, maybe, but also a grandly formal reflection on the foundations of any system of religious thought: We don't last.

Seen from the twenty-first century—a century terrified by the finitude of the body—a temple like this is first and foremost an affront. For a sixteenth-century Spaniard, who had witnessed wars and autos-da-fé and seen the rebels of his time die, rot, and wither in cages hanging at the gates of cities, it would also have been astonishingly hygienic in its presentation of the macabre realities of life. The white floors; the skulls, bleached and bare. All sanctified by a tidy geometry. It wasn't an edifying display of the suffering to which errors in conduct would lead, but a representation of things as they are: inside each of us is a skull, and that's all that will be left of us when we're gone; thanks for your participation.

If Caldera had taken his walk dressed in Castilian fashion and in the company of the other captains, he would have had to shake his head in disapproval, proclaim his horror, cross himself. Alone and dressed as a Colhua, he would have seen the huey tzompantli as intensely Christian—dust we be—and illuminating, as perhaps we would too if we could shed the moral superiority of societies that do their killing out of sight. He would have seen it for what it was: a triumph of design.

Distracted by the gleam of the clean skulls and the sound of rattles and flutes—a perpetual prayer—and maybe thinking that if Hernando happened to go too far in his talks that night with Moctezuma, his own head and all the other captains' heads would become part of the great clatter, he would have carried on.

The Tlatelolco market—the place someone like Caldera would have wanted to see in Tenoxtitlan; the place everyone said must be seen because there was nothing like it in the world—was toward the north, so he would have passed between the twin temples of flowers and corn—exquisite fretwork, polychrome sculptures—and paused in the very heart of the city: the square in front of the main cu. It was a tall double temple; on top were the houses of the two gods to whom the Mexica owed everything: Tlaloc, god of water, and Huitzilopochtli, god of war.

Just as one has to see the Duomo in Florence to understand that once upon a time Notre-Dame in Paris or Chartres Cathedral were soaring riots of color, one has to see some of the Maya cities—they kept their color, protected by the jungle—to understand that the piles of stone swallowing up light today in the ancient religious centers of Mesoamerica were once structures that reflected it. They looked like the Scala dei Turchi in Sicily; the marble temples of the Acropolis; the Maya plinth in Uaxactún, its stucco intact. If there's a sliver of moon, they shine—and in the sun they dazzle.

The Mexica imagined that the gods roamed the world. Unlike their European contemporaries, they thought the gods inhabited time in the same way they did but were ethereal beings—which is why they stuffed themselves with hallucinogens at festivals in the hope of catching a glimpse of them. They didn't pray to them with litanies, but with things that rose up. The square before the Great Temple bore no resemblance to the pit visible today—though the paving stones that Jazmín Caldera might have trod if he had existed can be seen, some still covered with stucco. It was a whirlwind of light and color, like something rearing up, whose highest point—the temples themselves—could only just be glimpsed at the top of the rise. One could see stairs and platforms like columns of cloud or like forests and jungles, leading to the sun.

On November 8, 1519, it had been nine days since the previous month's festival; there were eleven days until the next one. The stairs of the Great Temple would have been washed; the priests, except for those going about their daily business, would have been in their rooms, far from the temple. There wouldn't have been lines of bearers in green-and-blue-feathered capes winding upward like serpents; there wouldn't have been slicks of red and black blood; there wouldn't have been heads without bodies or torsos without arms and legs, just the light and the mounting weave of high-relief sculpture painted in bright colors.

More exhilarated than filled with dread, though maybe fearful, Jazmín Caldera would have walked on northward, more or less along what is today Calle Seminario, toward where the College of San Ildefonso now stands. He would have bowed his head as he passed the temple of the Jaguars and the

temple of the Eagles, with whom he had had some skirmishes but who thus far had mostly been his guardians along the way to Tenoxtitlan. Upon mingling with the multitudes of macehualtin returning laden with purchases from the Tlatelolco market, he would have felt the sadness, the thrill, and the relief of those who had gotten too close to God and lived to tell about it.

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Cuauhtemoc opened his eyes. Someone had come into the Eagle College courtyard and was standing there behind him. A ripple in the air told him that the visitor had inclined his head and was waiting with his wrists clasped before him.

The general concentrated: it was family—he could smell it. The person was young: he couldn’t hear his breathing. But not too young: he was composed, not quaking despite having to wait to talk to him. He was someone of high standing in the palace, because they’d let him come this far, but lower in rank than Cuauhtemoc himself: he made no sound, didn’t fidget, didn’t cast his eyes about; his feet were firmly planted on the ground. The general said: How can I help you, Metztlí?

Atotoxtli strode along the passageways leading to Moctezuma’s private rooms. When she reached the threshold between the tlatoani’s rooms and everyone else’s, the serving girl tried to stop her, but she swept on, ignoring her protests. She passed through the emperor’s kitchen: empty; his dining room: empty; the private shrine and the imperial pool: empty. When she turned down the corridor to her brother’s bedchamber, she stopped short. He was sitting on an equipal, unkempt and in his nightshirt, smoking and talking to the wall.

She might have gazed upon him in pity, might have stayed to comfort him, if she hadn’t known that Tlaxcala was about to descend upon them, that fucking Texcoco had turned against them, that half the empire had been lost—because that was what had happened, though no one would admit it—after the battle of Cholula. The time for compassion and patience had come to an end. She turned and went off, still in storm mode, toward Tlilpotonqui’s rooms. They had to do something.

The secretary approached Cuauhtemoc and whispered the cihuacoatl's request in his ear. Then he bowed his head, saying he would return to the palace. The general took him by the forearm and said, I'll come with you, help me up, and he rose in a single leap.

They left the courtyard together, passing through the rooms where priests were preparing the prescribed offerings for battle, just in case. They climbed the steps, coming out onto the upper platform of the temple. Metztli was bursting with pride: he was walking with the most famous and valiant of his great-uncles—though the general was only twenty-four, five years older than he was. As they went down the steps leading to the north wall of the Great Temple, Cuauhtemoc was moved to make an extravagantly human observation. He pointed to a spot in the square and said: A while ago, just there, I saw the strangest man; he looked like us, but he had a mustache, like the Caxtilteca, and he said something to me that I didn't understand. These are crooked days, mysterious days, replied Metztli; I myself just passed a phantom right here in the square: a Colhua lord with Caxtilteca legs and feet. The general shrugged, and sank into his customary silence.



Since the feast thrown for them by the fat cacique in Cempoala, back on the coast, the conquistadores had noticed that when they sat down to eat, what they were served was more chile-spiked than usual. It afflicted them greatly, but the locals, whom one might expect to be used to it, were affected too, so they concluded that they had been dosed on purpose.

Alvarado had imagined it was a test of their manhood. Oviedo and Luengas, more insecure, said they were being made fun of; Caldera said the heat was a sign of elegance. Díaz del Castillo, who was a lancer but who lent a hand to help with bad cases of the runs and dithyrambic attacks of flatulence, thought they were being purged because the locals were so much cleaner and Castilian habits repelled them. As always, Aguilar laid the question to rest. It's espionage, he said; an enemy who is constantly shitting is an enemy who can't hide his tracks. He suggested that once they left Cempoala, each man should bury his own shit. Of course, nobody did, not even he—after all, the expedition was hardly stealthy.

Once they had left the jungles and plains of the coast and climbed to the highlands—more rugged, less fertile, depleted by millennia of sowing milpa upon milpa—they discovered that the people of the altiplano, thriftier than the high-flying coastal folk, saw shit as a treasure. There were no cows or sheep, so they treated their bodies as fertilizer dispensers. No matter the size of the city or town where they stopped, the conquistadores always found latrines that could have given Rome's a run for their money: comfortable, with little pipes of running water for rinsing the third eye after a bowel movement. These privies didn't even stink, because under the throne was a clay basin, its contents dumped into a recycling bin as soon as the deed was done.

Thus was the caudillo occupied, reading Livy somewhat distractedly, when it occurred to him that he had solved the mystery of the words spoken to him by Jesus in his dream, and that the rest of the afternoon would be best spent performing a Christian act: he would pay a visit to the Great Temple and build a chapel in the very dwelling place of the Colhua devils.

He left the latrine and went back to his room without a thought for the servant who would remove the basin of fertilizer. The action he was about to take demanded that he represent all the glory of Spain in his own person, so he put on his stockings, wool breeches, and frilled shirt. The afternoon was growing cold. He put on the red doublet with slashed sleeves and neck. He tightened his belt and put on the breastplate from his suit of armor. Only then did he realize that Malinalli wasn't there; he would have to tie the laces himself. He was a man with a message from God, so he didn't mind. He was putting on his boots when he noticed that they were shamefully filthy. He sat on the bed and took a flask from his travel sack, the flask in which, like any soldier, he kept grease to polish his metals and leathers.

He unstopped the flask, sniffed its contents with a certain delectation, and looked in the bag again for his chamois cloth. Not finding it, he dug around. He pulled out his copy of *Amadís de Gaula*; a translation of the first *Orlando furioso*; the poems of Manrique; and the third volume of the *Vita Christi*, on the Passion, which his mother had pressed upon him when he left for Sevilla after learning that his rich relative, Diego Velázquez, was setting out to conquer the island of Cuba under the patronage of Diego Colón, and that Velázquez sought doughty loyal followers with some grasp of the law. The captain general found the chamois cloth at the bottom of the sack, tangled up with his rosary. He kissed the rosary devotedly and set it on the pe'c to later commend himself to God.

He had learned from his mother that you could pray as you went about your work, even if briefly, so he sat on the bed and picked up the right boot to polish it. *Glory to God in heaven*, he murmured as he dipped the tip of the cloth in the flask. *And on Earth peace among those beloved of the Lord*. He began to rub at the crusted mud. *Praise be to You for Your great Glory*. Glory here, glory there—he was reminded of his immaculate victory in

Cholula. *Blessed be Your name.* He had won that battle before it began. *We worship You, we glorify You.* When word had reached him the day before his departure from the city of the cúes that a considerable force of local warriors awaited them on the road, he had invited the lord of Cholula, all his pipiltin, and all their priests to a farewell dance in the square. They had come elegantly dressed and unarmed, and his men had barred the exits and run them through with their swords. *Thanks be to You, the Lord our God, King of Heaven.* Everyone's boots were filthy in the end because the operation had been more like killing cattle in a slaughterhouse than a fight. *Our Father Almighty God.* They hadn't rendered fat to clean their boots since they left Cuba, and they had to save the little oil they had for cooking, so he had asked them to bring him the bodies of the four fattest lords to be found among the corpses. *Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, Lord God, Lamb of God.* They cut off their heads, their penises, and their extremities. *Son of the Father.* They hung the torsos head-down from a tree to bleed clean. *You who cleanse the sins of this world, have mercy on us.* As the torsos were draining, he ordered a space cleared in the square amid the heaps of bodies, and the soldiers lit a great blaze, as if it were Saint John's Eve. *You who cleanse the sins of this world hear our prayer.* When the wood had turned to coals, they stuck an iron bar up the rectum of each torso, nice and straight so it came out the pharynx. *You who sit on the right hand of our Father have mercy on us.* They planted the four bars in the middle of the fire. *Because only You are Holy.* They tapped the four bellies and kept feeding the fire as the fat dripped into four pots covered with chain mesh to filter it. *Only You, Dearly Beloved Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in the Glory of God the Father.* When the torsos of the lords were thoroughly cooked and had run dry, they took the pots from the coals and distributed the contents among those who brought up their flasks. *Amen.*

He gazed proudly at the shine he'd gotten on the right boot. He picked up the left one.



