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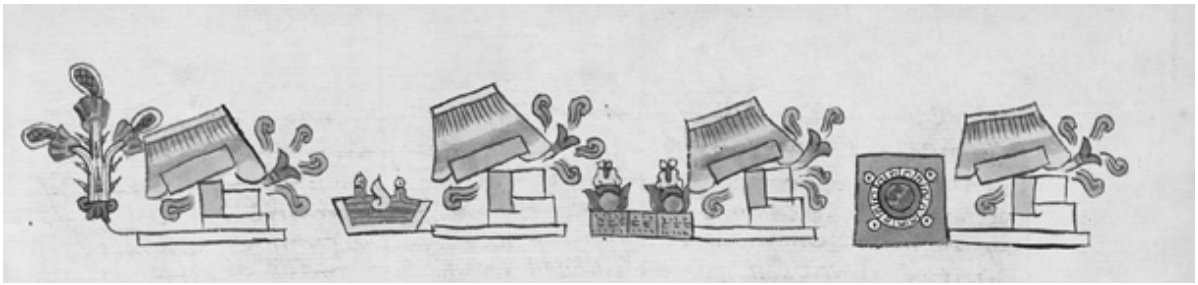
A War to End All Wars

1520–1521



Temples burn in war. The Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Selden. A.1, folio 6r.

The smell of the burning bodies was rank in the air. But worse was the smell of the *miccatzintli*, the poor dead woman who had not been moved for days. She lay where she was, because there was no one left in the palace strong enough to cope with the problem. The sickness, like nothing ever seen before, had struck not long after the unwelcome strangers had been forced to leave Tenochtitlan. Now Moctezuma's young daughter looked at her sisters lying with her on the soiled sleeping mats. They were still alive. When they looked back at her, their dark eyes reflected her own terror. Their faces, their arms, all their parts were covered with the vile sores. But they were beginning to heal; they did not seem to be at the point of death. Not like before, in the fevered haze, when she thought she knew they were all perishing, all disappearing—it was the same word.[1]

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NONE OF THE royal children had ever known a day's hunger until now. Even through this scourge, they had had good care as long as there were any servants left to tend to them: their good fortune had helped them survive. It helped that they were grown girls, too. Later, Moctezuma's daughter would find that her younger siblings—children recently born to the newest wives—had died.[2] Nor were they the only ones gone. Others had been "erased"—as she would have described it—weeks before the pox struck. Two of her brothers had been accidentally killed when she herself was rescued from the strangers,[3] the night the Spaniards were ejected. People said that her father, the Lord Moctezuma himself, had been found strangled by the Spaniards like a common criminal.[4] It was probably true. However it had happened, he was gone, as were the others. Like the heroes in the songs, they would never come back. Time on earth was fleeting, the singers always said. "Are we born twice on this earth?" the singers called out when people died. And the chorus knew the tragic, angry, tear-laden response, "No!" The child understood what they meant now.

Tecuichpotzin (Tek-weech-PO-tzin, Lordly Daughter) was about eleven years old.[5] She had experienced so much horror in the past year that her mind had almost certainly chosen to forget some of it, as she needed to use the wits she had left to make it from day to day. It had been a joyous moment when the Spaniards left, when they were pushed out of the seething, resentful city and forced to flee for their lives. If she had known then that the ordeal was far from over, that the worst was yet to come, she might not have found the fortitude to forge ahead and join her people in putting their world back together. But she was eleven, with a child's zest for living, and she had her beloved sisters at her side. And of course she had not known that the sickness stalked them. So when the Spaniards left, she—like all the other women—reached for a broom and began the holy act of sweeping.[6] She swept the cobwebs, both literal and figurative, out the door.