Cuauhtemoc and Metztli entered the royal palace through the priests' tunnels to avoid gossip. They followed the passageways that only the serving people used, to the quarters of the cihuacoatl and his family. There, the secretary pointed the way to the garden and gave a martial nod, then returned to the office. He knew the conversation between his bosses demanded absolute discretion, so he didn't see that Tlilpotonqui wasn't alone. Atotoxtli was there too, crying on his lap.

Cuauhtemoc could take on a troop of Otomí warriors single-handed and he knew the fourteen ways to kill a man without a weapon, but tears were too much for him. He stood there on the threshold, silent and still as a jaguar. The old man noticed the general's presence after a while. He thought they must be at the end of something: he had never imagined he would see Cuauhtemoc's lips white with fear. He motioned for him to approach.



Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, emperor of the Anahuac, huey tlatoani of the great city of Mehxicoh-Tenoxtitlan, and supreme commander of the armies of the Triple Alliance, was lying on the ground in the fetal position, his hands over his eyes, when the chamber-shaman propped himself in the entrance of the royal dressing room, which was at the end of the passageway connecting the rooms of the priests with the royal chambers. Just look at yourself, Mocte, he said.

The emperor uncovered his face and rolled over belly-up, stretching out his arms. There were trails of dried drool at the corners of his mouth, and he was in his nightshirt even though the sun was about to go down. His hair was a mess, but it always was.

The chamber-shaman put his hand in the deerskin bag that he carried alongside his sack of tobacco. I have fliers and slides, he said, which do you want? Moctezuma rubbed his face: I want a nibble of flier, just for balance, because I have a meeting soon, but that isn't why I called you. You don't say, replied the shaman.

The emperor got on his hands and knees, but he didn't stand up. He sat back on his heels, scratched his head, and wiped his mouth at last: one of the consequences of losing molars after the age of forty is that drool is unbounded; it spills out at nap time, which is why the insult *old drooler* is a tautology. He asked: Did they check the calendar again? The chamber-shaman walked into the room and sat on the bed so that they were face-to-face and he could meet the emperor's eyes. He said emphatically: All the palace priests and magicians are in agreement; you can't attack, everything is against you, you have to wait for the new sun, no more than one hundred days from now, and that's all there is to it.

Moctezuma got up, walked to the pe'c, stepped out of his nightshirt, and carelessly put on a white tunic. He pulled a feather cape over his shoulders and grabbed his tiara. He nodded toward the passageway leading out of the royal dressing room. He asked: Is the priest of Huitzilopochtli working at this hour? I don't know, replied the shaman, but you can go and look for him, and if he isn't there, have him sent for—you're the tlatoani. The emperor nodded. Will you take me? he asked. And he explained: I get lost in the new passageways, even though I was the one who had them made. His own joke cracked him up. Whatever you say, the shaman replied. Moctezuma put his headdress on crooked and picked up the golden sandals encrusted with precious stones that he had worn that morning to receive the pain-in-the-ass Caxtilteca. He let them dangle by their straps between his index and middle fingers. He would walk barefoot and put them on when he reached the temple complex's secret stairway; they were extremely uncomfortable.

Mocte? asked the shaman. What? That cape. What about it? You'll have to present it as an offering to the high priest, and it's your favorite, isn't it? The emperor snorted. Beggars, all of them, he said, and he took it off, leaving it in a heap on the floor. He picked up another one at random and dropped the sandals to put it on. Then he looked at the sandals, thought for a moment, and picked them up again. Ready? asked the shaman. No, replied the tlatoani, give me a slide, a whole one. The priest rummaged in his bag and put the mushroom in his hand with an ironic smile. Are you sure? You just told me you have a work meeting tonight. Precisely, said the emperor, accepting the slide delicately and taking a first nibble of the cap. And it gets worse, my friend, he said. You'll escort me to the temple right now and then return to the kitchen, because for the meeting tonight I'm going to need some cactus-of-tongues. The shaman screwed up his eyes, making a hissing sound that expressed both shock and disapproval. It's very strong, he said, something to try once in a lifetime, maybe twice, and this would be the fourth or fifth time I've given you one; you might get lost on the trip. The huey tlatoani closed his eyes. The empire weighs on one's shoulders, he said, sometimes too heavy; help is needed. What do you want

it for? My meeting is with the chief of the Caxtilteca. Who? Make it ready, that's an order: two pieces, no more. The shaman shrugged. You're the boss, he said, but don't say later that I didn't warn you.

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I think it's time we all say what we know, said Tlilpotonqui. Maybe nothing is going on, but if there is something, at least we'll have known what we were doing. They were in his garden, he and Atotoxtli sitting on a bench and Cuauhtemoc standing rigid as a plank before them.

After a long silence, the general began. I issued the call to arms, he said. Atotoxtli, who was still sniffing, seconded him: I passed on the order, straight from the huey tlatoani. When was this? asked the cihuacoatl. We've been running back and forth all day. Yesterday, she said, when we heard that everyone was arriving today. Why wasn't I told? The princess looked him in the face: You're the cihuacoatl, I thought you knew. Tlilpotonqui stared up at the leaves of the tree they were sitting under. They had lost the splendor they'd had during the rains; they were dry, old, and withered, ready to be replaced by the new winter growth. So why do you think the tlatoani didn't tell me? The general and the princess shrugged, yet their manner somehow suggested it wasn't a display of ignorance, but a plea for him to understand something unsaid.

The old man knew he was venturing in a suit of pine into a house on fire when he said: I'm trying to understand. He traced a circle in the air as if to circumscribe one of his problems in its entirety as he described it. If anyone has had Moctezuma's back, it's me, and you know it. The general and the princess nodded. I've always supported his decisions, even when it was my job to oppose the ones that hurt the Mexica; I even supported the folly of bringing the *cahuayos* here. He glanced at Atotoxtli: You were right. The general and the princess nodded again. It was hard for him to get it out, but he said: It was my son Tlacaelel who called the Council today. The silence that followed was even more uncomfortable.

I passed on that order too, said Atotoxtli. In anticipation of his next question, she went on: Since yesterday, only the emperor, Tlacaelel, and I knew that the Council would be called after the nap. Tlilpotonqui gazed upward. A breeze shook the dry leaves; one fell on his head and lay there. Today I woke up thinking I was the cihuacoatl of the great Mehxicoh-Tenoxtitlan, he said, and now I feel like an old drunk who woke up naked in a canal.

Atotoxtli brushed the leaf from his hair and touched his hands, which were clasped in his lap. The Council meeting was a message for you, she said, but I don't know what the message was; did you understand it? The cihuacoatl motioned as if to say he would deal with that later. The important thing is the city, he said. If the huey tlatoani thinks I'm no good as cihuacoatl anymore, then I'm no good, but today it's still my job, so let's move on. He thought for a moment, took a deep breath, and spoke: Just one question, is he going to have me killed? Not today, said Atotoxtli, but he sent you a message through the Council; you have to understand it, whatever it is.

The old man looked at the ground and slapped his palms on his thighs. All right, he said, raising his face, time enough tomorrow to worry about tomorrow. He went on: We've got the Tlaxcalteca in Iztapalapa, but I don't think he called up the army to attack them; the priests say the auspices are bad and he'll lose, like the Cholulteca when they planned an ambush; they didn't heed the priests and they lost. Atotoxtli made a face. The Cholulteca lost because El Malinche is a coward who betrays and kills unarmed people, not because the gods were against them. The cihuacoatl shrugged. Those were my thoughts too, he said, but Moctezuma interpreted it differently. The princess said: Did you come out strongly and clearly against the priests? The old man nodded. Maybe that's why he isn't consulting you anymore. Cuauhtemoc was beginning to exude impatience: Can we stop talking about Tlilpotonqui and deal with the empire? Atotoxtli smiled. Neither of you has a clue about anything, she said, but Moctezuma doesn't either, so we're all equal. She looked at the cihuacoatl as if he were a foolish child. You're his only friend, the only person in the world who

doesn't want what he's got, she said. He took you out of the game to get the priests off your back; he's doing what he thinks he must, but not saying anything, like the ant. Tlilpotonqui took note—the confounded ant again—but didn't reply. Cuauhtemoc said: Can we talk about what matters? Atotoxtli sighed. She said: You'd be better off visiting the feelings-shaman. Both men rolled their eyes. He's in the palace, she went on, you don't have to pay a thing, and he has appointments available because no one goes to see him.

To get to the point, said Cuauhtemoc with a look at Tlilpotonqui, his voice tense, at once kind and impatient, we aren't going to go to war; I issued the call to arms to curb the rebels of Texcoco in case they spill into the city when the Tlaxcalteca attack them. The old man stared at him wide-eyed. The Tlaxcalteca are going to attack the Texcoca? Cuauhtemoc spread his palms. That's the idea, he said. The four lords can't say no; if they wipe out Texcoco for Moctezuma, they'll take its place in the Triple Alliance. The cihuacoatl turned to look at Atotoxtli, who nodded without saying a word. The old man smiled. I can help you, he said, I've been gathering intelligence all day; the four lords are hiding in the waste collectors' calpulli. Cuauhtemoc made another gesture of impatience. You shouldn't have sent Metztli to kill the head blade-maker, he said; he was our ally. Tlilpotonqui closed his eyes. Why didn't you tell me? You're the cihuacoatl; you should know what your people are up to. But the emperor tells me nothing. Feelings-shaman, said Atotoxtli. The heads of the calpulli are your subordinates, not ours, said Cuauhtemoc. If Moctezuma gave the order, why didn't he tell me? The ant, said the princess again, and the feelings-shaman. Cuauhtemoc scolded her: Stop talking about the ant. Both of you, said the princess, go to the feelings-shaman.

The old man raised his hand to interrupt and asked, looking at the general: Are the four lords prisoners? They are our guests and they are kings; we're making them an offer they couldn't have dreamed of a month ago. Tlilpotonqui asked: Is that the message Moctezuma sent them? In those precise terms? Straight up? That they'll take Texcoco's place in the Triple Alliance? Cuauhtemoc replied with another question: How long have we

been tired of Texcoca insolence? The old man made a wild calculation: Since the founding of Tenoxtitlan? And he asked: Does anyone know what the priests think about this? Now it was Atotoxtli who responded with impatience. What we should do, she said, is take advantage of the commotion and kill all the priests. Cuauhtemoc closed one eye and gazed skyward. It's a good time for it, he said, because we could replace them with refugees from Cholula, but it would take a few hours that I don't have today. The other two laughed and he replied: I wasn't joking.

Tlilpotonqui got up from the bench, scratched his buttocks, and sat down again. He said: I began as cihuacoatl under Ahuitzotl and I've served all through Moctezuma's reign; we've never been in such a bad place, and I've never seen the emperor so distracted. He went on, looking at Atotoxtli: But your brother has always had mysterious depths; anyway, what worries me more is that your father was afflicted by the same kind of melancholy when he had his accident. He arched his eyebrows when he said *accident*. The other two swallowed, and he was emboldened to ask the question that lurked beneath the whole conversation: Do you know where Cuitlahuac is?

Cuauhtemoc scratched his chin—a surprisingly human move—and said: He's not with the Tlaxcalteca lords; I haven't seen him any more recently than you have. Atotoxtli made a face. I think he's no longer among us. Tlilpotonqui met her eyes: Was that order sent through you too? No, she replied, but whenever I ask Moctezuma about it he gets furious. The cihuacoatl looked at the general. You're next in line for the imperial tiara, he said; when this wave has passed, ask him to name you priest of a temple—he'll get the message. Atotoxtli added: He'll send you to win back Cholula; ask him to set you up there in a temple to any god but Quetzalcoatl, whom he can't stand. She covered her head with a veil. The cihuacoatl could say outrageous things because he was the cihuacoatl and, the best they could figure, he was already a dead man, but she could not. She got up and asked them please to proceed with discretion; she would go and carry out her assignment at the Old Houses.

Before leaving the garden she repeated: Feelings-shaman, boys. A short session once every five days can't hurt.

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Eight of the nine captains came along on Cortés's outing, armed to the teeth. Also present were Aguilar and the three carpenters and two lancers who had previously participated in the toppling of idols in Cintla and Cholula. They had to be shouted for because there was no way to find anyone in the palace. They brought with them their pikes, hammers, wedges, and ropes.

Malinalli, who came out of the pool courtyard when the caudillo walked past bellowing for his men, said nothing could make her set foot in the houses of the Colhua devils. Cortés took this as insubordination, but Aguilar calmed him down by pointing out that her words were a sign that the true faith was taking root in her heart. The captain general considered this and finally said: It's not as if we plan to do any talking, so we can manage without a translator as long as you take care of the Our Fathers. He chose not to bring along the chaplain, who had a weak stomach. He ordered Olid, one of the captains, to carry the icons of Saint Christopher and the Holy Virgin that they had been making in their campaign chapels to put in shrines once they had toppled the idols. And where the hell is Caldera? Aguilar said he'd gone to the market. Cortés reflected. Knowing the man, it made sense.

They left Axayacatl's palace three abreast—the caudillo in front, the friar bringing up the rear. The gleam of their helmets, breastplates, and lance points in the golden sun as it sank low in the sky made them feel like an unstoppable force. After all, they had the Virgin and Saint Christopher under Olid's arm to protect them.

Out on the street, the puzzled and mocking glances of the sea of people who seemed to be constantly crossing the city deflated them a little, but their resolve was firm and they made their way toward the entrance of the

citadel. They went up the steps, and had advanced only a few spans over the gleaming white paving stones toward the reflecting pool before they realized that they were nothing but a handful of toy soldiers. The magnitude of the expanse, the size of the buildings, the ease of the people—a scant few—bustling among the temples on religious business, made them slacken their pace and wonder whether this wasn't a fool's errand.

Moctezuma loved the system of passageways connecting the public buildings to the temples, but his own palace had been built after he had left the priestly pathways. The chamber-shaman went ahead of him with a torch.

The south side of the Great Temple was a straight shot from the palace. To get there you had to follow the tunnel that ran under the temple of Tezcatlipoca with a turn at a spot just beneath the temple of Xochiquetzal. The passageway from the emperor's rooms met the old central tunnel a little farther on. In the central tunnel it was no longer unusual to run into priests following or trailed by their novices. This passageway was lit: the old builders of the city had left tiny openings that let in light through the paving stones above; shafts of brightness. It led to the underground square where you could take the left-hand passageway up to the temple of Quetzalcoatl, or the right-hand one to the temples of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli.

They were moving slowly because the emperor was feeling the slide: he was cooked to the gills and he had mixed doses. He stopped every so often and asked if they were in the caves of Coatepec, because precious stones were getting stuck between his toes. The chamber-shaman replied: No, Mocte, we're in the south side-tunnel on the way to the central hall; that's gravel between your toes. Of course, of course, replied the emperor. And again he stopped. Look at the size of that serpent, he said, incredible plumage. It isn't a serpent, Mocte, it's the canal that brings water to your pools. Of course, of course.

The conquistadores had heard talk of the huey tzompantli of Tenoxtitlan, of course, but it was never easy to stroll past the biggest dead-man's rattle in the world, especially if you were part of a convoy of worm-ridden stooges in the heart of a city crammed with warriors famed for their ruthlessness. They walked the thirty yards of clattering skulls with their

heads bowed. Cross yourselves, the captain general had called out. Aguilar began to sing psalms, to which everyone responded with a fervor they had never shown at mass. The Tenochca in the vicinity found it touching, pretty, and even auspicious to watch them howl at the sight of the place their skulls would end up. Atotoxtli, passing them on her way to the Old Houses—she was veiled and plainly dressed, so they didn't recognize her—said to the maid accompanying her: They're like little dogs, one can see why the emperor wants to have them to keep.

Moctezuma shook himself as if struck by a shiver of lucidity when he saw the chamber-shaman plunge the torch into the canal to put it out. They had reached the circle of shafts of light marking the entrance to the central underground square. At that hour, the shafts weren't the torrents that illuminated the whole place when the sun was at its zenith, high above the openings in the paving stones, but it was bright enough to see the way.

The emperor was transfixed for a moment by the bits of dust floating in the light. What pretty little stars, he said. The chamber-shaman shook him by the shoulder and pointed to the tunnel leading to the stairs of the Great Temple. That's the way up, Mocte; you're on your own now. Of course, of course, said the tlatoani, shaking his head. He asked, What is that terrible wailing up above? The shaman shrugged. A sacrifice of coyotes, maybe, he said. The emperor thought about it for a moment. I don't think we're beheading coyotes today, he said, but I could be mistaken, I'm on slides.

Cortés sensed his captains huddling together, smelled their fear. He clenched his jaw, took a deep breath to control his own trepidation, and did the thing that thus far had made him shine in difficult situations. He advanced alone at great strides to the main square—the square of squares that lay before the Great Temple—and shouted: Charge for Santiago and Spain! Moctezuma broke through the circle of light and paused in the very center of the underground square. He heard Cortés's shout, but he ascribed no importance to it now. Before he bowed his head to commend his entrance into the temple grounds to the gods, he said: Go back to the palace and do as you were told; I'll go on alone from here. The shaman didn't hear him; he was already gone. Only those accustomed to battling truly terrible

gods walked that passageway. Cortés shouted: Onward, boys, first one up is the winner. Moctezuma heard the footfalls of the soldiers as he was putting on his gem-encrusted sandals, and he said to himself, It must be the slide, and he laughed at his own joke. He concentrated on climbing majestically up the stairs. If there was one thing Moctezuma knew how to do, it was to be emperor.

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Malinalli was alone in the captains' quarters when the princess, dressed in a white huipil as if she were any ordinary pipil, slipped in and took off her veil before the translator. Upon seeing the imperial tiara, Malinalli, confused at first, prostrated herself, touching the floor and bringing her hand to her mouth. You have nothing to fear, little sister, said Atotoxtli. She held out her hand to help the translator rise. Malinalli took the empress's fingers, which were cold and a little sweaty. She stood up, her head still bowed; the bitch was lying to her. Taking a risk, she said: You can be frank with me; I'm nobody; I was translator and courtesan of a lord in the Mayapán and now I'm translator and courtesan of the lord of the Caxtilteca.

Atotoxtli was taller than Malinalli and her eyes were bigger; she was lighter-skinned because she rarely went out in the sun; she hadn't seen the empire, she had been away from the palace only once, to Malinalco. The translator had just come from a long campaign under the sun and through the mountains, and before that she had lived enough for several lifetimes. She had the aquiline nose and wide face of the Gulf queens; Atotoxtli had the sharp features of Colhua royalty. The princess had just turned forty but she looked younger because she had never left the court; Malinalli's struggles were beginning to show on her body though she wasn't yet twenty. Atotoxtli reached out her hand again and lifted Malinalli's face with an index finger that clearly knew how to command. You may look at me when you talk, she said, I'm not the tlatoani. How may I serve you? Malinalli replied, her face raised but her eyes still averted. The emperor has sent me to ask you something and to give you a message. As you wish. First the question, said the princess. We've known for a long time that you

already spoke many languages when the fat king offered you as a gift to El Malinche, and you've been more than ten months with him; do you really need the fake Maya to translate, or do you understand his tongue? Malinalli said no, looking her in the eyes, and Atotoxtli knew the girl was lying to her. She smiled. Now the message, said the princess. It pleases us that you stay with the Caxtilteca, but if you feel threatened, simply cross the citadel and come to the palace; Moctezuma will protect you and restore your birthright, making you a princess again, and you may continue to be a translator without being anybody's whore, to put it bluntly. Malinalli bowed her head. The emperor's will is my own, she said, but for now I think I can serve him best if I stay here.