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HAD ANYONE ASKED Tecuichpotzin, she undoubtedly would have said that the problems had started even before the strangers and their Tlaxcalan allies had crossed the causeway into her world. Her father's temper had been frayed for months before that moment, as he had struggled to determine the best course of action. He could not afford the casualties of a battle with the newcomers so close to home, in front of all their allies. His offers of tribute, no matter how great or dedicated to what god, had proven ineffective in turning the marching army from its course. Eventually he determined that there was nothing to be done but to welcome them, even act as though he expected them—and gather as much information as he could. There had been tensions from the earliest moments of their arrival when Hernando Cortés dismounted from his horse, took a few steps forward, and made as if to embrace Moctezuma. The tlatoani's shocked retainers had stepped forward quickly to prevent such marked disrespect. They waited nervously as gifts were exchanged. Cortés presented a necklace of pearls and cut glass. Moctezuma signaled that a servant bring forth a necklace of red snail shells, hung with beautifully crafted shrimp made of gold. Then he gave orders that the newcomers follow him, as he would speak with the leaders indoors.[7]

To this day we do not know exactly what the great men said to each other. Tecuichpotzin did not hear what passed between them; few did. A year later, Cortés made the remarkable claim that Moctezuma had immediately and contentedly surrendered his kingdom to the newcomers, on the grounds that an ancestor of his had gone away generations before, and that he and his people had long expected that his descendants would return and claim the kingdom. Cortés added that a few days later (because he doubted that he really had full control) he had placed Moctezuma under house arrest and never let him walk free again. Cortés's statements would be utterly mystifying—except that they were absolutely necessary for him to make at the time. When he wrote of these events a year later, the Mexica people had ousted him and all his forces from the city. At that point, he was desperately trying to orchestrate a conquest from near the coast, in conjunction with indigenous allies and newly arrived Spaniards. He did not want to look like a loser, but

instead like a loyal servant to the Spanish monarch who had already accomplished great things and would soon do more. According to Spanish law, he was only in the right in launching this war in the name of the king … if in fact he was attempting to retake a part of the kingdom that was in rebellion. He had no authority to stir up trouble by making war against a foreign state that had just ejected him. Thus it was essential that the Mexica people were understood to have accepted Spanish rule in the first place, so that their present choices could be interpreted as acts of rebellion.[8]

When Cortés's men wrote about these events in later years, they often forgot what they were supposed to say. Cortés, for example, claimed that his control had been complete from the beginning, and he asserted that he had ended human sacrifice. "While I stayed … I did not see a living creature killed or sacrificed." But Bernal Díaz admitted, "The great Moctezuma continued to show his accustomed good will towards us, but never ceased his daily sacrifices of human beings. Cortés tried to dissuade him but met with no success."[9] Another man seemed to remember mid-paragraph that Moctezuma was supposed to have been their prisoner. "[His people] brought him river and sea fish of all kinds, besides all kinds of fruit from the sea coast as well as the highlands. The kinds of bread they brought were greatly varied…. He was not served on gold or silver because he was in captivity, but it is likely that he had a great table service of gold and silver."[10]

It is more than likely that Cortés had heard about the Mexica history of schisms and migrations through Malintzin or perhaps others. Moctezuma knew well that his own ancestors were invaders and that there had been other waves of invaders, some of whom had moved on or turned back. It would make sense for him to believe—or at least seem to believe, in front of his people—that the strangers were other descendants of his own fearsome ancestors, in short, that these visitors were long-lost relatives, whose existence did not surprise him at all. Such a scenario makes perfect sense. But we can't know with any certainty what really passed in that first conference between the Mexica tlatoani and the men from Europe. All that the children of the indigenous elites ever mentioned was that Moctezuma recounted his own ancestral lineage in great detail, before calling himself the newcomers' "poor vassal." If he really said that, then he was only underscoring his great power in the speech of reversal that constituted the epitome of politeness in the Nahua world. It certainly would not have been an indication that he actually intended to relinquish his throne without further ado.[11]