The empress smiled and relaxed her shoulders. She really knew how to play politics, Malinalli could see; her physical control was so absolute that the translator was almost persuaded by her gestures. And is this all to your liking? asked Atotoxtli. It's not an ideal situation, said Malinalli, but the huey Caxtilteca isn't the worst man I know, he spends hours reading his books. No, said the princess, the building, your rooms—I hope they are to your liking; they were my rooms until I moved to the palace, and I have to confess that I was very angry when I learned that the tlatoani had put you all here. How could they not be to my liking? said Malinalli. But to tell the truth, I'm always feeling watched—are the walls hollow? Atotoxtli understood that she was addressing a woman at least as intelligent as herself; the translator knew how to pose a direct question to throw off her conversation partner and gauge her reaction. Luckily, here the princess could tell the truth, so she spoke it with a candid smile to soften up the other woman, even touching her shoulder to let her feel in her skin that she wasn't lying. Don't tell El Malinche, she said, because we'd rather keep him worrying, but no, these were my rooms, and my father's were across the way; all the walls in the royal quarters are solid; up above, where they put the soldiers, there are false walls and they're surely teeming with spies, but here you're safe. She removed her hand and said, Now I have a favor to ask for myself. Malinalli's smile was a model of complicity; she even hunched her shoulders slightly, which made the princess think they really

did need her in the palace as a spy. Will you take me to see the *cahuayos*? Malinalli didn't allow the calculation that she was making to show on her face. Yes, she said, but I'll have to tell my lord when he gets back, because they have them under guard. She bent her head a little and smiled with perfect cunning. I'll tell him you ordered me to take you. Atotoxtli understood that she had lost the match, but at least she would achieve her goal. She stayed in character: So long as the huey tlatoani doesn't find out, she said.

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Moctezuma climbed the inner stairs of the temple in one burst, following the shafts of light filtering through the openings in the outer staircase. Outside, Cortés and his men were climbing too, but they had to sit down to rest before they reached the first platform. When we speak about this, said Alvarado, we'll have to say we did it in one go. Cortés took mental note, thinking it was lucky that it was late in the day, because if they had come at noon with all this gear and the sunlight glaring off the square, they would have fainted.

The huey tlatoani reached the top, made his way down the final passageway, and stepped respectfully into the little entrance to the sacred inner chamber of the temple of Huitzilopochtli. He said: Hello. No one answered, but he went in anyway. The high priest, surrounded by acolytes in the next room as he arranged a niche, turned in irritation at the interruption. When he saw who his visitor was, he bowed his head and dropped everything; he didn't have to order the young priests to make themselves scarce.

I love this room, said Moctezuma, you can't imagine how I miss being a priest. Where there were splotches of blood, he saw sprays of flowers. The withered fingers of the hands of great warriors sacrificed during the year's festivals swayed pleasingly like the branches of a small tree to the beat of some music he couldn't place, though in a possible future we would have recognized it. It was T. Rex's "Monolith."

The priest was also up to his ears in whatever he had taken to carry out his temple duties, so he bent his magic powers of hearing to the music and caught the sexy crooning of Marc Bolan. He smiled. That's good stuff, he said. Moctezuma swung his hips to the beat. It's nothing I've ever heard

before, he replied, but I like it. He pulled his elbows in tight and shimmied, moving his head gravely from side to side, transfixed by pleasure. The priest, swaying his own ass to the beat—he was nearly eighty, but on mushrooms he was a jaguar—said, I was thinking about you, believe it or not; look at this. He carefully lifted the clay basin in which the blood of doves sacrificed that afternoon had yet to coagulate—their decapitated bodies sensually dancing to “Monolith,” all around the priest and emperor—and showed him the image forming in it. It took Moctezuma a while to bring it into focus because it came from very far away. When it was finally sharp and clear, it made no sense to him: It was me writing this novel in a yard on Shelter Island. Uh, he said, strange, and he was seized by laughter. Is that what will happen if I wait for the new year, or if I don’t wait? The priest shrugged. The calendar says you should wait, but the calendar has been wrong lately; let me ask the boss. Moving to the beat of the emperor’s internal music, he walked to the giant sculpture of Huitzilopochtli that loomed over the place. His skull-embroidered cape swished like the train of a contented queen. As always, the god was covered with a veil.

On the temple’s lower level, the Spaniards stood. They began to climb, taking it easy now and not speaking, to save their breath and their strength.

The priest approached the image of the most warlike god in the Tenochca’s insufferably bellicose pantheon, whispering a prayer. Moctezuma watched how, under the veil, Huitzilopochtli set aside his lance and shield and bent down to listen. He loved the way the god raised his left hand to his head—or his left claw, maybe; no one had ever seen it—so his headdress didn’t fall off when he leaned over. The priest whispered something in the idol’s ear and then listened carefully to his reply, delivered in a voice the tlatoani would have loved to hear clearly, though from a distance and mixed up with “Monolith,” it sounded like the whir of a hummingbird.

He says there are many possible futures, said the priest, and you should follow your instincts; he says our calendars are shit but they’re the best we’ve got, and we should think about revising them because we’ve gotten seriously behind; the year is 365.256 days long, not 365, like we thought.

What does that mean, point two hundred and fifty-six? asked the tlatoani, and they both giggled maniacally.

The conquistadores, hearing from afar the emperor's and priest's laughter warped by its passage through successive temple chambers, imagined they were hearing the death rattle of the holy, and they exchanged wordless glances to rally their spirits.

All right, then, said Moctezuma, and he turned and went back the way he'd come, swaying his hips and shoulders gracefully to the beat of his song. The priest clapped once and the acolytes returned. One of them said, It so happens there are some Caxtilteca climbing up to the temple with their little gods under their arms. The priest snorted impatiently. He thought: I ought to have told the emperor that Huitzilopochtli said we should sacrifice them once and for all. And he said, Welcome them, give them a scare, and then tell them to take their idols to the temple of conquered gods; say we'll give them a very nice altar there.



Of course Jazmín Caldera was impressed by the Tlatelolco market: the concentrated variety of a land whose true dimensions he could not yet guess. He liked the aviaries with their live macaws and quetzals, orioles and toucans; the butchers with their dead deer, iguanas, armadillos, xoloitzcuintles. He liked the furriers with their hides of jaguar and otter; the flower sellers; the cacao-bean vendors' tables like those of the money changers that he had seen in Venice. The stalls of fruit—mamey, avocado, papaya, guayaba, zapote—and the unbelievable variety of vegetables. The cages of live animals for sacrifice: doves, coyotes, lynxes, a wolf. But all this he had already seen on a small scale on their journey to the city.

He was impressed, too, by the human variety, abundance, and density. The bark-paper painters from over the mountains and the muralists from the Mayapán; the section where slaves from the conquered territories were sold and the section where people in desperate circumstances sold themselves; the spell-casters of all sorts, the sculptors of idols and the ceramicists who could craft any creature, bizarre as it might be; Oaxacan potters, Totonac weavers, Chichimeca sellers of bows and arrows, and the Mexica who sold obsidian lance points and blades. But this too he knew about or had seen or heard talk of, to some degree.

And there was more, much more: infinite peoples and trades he simply couldn't identify, but even so, it was something else that struck him, something he couldn't put his finger on until he turned back toward the islet of Tenoxtitlan as the stalls were being taken down and squads of sweepers with brooms and buckets of water advanced, about to leave the paving stones of the market as clean as those he had seen in the temple citadel.

Malinalli had gotten lost in the palace trying to take Atotoxtli to the horses. The empress, who knew the building, had guided her delicately and deftly, leading her from one courtyard to another until they came to the orchard.

To avoid complications in case they came across anyone in the hallways, the princess had taken off her royal tiara, and her simple attire put them on equal footing. As they walked, Atotoxtli told stories of her childhood in these halls, and Malinalli responded with her own memories, similar in feel though she hailed from the house of a Gulf lord, tiny in comparison to Axayacatl's palace. The Colhua princess liked Malinalli's heavy southern Nahuatl accent, her old-fashioned vocabulary. And Malinalli was delighted to once again walk and talk with her head held high, followed by a retinue of ladies, instead of keeping her eyes on the ground and hurrying behind a bunch of yokels. They reached the orchard without encountering anyone.

Once on the threshold of the improvised stable yard, Atotoxtli stopped short in fear: the *cahuayos* were loose. She asked whether they bit and Malinalli said only plants. And it was true: they hadn't been there for even a full day and they had already eaten all the flowers, shat on the beds of medicinal herbs, and nearly polished off the fruit in the trees.

The destruction scandalized the empress—many of the plants had taken years to acquire, acclimate, and propagate—but she surveyed the damage with a smile that soon turned sincere, because the snuffling of the beasts, the almost feline shine of their backs, and the age-old calm with which they turned to look at her when she burst into the garden, only to return immediately to their business, was like nothing she'd ever seen before.

It wasn't the tumult or variety or even the cosmopolitan quality of the place, different from Sevilla or Rome, though maybe like Syracuse or Catania on a much larger scale. It was something else. What Caldera felt deeply but couldn't describe, having truly never seen anything like it, was not Tenoxtitlan exactly, but the idea of it. It was a city planned down to the last span, a city that operated ceaselessly with the precision of a Roman cohort, an obsessive city in which everything was where someone had said

it should be and everything happened when it was supposed to happen according to strict procedure. Not a metropolis that had grown naturally over generations, but a planned and purpose-built city.

There was something terrifyingly beautiful about a whole country agreeing to make its capital punctual above all things; choosing to live a geometric and foreshortened life in a canyon of straight lines where everyone followed a common choreography seemingly taught by some artist rather than resulting from chance, luck, or the trauma of history.

Aguilar, maybe because he was already familiar with the local obsession with straight lines and geometric structures, wasn't as awestruck, but he had nonetheless spent years wanting to see the great Tenoxtitlan, and having the chance to view it from the avian heights of the upper platform of the cu of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc before venturing into its streets, as Caldera was doing now, struck him as lucky and strategic. Seeing it from above before experiencing it below; being the eye of God: no smells, no noise, no bustle. Just watching the city, seeing it as a mechanism before anything else. He had no trouble climbing the stairs; he'd spent a few years working long days in the infinitely less benign climate of the southern jungles, so while the captains rested he gazed down upon the city and valley from the heart of it all.

When they got to the top and were at the temple doors, he saw that Cortés was advancing resolutely toward the first chamber, and he dared to call out to him. The captain general turned and said, What? With all due respect and knowing my place, replied the translator, I think it would be best to wait to talk to Moctezuma, ask his permission, before we set foot in the inner sanctum; meanwhile let's make a chapel in the houses of Axayacatl. He swept his arm in a circle, encompassing all they could see. Look at the city, he said, and look how many of us there are; see how modest the palace looks down below, though it seemed so big to us; note the lay of the land, there's no way to get out if they raise the bridges, and they will raise them when the drums sound in that temple—he pointed to the temple of Ehecatl. And he concluded: A city like this wasn't built by

being nice to foreigners, and we don't know yet whether we're visitors or prisoners.

Caldera remembered a conversation he'd had in Florence with a protégé of Pope Leo: a man getting on in years, famous in Italy, older than Hernando was now. He had painted a chapel for Pope Sixtus that was the modern wonder of the world, according to the few who had seen it. A Spanish assistant in the painter's studio had invited Caldera to meet him. At the time, they were designing the facade of a church dedicated to Saint Lawrence. The design and the sculptures that were planned to adorn it when it was finished would be reminiscent of a gridiron, in memory of the martyrdom of the roasted saint.

The name of the head of the studio was Buonarroti and he was a distracted type who nevertheless had taken a liking to Caldera, and upon hearing that he was heading to Lazio, he had spoken to him in a kind of dream state about how much he missed Rome and how the city would be better if Pope Leo let him sack the whole place; if only the mess and filth of the pilgrims and soldiers could be removed to Trastevere and the papal enclave redesigned and rebuilt on the model of a Roman army camp: rectilinear, foreshortened, as harmonious as the gridiron on which the saint had been cooked, to be precise.

As he walked back to Tenoxtitlan from Tlatelolco, Caldera made a detour to the lakeshore. Seeing the rows of floating garden plots tethered to the land, all rectangles of equal dimensions separated by canals identical in width and linked by movable bridges, each the same; thinking about the canyons of light and shadow in the temple complex, the perfectly smooth floors and the even paving stones between which not a single blade of grass grew, he reflected that the city's perfect grid, its obsessive neatness, its lack of knots of disorder—no food stalls, no street markets, no horse shit, no inns for travelers or courts for the poor, no fruit peels or open-air latrines, no drunks or whores—would have been Buonarroti's dream; his idea writ large, taken to the most remote and impossible of extremes.

If Malinalli and Atotoxtli were translator and empress when they left the rooms, forced into conversation by a toss of history's dice, by the time they

entered the orchard-turned-stableyard they were two princesses exchanging confidences in a house taken over by savages. An obscene joke about the longitudinal virility of horses bolstered their complicity. So the Caxtilteca who tends to them has a big one and that's why they get along so well? asked Atotoxtli naughtily. No, said Malinalli, and she explained that she knew it because the poor man was incontinent, so he was always lowering his breeches to drop a load.

Badillo had no idea who the woman with the captain general's translator was, but the flurry of ladies and the haughtiness of her manner made it clear to him that in the scene unfolding before him, his role was to obey. Among a thousand other things, Atotoxtli asked Malinalli how many *cahuayos* there were, and she said twenty-seven, but did the princess want to see something funny? She called in Spanish: Badillo, *¿cuánto cahuayo?*—explaining that the captains were always making the same joke, which was why she could repeat it. The conquistador counted on the fingers of his hands, looked around the whole yard, and sat on the ground to take off his boots and socks. After counting his toes, he shouted, Twenty! Malinalli translated: Cempohualli.

The joke seemed more cruel than anything to Atotoxtli, when, after she made signs to ask whether she could touch one of the beasts, he got up from the ground and, barefoot, approached a random horse, put a hand on its muzzle and spoke into its ear in a way that no one in the Colhua world—where everything had its use and its place and tended to be on its way to an early death—spoke to an animal. He stroked its braided and beribboned mane and patted its neck. Then he pointed to the ladies, and the *cahuayo* walked docilely toward them.

What creature was this? Such size, bearing, strength, obedience. It let itself be petted as if it were a dog. Atotoxtli was impressed by the musculature of the beast and by its clear pact of friendship with Badillo, allowing her to touch it. Nothing in the Chapultepec zoo was this size, much less this tame. The empress reflected that Moctezuma might have been mired too long in melancholy and the priests might feel themselves on the verge of mastering his will, but he was still the ablest politician in the

empire and the sharpest-eyed and farthest-seeing person in the city: a whole world, bigger and more solid, could be built on the backs of these beasts. They were the future.

There was a crush on the Tlatelolco causeway, everyone laden with things they'd bought or hadn't sold as they made their way back to the endless chinampas that extended in every direction from the floating city. Caldera walked among them, breathless in admiration, very much wishing his walk would never end and not at all wishing to return to the palace and the service of the captain general. Back on the islet of Tenoxtitlan, night was falling, so he decided to cut through the citadel.

Cortés thanked Aguilar for the unbidden advice and, turning to those he trusted would follow, he said: In we go, Spain. No one moved. The friar stared at the captain general's back. He was visited by mingled feelings of fear and shame, which gave him courage. He said: We're in this together, Hernando, but I'm a man of God and I'm not going to get mixed up with their idols. The captain general shrugged without turning to look at him and murmured, more for the benefit of the others, that translators were a diplomatic luxury. He patted his balls and strode toward the inner chambers; the others followed. Aguilar made a face of disgust and went to sit at the very corner of the upper platform of the *cu* of Huitzilopochtli, the highest point in the valley.

Atotoxtli petted the *cahuayo* a little more. She looked up to thank Badillo and saw that behind him a blade of sun was striking the upper cornice of the garden wall. She knew the Old Houses like her own body, so she said: Time to go. She took Malinalli's hands, maybe sincerely, and thanked her. She repeated: Moctezuma's doors are open to you if at any moment you need shelter. Malinalli bowed her head graciously and thanked the princess for her visit. Atotoxtli put on her tiara and the ladies fell into place behind her. It's late, she said, hurrying them along.

While Aguilar listened with discreetly vengeful pleasure to his comrades' cries of *Mother of God* and *Sweet Jesus* and *Heaven forfend* from the first chamber of the temple, he noted that the procession of drummers was now advancing from the priestly houses. On the upper levels of the

other cúes—he was watching all the summits—priests and novices appeared as if out of nowhere. They came bearing incense, preparing to raise it toward the four cardinal points as the sun set. Any pipiltin and macehualtin who'd had things to do in the citadel were heading quickly toward the gates to their neighborhoods.

The first to come running out of the chamber was Luengas, who began to vomit as soon as the fresh air hit him. Behind him came Lugo and Oviedo and then the others: the full cast of carpenters and lancers, and the icons of the Virgin and Saint Christopher. When they saw Luengas, some joined the chorus of lunch liberators. They were so competitive, Aguilar thought, that even in their suffering they wanted to come out on top. The captain general and Alvarado were the last to emerge, unscathed. Both of them were immune to reality, so even when everything was against them, they had the advantage. Hernando laid his hand on Aguilar's shoulder and sat down beside him.

Cuauhtemoc materialized like a ghost in the garden where Tlilpotonqui, surrounded by his grandchildren, was trying to memorize their names. They had brought him scarcely a dozen of the seventy or eighty he possessed. The general approached the cihuacoatl and whispered in his ear: The chamber-shaman said to remind you that it's you who must bring the Caxtilteca to Axayacatl's throne room so Moctezuma can talk to them. The cihuacoatl nodded; it was his diplomatic duty, and even though he felt he'd been relieved of his post, he planned to perform it. There's more, said Cuauhtemoc. The emperor says to tell you to bring your eldest son to the meeting so he can watch and learn; he heard you've been going around asking about the story of the ant, and he says you must ask your son about it, since he's more serious and studious than you ever were. The cihuacoatl grimaced. I should worry, shouldn't I? Cuauhtemoc shrugged. I asked the shaman, and he said maybe not, because Moctezuma nearly fell over laughing when he gave the message to be delivered, but he also said that maybe you should, because the emperor was swimming in slides. Tlilpotonqui felt his chin and said: So be it. Then he added, so as not to be left wondering: What about the Tlaxcalteca? The general could hear that the

question had the ring of the last wish of a condemned man, whether Tlilpotonqui was one or not, so he told him the truth. They're still divided: the young lords want to come to an agreement, but the old ones aren't sure; they won't do anything until Moctezuma has spoken to El Malinche. Whatever for? asked Tlilpotonqui. I don't understand it, the general said, they're like the emperor, they think the Caxtilteca are important; it's a mystery. The cihuacoatl rolled his eyes and went back to his grandchildren.

Caldera entered the citadel by the north gate, which opened directly onto the little square at the back of the Great Temple. If he went around the temple to the south, he could head straight back to Axayacatl's palace and see the main square again, now alive with priests, novices, and acolytes hurrying every which way with offerings and processions.

You won this one, Cortés said to Aguilar amid the sound of his comrades retching. I'm going to ask Moctezuma to give the chamber a good mopping before our next visit; with all Saint Chris has done for us, we can't leave him in a slaughterhouse like this. The translator smiled, patted the captain general's thigh, and returned to the spectacle of the city shutting down. Beyond the walls of the citadel, the macehualtin of the endless calpulli would soon begin to raise the bridges, turning each community back into an island for the night. He didn't point out to Hernando that although it was a daily ritual, for all intents and purposes they would be trapped on the central islet; he had no interest in watching the captain general go through the performance yet again of being the manliest of all men.

Atotoxtli, walking swiftly back to the palace of Moctezuma with her ladies, reached the Great Temple square, and there she came upon a Caxtilteca dressed as a Colhua. She recognized him immediately. He was the one who hadn't wanted to eat his soup because he was nauseated by the priests. She had empathized with him, with his body's refusal to take part in the farce, and the subsequent discipline with which he had dispatched all the courses anyway. When she had asked him to tell her the truth, he had done it.

The Caxtilteca didn't notice her. He was staring at the upper level of the houses of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. She followed his gaze and saw El Malinche and his translator sitting all the way at the top of the steps—a place they definitely should not have been: no one but the priests, the emperor, and the dead ever reached that perch. More amused than worried, she wondered whether they realized that sooner or later they would be in the very same place, with roles in the main performance.

Aguilar, irritated by the hacking and shuddering of the vomiters and the smell of the contents of their worm-ridden stomachs, but above all disgusted by the captain general's imperviousness, spotted the gleam of the imperial tiara in the middle of the square and recognized the princess, who in turn was gazing curiously at a pipil in a yellow mantle looking up at them. He recognized the mantle. It was Caldera. The missing captain was scratching his head lengthily, still looking upward in their direction—maybe indignant at their blasphemous lounging on the temple platform as if it were a terrace. He was right, Aguilar thought. Then Caldera began to walk toward the west gate of the square, not the one leading to the Old Houses. Aguilar smiled.

Atotoxtli saw with surprise that the Caxtilteca dressed like a Colhua wasn't returning to Axayacatl's palace but was heading toward the calpulli, deep into the city. She sent one of her ladies with precise instructions to take him by the hand once he had left the citadel and lead him to a safe neighborhood; she took off her tiara. Show it to him so he understands the message, she said, and take him to a place where he'll be hidden until the inevitable happens, in case later we need someone to demonstrate how to mount those *cahuayos*.