What is clear is that Moctezuma continued to govern in the weeks and months that followed, and that he treated the strangers, even the Tlaxcalan leaders, like honored guests, despite the drain on his resources that feeding so large a company entailed. He persistently questioned them through Malintzin. The Spaniards toured the city, rudely demanding gifts everywhere they went. Their hosts remembered them chortling and slapping each other on the back when they saw Moctezuma's personal storehouse and were told they could take what they liked. The Spaniards took beautiful gold jewelry and melted it down to make bricks; the Tlaxcalan warlords preferred polished jade. Moctezuma showed the strangers maps and tribute lists in an

effort to get them to name their price and go away. He clearly hoped to convince them to leave and to have established the most favorable possible relationship with them by the time they did.[12]

Tellingly, Moctezuma sent for Tecuichpotzin and two of her sisters to be turned over to the newcomers as potential brides. It was a test. If the strangers treated them only as concubines and not as brides, it would be bad news, but he would at least know where he stood. The royal sisters, presented in all their finery, kept their eyes down and maintained a respectful silence as their elders made the requisite rhetorical speeches and Malintzin listened.[13] The translator learned that Moctezuma had a number of older daughters who were already married into the royal houses of Chalco, Culhuacan, Tlacopan, and other important altepetls. These three daughters were the girls presently of marriageable age. The mother of two of them was the daughter of the Cihuacoatl, the leading military commander.[14] The mother of Tecuichpotzin, or Lordly Daughter, was a daughter of the former king Ahuitzotl, so this child's marriage was of great political significance, as her heritage brought together both the rival branches of the royal family, the one descended from Huitzilihuitl and the one descended from Itzcoatl.[15] Moctezuma kept the existence of a younger sister of hers a secret from the Spaniards, so that they did not even know of her until years later. Perhaps he thought she might be useful as a political pawn some day in the future, or her Tepanec mother had insisted on hiding the girl, or both. Another young boy, the child of a woman from Teotihuacan, was also purposely hidden from the Spaniards.[16]

Malintzin managed to convey to the strangers—utterly ignorant of the complex politics of marriage in this part of the world—that Tecuichpotzin was the daughter of a high-ranking mother and thus a princess of significance. This they understood. When they baptized her, they named her Isabel, in honor of Queen Isabella, who had launched the first ships to the New World. They called the other girls "María" and "Mariana."[17] Then they were taken away to live with the Spaniards in their quarters in Axayacatl's former palace. What happened to them there is undocumented, but some of the Spaniards later said that Cortés violated multiple princesses during those early years; and other, less public figures than Cortés would never have been brought to account for anything they might have done.[18]

The weeks of tension dragged on. Then in April of 1520, the situation changed dramatically. Moctezuma received news from his network of messengers that at least eight hundred more Spaniards in thirteen ships had arrived on the coast.[19] The Spaniards did not yet know. The tlatoani eventually decided to tell them, in order to gauge their reaction. He gave the news to Malintzin, who turned to tell Jerónimo de Aguilar, who said the words aloud in Spanish. Cortés could not hide the panic he experienced in that moment.

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WHEN ALONSO DE PUERTOCARRERO had sailed from Veracruz, the plan had been to make straight for Spain. But one of the Spaniards on board had lands and loved ones on the north coast of Cuba.

Stopping briefly at his plantation had proven irresistible. They left within just a few days, but word soon spread. The angry governor, Diego de Velázquez, made a futile effort to overtake the scofflaws on the high seas, and he brought in for questioning all those who had learned anything during the ship's brief stopover. Velázquez, who had once led the brutal conquest of the island of Cuba, now decided that he was extremely concerned about the violence Cortés had inflicted on the Indians along the Maya coast. He wrote of his concerns to the king, and assured him he would immediately send Captain Pánfilo de Narváez in pursuit of the renegade. Narváez had been his second-in-command in the taking of Cuba and now held a legal permit to explore the mainland. Unlike Cortés, he said, he would establish a suitable relationship with the people there.