From up above, Aguilar watched tenderly as Captain Jazmín Caldera's pale legs, bowed by years on horseback, carried him toward a different life, one Aguilar himself already regretted having rejected. Caldera wasn't the first Castilian he'd watched abandon the shit-ship of Europe. He glanced at Cortés and said nothing.

Then the drums rang out. Cortés, Aguilar, and the eight captains gazed toward the summit of the cu of Ehecatl, where the drumbeats were coming

from. Caldera glanced at the temple, then turned his back on it and followed in the footsteps of the lady who had handed him the empress's tiara. Atotoxtli got to the door of the palace and went in. Cuauhtemoc closed his eyes and Tlilpotonqui opened his own wide and fixed them on the sky: it might be the last time he saw it. Malinalli looked at the captain general's belongings strewn about the room and decided not to pick them up. Moctezuma said: Hmm, it's late for my bath.

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IV.



CORTÉS'S DREAM

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Though Tlilpotonqui had long since moved into quarters in Moctezuma's palace, that night he decided to dine at the house that had belonged to his family since the islet of Mehxicoh-Tenoxtitlan was a cactus grove and the Mexica were bundles of blood and dust determined at all costs to control the lake region of the Anahuac Valley. It was a modest residence compared with the palaces the emperors had built for themselves, but it had a nice garden and, best of all, a celebrated rooftop: rather than facing the interior of the islet and its temples, it looked out over the floating city of the Tenochca.

Tlacaelel was waiting for him there, leaning on the balustrade, gazing out over the valley of artificial islands now lit by torches and braziers. The cihuacoatl approached his eldest son, thinking he'd done well to eat alone in the dining room. A meal together on the rooftop at sunset overlooking his political patrimony would have prompted a conversation that would have ended in his breaking down and his heir's feeling obliged to express compassion—the one thing they didn't teach at the calmecac.

Tlilpotonqui approached slowly and cautiously. He was already in formal attire, the plumed headdress he would wear into the throne room under his arm. Since afternoon, he'd felt a weight upon him. While that very morning he had strode the palace corridors with a warrior's vigor, dispatching business that would have cowed any other imperial bureaucrat and scorning the councillors because they seemed like old men, now he was moving across his own rooftop as if the combined ages of all the mayors preceding him had come to rest on his shoulders, head, and spine.

Once he was near Tlacaelel, he said: My son. The young man turned and came to him, bowing his head respectfully. When he raised it, he said,

You haven't called me that in twenty years. Tlilpotonqui reached out and patted his cheek. The future cihuacoatl raised his eyebrows in surprise, or perhaps fear. He had all the emotional training of a trout.

Tlilpotonqui had always thought Tlacaelel was just like his mother. She hadn't been the first or most important of the cihuacoatl's wives, but she was more Tenochca than anybody and the first to bear him a healthy male child. She was fierce, tough, and hard to read, like all true Mexica. Her gaze was a deep well in which nothing could be glimpsed. You have her eyes, he said. Whose? retorted his heir. Your mother's; I loved her best, but she was quick to go, as if she'd come to this world only to bring you. After an uncomfortable silence the old man added: Come, we must be in the throne room when Moctezuma arrives, Caxtiltecas and all.

They left the rooftop. In the house the servants were bustling about, preparing the rooms for the next morning's surge in activity. It had been a long time since the cihuacoatl had conducted business there, and they were nervous. The cihuacoatl and his son descended the stairs, crossed the ground floor, and went out into the patio and the street. They walked in silence. Tlilpotonqui couldn't bring himself to ask Tlacaelel whether Atotoxtli had said anything else when she asked him to summon the Council. He couldn't read him, but he had never been able to. His son always seemed made of obsidian.

The street was deserted. When they turned a corner and saw the lit braziers at the entrance to the Old Houses of Axayacatl, he said, Tlaca. His heir looked at him the way he looked at everything: with all the warmth of a serpent. Aloof, unmoving, and terrible. He had been taught well. Tlilpotonqui couldn't bring himself to ask whether Tlacaelel thought Moctezuma was going to have him killed. It wouldn't help and it would make him look like an old coward. Instead he said: I want to die at the temple; in private, but at the temple.

Tlacaelel thought for a moment and replied that it could be done; when the time came, he himself would bring his father to the sacrificial site of his choice to embark on his final journey.

Tlilpotonqui smiled. Maybe his son sincerely thought he was going to die of old age. He tugged at his mantle, gave the headdress he'd been carrying under his arm a shake to fluff the feathers, and began to set it on his head. Tlacaelel, who was watching him as gravely as a monolith, said: Before we go in, Father, there's something I have to tell you. The old man raised his eyebrows distractedly. What? he asked. I have a message from Moctezuma to give you before we go in. The old man looked at him as if they were already in different worlds. It's the ant thing, said his heir.

This, like everything else, was all his fault, the mayor thought. The boy had been destined to be cihuacoatl since birth and he himself had decided to call him Tlacaelel, the name of the bastard who had stopped at nothing to turn an islet in a mountain lake into a kingdom that touched the two seas.



Atotoxtli had chosen a fawn-colored huipil patterned with flowers and a sky-blue cape with feather embroidery stars to wear to the audience that Moctezuma had promised the Caxtilteca. Her attendant, who was her aunt, was winding the princess's braids around her head, soon to be draped with a mantle. Her body, the empire.

The princess's aunt had the two meaty snakes of hair in her hands, weighing them as she calculated how to fasten them with some bone clips—duck-shaped, with little jade eyes—when out of nowhere she asked: Why do they call him El Malinche? Rumors had been circulating around the city for weeks and months, so it was only natural that those who served in the palace should have questions and conjectures too.

Atotoxtli twitched her mouth, as always when she was presented with a problem. I'm not sure, she said, raising one eyebrow and lowering the other in a way that would have given her ruling powers anywhere. She pondered further: I don't think anybody knows what he's called.

When her aunt had finished with her braids, the empress leaped up. I can't be late, she said. Bring my mantle. She glanced at her sandals and dress, smiled in satisfaction, and went on: I guess no one ever talks to him, or even looks at him much; they call him El Malinche because the person they're really talking to is Malitzin—La Malinche, you know. Not the captain.



Tlilpotonqui's familiar face had a calming effect on the captain general. The caudillo was still nervous, though. Negotiating with a lord of Tlaxcala or even being formally presented to the emperor wasn't the same as sitting down to talk to him. Waiting stiffly to be taken to the blue throne room to speak to the huey tlatoani, the poor man still thought they would be sitting down to talk.

For the occasion he had donned the noblest, most elegant attire in his bag: a frilled collar, black-and-blue velvet breeches and doublet, and a black cap with a plume—two red feathers with a yellow one sandwiched between them. When he retrieved the cap from the bottom of his campaign sack, Malinalli had taken it from him to restore the panache of the crest the best she could; it had gotten crushed as it was bumped around on their travels. As she tried to smooth the feathers with a bit of saliva, she recalled the glorious plumes that had greeted them that morning.

So nervous were they before the meeting that neither Cortés nor his soldiers tasted the evening refreshments after the beating of the drums, served in the dining room where they had eaten at midday. The captain general demanded that all his men go armed wherever they were in the palace and wherever they were fed; he ordered guards posted on the roof and at the entrances and corners of the palace; he took roll of the captains who were to accompany him to the meeting and demanded they put on their best garb under their armor and helmets; he arranged them in two rows of four because Caldera, the imbecile, had left that afternoon and hadn't returned, and the squad would look mismatched if he arranged them by threes, as he preferred. He took the lead, flanked by his translators. And they stood there at attention until Tlilpotonqui arrived to lead them to

Axayacatl's blue throne room, where the emperor would come when they were ready to receive him.

The cihuacoatl was dressed with even greater pomp than he had been when they were first welcomed into the city. He had put on a black mantle of grackle feathers with the emblems of his family and rank set in gold and silver sequins: broom and dog. He was wearing a great headdress like a half sun of black and blue feathers—Cortés thought it was luck they had chosen the same colors. With the mayor was his son, dressed more simply, though his bearing was arrogant in the way of those yet ignorant of politics. Both were barefoot. When Aguilar noticed this, he put his sandals aside; Malinalli had left hers in her room. Tlilpotonqui delivered the extremely long salutation befitting the occasion. Cortés listened to the translation and said simply: Shall we proceed? First Aguilar and then Malinalli added some polite embellishments to his response.

With the help of the translators, the cihuacoatl went on to lay out the protocol for the meeting. He and the emperor understood that it was unthinkable for the Caxtilteca to appear barefoot, so they could wear their boots, but all the other rules had to be followed.

Once they had entered the hall, they would take the places assigned to them on the benches built into the wall. The Caxtilteca would sit to the left of the throne, and the cihuacoatl and his son to the right. There would be no room for confusion because the empress would be waiting for them on the Colhua side, along with General Cuauhtemoc and his wife, the emperor's daughter. There would be a linen cloth on each seat and the emperor wouldn't enter until all heads were covered with those cloths. No one could look Moctezuma in the face if he didn't command it first, so as soon as they entered the hall they should sit down, veil themselves, and keep their heads lowered unless they were called upon.

The tlatoani would come in through the doorway on the right and greet his family, then he would sit on the throne and call the huey Caxtilteca. Only then could El Malinche remove his veil, rise, and proceed to the middle of the room, followed by his translators, who could also remove their veils. The three had to remain with their heads bowed unless they were

commanded otherwise, and they had to remain standing just within hearing distance of the tlatoani. Tlilpotonqui emphasized this point, saying that under no circumstances could they touch the tlatoani or get too close to him or talk to him if he hadn't addressed them first. Finally he said: Neither General Cuauhtemoc nor my son nor I will be armed, much less the huey tlatoani; the same is expected of you.

Cortés, who had been listening and accepting the protocol with grudging snorts, recoiled at the last instruction. Impossible, he said. For us, weapons are part of our dress. Aguilar and Malinalli translated, rather shamefacedly; the captain general must have thought the mayor was an idiot. Tlilpotonqui raised an eyebrow and said to Malinalli: Tell him it's not a question; if he doesn't follow the rules there is no meeting; they've come here to talk to Moctezuma, he has done them the honor of accepting, and that is how it will be. Cortés made another attempt. I have five hundred men with fire-sticks in the palace, he said, and one hundred hornless deer ready to attack. Remind him, said Tlilpotonqui to Malinalli—without even glancing at the captain general—that the palace is ours and you are here, in our house, by our leave; I have four thousand eagles on the islet ready to defend their emperor; if your soldiers concerned us, we would have disposed of them the moment you landed. The captain general listened to the translation, and in a huff he said: So be it, then, for Spain and the king. With a dramatic flourish he removed his sword belt and tossed it on the floor. His men followed suit.

When they were standing at attention again, the cihuacoatl's son murmured something in his father's ear. They must also remove the daggers from their boots and their jackets, said Tlilpotonqui to Malinalli. Cortés ordered this to be done and it was done. The cihuacoatl added: And one more thing. He pointed to Alvarado. He can't come, he said. Cortés thought about protesting, mostly because once again his ranks would be disordered. Still, he said nothing this time, partly because he understood that the mayor and his son were simply delivering information, not negotiating, but above all because if the meeting had been with King Charles, he himself would have left Alvarado locked in a privy.

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The throne room was in shadow, lit only by two of the four braziers in the corners. At night, the blue walls gave it a crepuscular air, the silence a little more oppressive because of the crackling of the logs that were the only source of light. When they entered, the royal family was already present, their heads covered. After showing Tlacaelel where to sit, Tlilpotonqui noticed with surprise that in addition to the guests he had expected, three of the four councillors were there. The eldest was missing. As the cihuacoatl crossed the hall, he mused that perhaps the healers would not let the old man go out at night, so that he didn't catch cold and die. He took his place beside the royal family, removed the headdress, set it on the floor at his feet, and covered his head with the veil.

An even deeper silence fell, and Moctezuma came in through the doorway opposite the bench where the Caxtilteca were sitting. He was in a splendid mood. He had been given a fiery dinner with chile-spiked chocolate to bring him down, with moderate success: he was no longer tripping, or not as much, but he was still in a freewheeling and inquisitive mood.

As soon as he came in, he clapped twice and asked that El Malinche and his translators remove their veils and come near, to be introduced to his family and friends. He told Cortés that he could raise his head.

He wasn't formally dressed, as he had been for their brief encounter that morning. Even so, he was imposing. He was much taller and stronger than the captain, though he was almost twenty years older; his curly mane, the diadem set carelessly and gracefully atop it, gave him the nonchalant look of those who truly fear nothing. A pity to look so majestic when no one is allowed to see, thought the caudillo.

The members of the tlatoani's court didn't uncover their heads as he introduced them. The translators, their heads lowered, followed behind the captain general to facilitate the conversation. You know the cihuacoatl, said Moctezuma, pointing to Tlilpotonqui. And you know Tlacaelel, his son; he'll be inheriting his father's duties, so I'm training him in the service of the empire.

Tlilpotonqui sensed the clear threat in Moctezuma's words, and he asked himself what his son must feel upon hearing his father so evidently sentenced to death. It was some consolation that with his head covered no one could see that Tlilpotonqui had turned pale, more from sadness than from fear. He liked the world, he liked being a Mexica among the Colhua, he liked being a powerful man descended from a slave, and he liked politics. He was not ready to go.

Next to Tlacaelel was a figure in a huipil. Moctezuma pointed and said: This is my wife, Atotoxtli; you had lunch with her today. The bodies remained inscrutable when he made reference to them. You've also met Cuauhtemoc, who almost ripped off your head—he smiled when he said it; as usual, he was the only one who found his jokes funny. The general stood stiffly under his veil, like a statue of himself. This is General Cuauhtemoc's wife, the emperor went on, my daughter Tecuixpo, who one day will be empress if her husband keeps on as he is. During all this, Cortés was continually murmuring his compliments, which the translators repeated. No one answered him.

Moctezuma then motioned the captain general to the place in the middle of the room where he was to stand before the throne to continue with the audience. Then he said: Malintzin? The translator took a step forward with her head down. Don't translate what comes next. She bowed her head even more deeply, and he looked toward the bench where the court was seated, and said that he would allow Tlacaelel to take off his veil because he had much to learn. Did you explain the song of the ant to your father? the emperor asked. The young man nodded with his head lowered. You can look, said the tlatoani. Then he said: Tlilpotonqui? The cihuacoatl bent his veiled head. You don't need to watch, he said, because you've already seen

it all; but let your son become a man, and go and sit in the place of He Who Looses the Rain; he's gotten very old and we'll soon need to find him a successor. Tlilpotonqui lowered one knee to the ground, touched the floor, and brought his hand to his mouth under the veil. Don't be absurd, said the emperor, I'm going to need friends on the Council when I die. This time no one laughed either, though the joke was a little better. Then he walked to the throne, settled on it, and, gazing at the captain general of the foreigners, he asked: What do you want to talk about, Malinche?

Cortés closed his eyes, opened them, remembered the dream he'd had that afternoon, and said: About Jesus. His men all raised their eyebrows in unison, though no one noticed because they had their heads covered. Yes? replied the emperor.

Tlacaelel regretted not having drunk at least some magic tea in order to enjoy what El Malinche was saying as much as the tlatoani would. When they had learned the sacred songs at the calmecac, everyone had turned up at the study session a little bit high on magic tomatoes so they could hear what the instructor was saying and see it at the same time. From the instructor's mouth had come a plume that turned into animals, gods, ancestors.

At first the captain general stammered, talking in circles. The emperor, who was trying to follow the tangle, asked helpful questions. So he was sacrificed even though he was a god? In explanation, he went on: We got rid of Quetzalcoatl, but we didn't sacrifice him, we aren't stupid. Or: Why was it in Xeluhalem that they sacrificed him? Have you been there? Tlacaelel could see Moctezuma seeing what the translators were saying Cortés was saying, as Cortés himself grew increasingly emotional and eloquent. The desert, the man-god who walked on water, the warriors who tortured him and hanged him from a stick, his disciples who went out into the world to repeat his words, the warriors who sacrificed them at spectacles, Santiago's arrival in Caxtitlan, and how that small kingdom grew bigger and bigger until it became an empire.

Moctezuma sympathized with the picture that emerged of King Charles, a young man who had inherited an entire world after his grandparents'

deaths and who, instead of being tempted by power, had assembled a council of wise men to do things right. He was like the Colhua: though he had foreign blood, he governed his Mexica wisely. The story of King Charles had its appeal, but it was a little boring, so Moctezuma announced that he would be happy to be friends with this tlatoani Xalx and if, as El Malinche said, he was the emperor of the whole world, they could unite their kingdoms. But I'm more interested, he said, in the part about Xeeztus. He says he's interested in Jesus, said Aguilar. He's a god who feeds his flesh to the dogs, like our Xipe, said Moctezuma. Tell me about his mother.

Carried away now by his own eloquence, Cortés described the Annunciation, which interested Moctezuma very much. Like our god Huitzilopochtli's mother, Tonantzin, he noted, who got pregnant when a feather fell in her apron; now tell me about the great pilgrimage of the followers of Xeeztus. And Cortés waxed on with the fluency and charm that had permitted him, against all odds, to reach Tenoxtitlan and speak face-to-face with Moctezuma. Are you an apostle? Are there any among your men? Did Xantiaho have children? Did he use translators as you do? The captain general told him about the day of Pentecost, and Moctezuma opened his eyes very wide and stopped him. He said: Tell that again. Cortés told it again and the tlatoani replied: Of course, they were speaking Xleek.

The Colhua side of the court quaked in their seats. They were approaching something sacred, something vast and awesome, a deeper conjunction than the similarities of Xeeztus to Quetzalcoatl and Xipe or the likeness of Mary to Tonantzin. When Aguilar had translated into Spanish, those on his side quaked too. Stunned, Aguilar said: He asks whether they were speaking Greek. The caudillo's eyes widened. He turned to the cihuacoatl and said: Can I ask the emperor something? Malintzin and Aguilar translated, and Moctezuma said: Go ahead. Greek? asked Cortés. Yes, said Moctezuma, Xleek; it isn't easy to speak, it takes a toll and can be deadly for those with a weak constitution, but yes, we speak Xleek here on very important occasions; you and I can speak it, if you want. Cortés turned to look at his translators when they had finished the sentence. Aguilar shrugged, but Malinalli pulled on his sleeve to get him to focus. She

understood what was about to happen, and she knew it should proceed without interruption.

Cortés watched Moctezuma take a packet tied with ribbon out of a leather sack he carried slung at his side with his bag of tobacco. He undid it and held it out in his hand. Inside were two very fine slices of cactus, glazed with honey. He said: Come closer, this is cactus-of-tongues, for speaking in Xleek; if we take it we'll understand each other and we won't need translators anymore; you can tell me more about Xeetzus.

Aguilar, once he had translated, said, Hernando. Malinalli pulled on his arm and whispered in his ear, in Spanish: Let him do it, let him know how it feels to be fucked in the ass. The friar, startled by his fellow translator's Spanish, understood that circumstances were now beyond his control. He relented.

The captain general hesitated. Or don't you have the balls? asked Moctezuma with a smile. Aguilar and Malinalli translated. Cortés stepped forward and took the cactus, waiting for Moctezuma to put his own piece in his mouth and chew before doing the same. He closed his eyes and opened them again, feeling the numbing effects of the plant's bitter juices on his tongue, the roof of his mouth, and his gums. He watched how Moctezuma, after chewing for a moment, spat the rest of the cactus into his hand, offering up a small, almost silent prayer. He did likewise, commending himself to the Virgin, and he felt Mary's presence in the hall.

Then the emperor, who was beginning to glow; the emperor, whose arm moved in stutter-stop; the emperor, whose nose was sometimes a nose and sometimes the beak of a magnificent giant eagle, said: It tastes terrible and it's dangerous, but very effective. He heard Malinalli saying the exact same thing and then Aguilar repeating it. He turned to look at them and noticed that they had changed clothes. He didn't remember the friar being all in black, a black so dark he was sure that if he looked carefully, he'd see stars. Much less Malinalli covered in birds and flowers. Hmm, he said to himself, and he heard his inner voice as if it came from outside. Then he said he didn't need translating now and Aguilar told him he was speaking in Greek, which was a portent, and he saw that Aguilar was more Maya than

Christian, and he thought, Shit, he's betrayed me, but it was too late, because everything was moving much faster than normal. Terrified, he turned to the emperor to ask how to get out of this place they were in. Moctezuma had lost his good cheer, the friendliness he'd shown during their conversation. In fact, Moctezuma seemed to have lost Moctezuma, or almost all of him. Claws, beak, feathers. He was an animal, but when he spoke, he was still Moctezuma. He spread his wings, and in a voice like thunder he said that everyone must leave the hall. Not Tlacaelel, he roared, he'll be witness. And Cortés watched his terrified comrades, dark and impenetrable as if hewn from stone, stampede out, crossing themselves. As they left each became a different animal, and his favorite was Oviedo, a suckling pig. The members of the court vanished like scraps of paper in the wind, all but Tlacaelel, who was strangely still himself, though a little brighter. Cortés realized that he had been chosen as witness because he was the purest of heart.

He turned toward the emperor and saw that he was once again Moctezuma, or Moctezuma multiplied and sometimes plumed. The tlatoani said: Don't be afraid, you're seeing me and my nagual, but I'm here with you, it's like a fit of drunkenness, very brief, it vanishes on its own, it doesn't last, like flowers; dream now.



Hernando sat down on the ground and saw before him an exquisite painting of a lady busying herself at some task. It was one of those banal, intimate paintings; secular paintings, the kind the Flemish made. There was no scenery, nothing around her, only the lady at work. He lay back to see the painting in all its splendor, and then he realized the lady was in a kitchen. It was his mother. There was a moment of darkness and then came another painting, of his Jesuit preceptor at school; he had a book in his hand and a lash in the other. Laughter rose up in him. Fade to black and then a field in Extremadura with Juana in the distance, the washerwoman who'd made him a man. Fade to black and there was Lola, the dog he'd loved and left in Medellín. Black: the University of Salamanca. Black: the tavern. Black: the whores. Black: the duel. The bailiffs, Sevilla, Cuba, the adelantado handing him a book, the sea, Cozumel, Cholula running with blood. That very morning.

Then he got up from the ground and looked down on himself dreaming. He scratched his head. He was dreaming that he was dreaming. Mentally he saw himself dreaming that he was dreaming, and he could also see himself dreaming that he was dreaming. Now he remembered himself dreaming and also watching himself dreaming. And he saw himself remembering himself dreaming. I'm still drunk, he thought, I'd better go. And he said good night to Moctezuma and thanked him.

As the emperor bade him farewell, still in Greek, he said he'd been told that Cortés had been to the temple with his men and it hadn't gone well; just now he was busy with the Tlaxcalteca in Iztapalapa and the Texcoca in the middle of a civil war, but in two or three days they would go together to the

temple so Cortés could see the house of the emperor's gods and the Caxtilteca would be treated as his guests deserved.

Wonderful, said Cortés, and he made his way along the palace corridors to his room. He didn't see the captains, or Malinalli. Still addled by the effects of the cactus-of-tongues, he thought they must be at dinner, but he was tired, so he got into bed and fell asleep.

The next morning everything was the same as it had been the day before. His head hurt a little and there wasn't much to do other than eat, nap, or read. So that's what he did. Days went by.

Waiting for word from Moctezuma was boring. He spent most of his time playing cards with the captains and having sex with Marina. One day they went to the market where Caldera had gone missing. Another day they went to see the flower plots. On the fourth day the mayor came back for them and told them Moctezuma was waiting for them on the temple steps. The Spaniards visited the temple. They did other things together. They went hunting. One day, bored as usual, they found a false wall in Axayacatl's palace and upon demolishing it they discovered a treasure hoard and melted it down. When Moctezuma said they couldn't do that, it was his family's gold, in the absence of guards they arrested the tlatoani. They locked him up with the mayor, who died of grief the next day.

Cortés had to return to the coast to meet his fellow countryman Narváez, who was on the way to arrest him. Moctezuma, still in good humor despite being a prisoner, loaned him a few squadrons of warriors to help along the way. He went back to the Gulf, and though he failed to convince Narváez to join his venture, the latter let any willing soldier follow Cortés to the capital. He returned to Tenoxtitlan with a bigger army, more cannon, horses, and crossbows. Under his arm he had an unsuspected weapon: smallpox. Upon his return he learned that Alvarado had committed an outrage and the city had risen up. Moctezuma was very angry. During an argument, Alvarado, drunk, stabbed the tlatoani. Cortés was sorry because he had liked Moctezuma, but he agreed to impale him on a stick and take him out on the balcony, shaking him like a puppet until some of his subjects, already enraged, threw a stone at the emperor. The Spaniards

pretended it had been the Mexica who killed him, and they sent Tlacaelel and the dead tlatoani's brother into the city to pacify the people. They never returned.

They had to flee. They lost men, horses, and most of the treasure. Cortés wept under an ahuehuete tree, and they made their way to Tlaxcala to ask for refuge. Then came the battle of Otumba, where their luck changed. Cortés himself drove a lance through Tlacaelel—another splendid specimen who had slipped through his fingers—and the plague spread its black mantle over the Anahuac, killing Moctezuma's younger brother, who had just been anointed emperor.

Amid the chaos, they returned with the Tlaxcalteca and Huexotzinco and Totonac and Otomí and Texcoca armies, and they besieged the city, and on August 13 in the Year of Our Lord 1521, the day of Saint Hippolytus, Cuauhtemoc was taken prisoner and the great city of Mehxicoh-Tenoxtitlan fell.

The first bishop arrived and founded a library for the Spaniards and a university for the macehualtin. Then came the apparition of Guadalupe, the mines of Taxco and Zacatecas, the torrents of gold and silver. Cortés was put on trial, and neither won nor lost, but the new kingdom that he had called New Spain grew so much that it stretched all the way to another enormous kingdom to the north, to be called New Mexico. And the kingdom of New Galicia that lay nearby, where once the Purepecha had ruled, now stretched all the way over the sea to some islands that were almost Cathay, baptized in the name of Prince Philip, son of Charles.

Where Tenoxtitlan had been there was now a Spanish city: palaces, churches, convents. There was a nun who was purest light, who also dreamed, and who, though she spoke Spanish, ate mole and pipián and papalo and nogada. It was a huge country: ravines, mountains, deserts, jungles. But it was a country of purest suffering too. The macehualtin uprisings, the slave ships, the priests fighting under the banner of Guadalupe, a republic fractured yet worthy in its way. The fucking gringos; a Zapotec tlatoani who won a war with France. Books, wars, universities, cities with many more people than anyone could ever have imagined;

another tlatoani, a Mixtec—everybody was Oaxacan—and Eufemio Zapata walking through Moctezuma's palace dressed like a Spaniard; another republic that rose the best it could; and another hundred years and this book and you reading it and it was then that Hernando woke up.

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Moctezuma and Tlacaelel were gazing at him curiously when he opened his eyes. He felt insecure, exposed, lying there on his stomach propped up on his elbows like a boy reading a novel of chivalry. As he rose, he recovered his composure: he was going to win. He had seen it: he was going to win. He stood taller. All of this would be called New Spain and his name would be remembered forever. He asked Moctezuma to take him to see the temple, but his words were now unintelligible to the tlatoani, who continued to watch him curiously, scratching his chin. The emperor scowled, clapped his hands, and said something in his own tongue, which Cortés no longer understood.

Tlacaelel did. What Moctezuma said was: Now, Cuitlahuac.

And on the dimly lit back wall, Moctezuma's younger brother opened his eyes. The prince was painted the same blue as the wall, his feet and shins the ocher of its skirt.

He approached Cortés, put his hands in his mouth, pulled until his jaw broke, and bent his skull backward until his spine snapped. Then the tlatoani turned to Tlacaelel and told him to go find his father.

Tlilpotonqui hurried in shortly after. He saw Cortés's broken body sprawled on the floor and Cuitlahuac naked and blue standing next to a brazier, leaning against the wall and nearly vanishing into it. The huey tlatoani said, Tell Cuauhtemoc to loose the eagles, and let Tlacaelel lead the defense against Texcoco; he'll be a great cihuacoatl when He Who Looses the Rain leaves us and you take his place on the Council. Tlilpotonqui bowed his head. And if anyone says the word *ant* again in this empire, said the huey tlatoani as he got up from Axcayacatl's throne and shook out his

cape, kill him, but first remind him that the ant may not talk, but in the end he always shows the way.

Before he returned alone to his palace, he ordered Cuitlahuac to secure the courtyard of the *cahuayos*—there was only one guard.

Moctezuma crossed the street, deserted at that hour, and climbed the steps to the citadel. By the time he stopped to splash his face in the waters of the sacred spring, cries could be heard. The eagle warriors—lances, shields, clubs, headdresses—were streaming from colleges, palaces, and temples on their way to the Old Houses, ululating majestically as they went. He adjusted his tiara, but it still sat a little crooked.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea that writing happens in enlightened solitude is a relic of Romanticism.

The original title of *You Dream of Empires* is *Tu sueño imperios han sido*, a line from the seventeenth-century Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón's *Life Is a Dream*. Cortés's cactus-of-tongues-induced trance is inspired by Sergio Pitol's voyage to the center of hypnosis in *The Art of Flight*, and the captain general's self-absorption harks back to Salvador Elizondo's *El grafógrafo* (The Graphographer). The figures of the conquistadores and Malinalli are indebted to *La desnudez como naufragio: Borriones y borradores* (Nakedness as Shipwreck: Erasures and Rough Drafts) by Margo Glantz. The "tla-tla" (rendered in English as "clack-clack") of Caldera's boots as he walks through the Old Houses is the sound of Eufemio Zapata's huaraches as he shows novelist Martín Luis Guzmán around the Palacio Nacional in *El águila y la serpiente* (The Eagle and the Snake). The poet whom Cuauhtemoc encounters reciting his own verses is Ramón López Velarde. The overall architecture of the novel is Borgesian, in conversation with "The Secret Miracle."

Whatever this book may get right in its vision of the past is based on the standard sources—Cortés's letter of 1520, the *Annals of Tlatelolco*, Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *True History*, Sahagún's *General History*, and Durán's *History of the Indies*—and the classics that have determined our interpretations of them, by León-Portilla, Martínez, Thomas, etc. Recent studies on pre-Hispanic Mexico and first contact by Michel Graulich, Serge Gruzinski, Alfredo López Austin, Leonardo López Luján, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Barbara E. Mundy, Matthew Restall, and Camilla Townsend have fine-tuned those interpretations.

The description of the Tenochtitlan citadel owes much of its precision and—I hope—force to the invaluable assistance of archaeologist Raúl Barrera Rodríguez. One marvelous morning he took me for a walk beneath the center of Mexico City, where Tenochtitlan lies intact. I was able to see it, and I’m eternally grateful to him and his team.

Tu imperio sueños han sido or its English-language translation was read at various stages by Natasha Wimmer, Ria Julien, Juan Enrigue, Silvia Sensé, Paola Morán, Julieta García, Aimé Iglesias Lukin, Laura Perciasepe, Ellie Steel, Chandra Wohleber, Lauren Riebs, and Nicole Wayland. Their opinions, observations, and corrections improved the book infinitely.

No one writes in solitude—least of all me. Thank you,

ÁE

New York City, Shelter Island, and Mexico City in the plague years of 2020–2022

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