Puertocarrero docked in Spain on November 5th, and the letter from the enraged Cuban governor arrived shortly after. Puertocarrero and other speakers on behalf of Cortés's expedition—such as his father, Martín Cortés—did their best to defend the operation in the king's eyes. They delivered all the gold and other exotic treasures the expedition had been able to collect along the coast. Some of the material was sent on tour for exhibition throughout the realms of the Holy Roman Emperor. In July, in the town hall in Brussels, the artist Albrecht Dürer saw some of the tiny, lifelike animals the indigenous people had made out of gold. "All the days of my life," he wrote, "I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart so much as these things, for I have seen among them wonderful works of art, and I have marveled at the subtle intellects of men in foreign parts." The stories, of course, traveled even faster than the exhibit—many of them full of wild exaggeration. Unbeknown to him, Cortés became a famous man in Europe. His father immediately began to outfit a shipload of supplies. Ships and printing presses ensured that the news passed from port to port in weeks rather than years, a speed that was to make a huge difference. Within months, there were people in every part of western Europe considering the possibility of investing in the newly discovered lands or even going there themselves.[20]

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IN THE MEANTIME, across the sea, both Cortés and Moctezuma were busy assessing future possibilities. Cortés knew that his messengers had not been gone long enough to have sent the many well-outfitted ships so rapidly. The recently arrived fleet had to have come from his would-be nemesis, governor Velázquez. Somehow, either through Malintzin or some other Nahua who was learning Spanish—perhaps even Tecuichpotzin—Moctezuma learned of Cortés's tension and the reason for it. He detected an opportunity to divide the Spaniards and, hopefully, defeat them. For the first time, he ordered his people to begin preparations for war—though he could not have been entirely certain which group of the outsiders he would initially side with.[21]

In desperation, Cortés risked all by doing what he only claimed he had done before: he took Moctezuma hostage—literally put him irons, where he would remain for about eighty days.[22] Only with a knife at

Moctezuma's throat could Cortés assure the newly arriving Spaniards that he was in control of the kingdom and thus hopefully win their allegiance. And only in doing that could he stave off a violent rejection on the part of the Indians: this was a tried-and-true practice of medieval Spanish warfare.[23] The Spaniards took Moctezuma by surprise, dragged him back to their quarters, and guarded him around the clock, threatening to kill him if he ordered his people to resist. Then Cortés took Malintzin and a substantial portion of his men and traveled with haste down to the coast.[24]

Once there, they sent messages and bribes to key men in Narváez's camp, assuring them that they were welcome to join them in dividing up the riches of Mexico if they chose. At the end of May, they attacked the camp suddenly in the middle of the night. The fighting was brief—only about ten men died—for once the obstreperous Narváez was captured, few others seemed to have the heart to go on with the battle. They reached an accord almost immediately. Cortés now had approximately eight hundred more men armed with steel, eighty additional horses, and several ships full of supplies at his disposal. Now he could truly bring down Moctezuma, he thought. They even had wine from home with which to celebrate.

On the twelfth day, however, as Cortés was in the midst of making plans and arrangements, some Tlaxcalans brought Malintzin a devastating piece of news. The people of Tenochtitlan were in open rebellion. The Spanish forces had turned Axayacatl's palace into a fortress, but they could not hold out much longer. They had every reason to believe it was the beginning of the end. The next day, two more Tlaxcalans arrived, this time carrying a smuggled-out letter from the Spaniards. Cortés remembered reading it. "I must," they begged, "for the love of God come to their aid as swiftly as possible."[25]

They set out at once. The trek up into the mountains was more than a little disconcerting. "Not once in my journey did any of Moctezuma's people come to welcome me as they had before," Cortés wrote. "All the land was in revolt and almost uninhabited, which aroused in me a terrible suspicion that the Spaniards in the city were dead and that all the natives had gathered waiting to surprise me in some pass or other place where they might have the advantage of me."[26] Later he would learn that a much smaller group that had traveled separately, whom he had dispatched before receiving the bad news, had in fact been attacked in a mountain pass, imprisoned, and eventually killed down to the last person—and animal. This group had included Spanish women and children, enslaved Africans, and other servants carrying burdens and leading livestock. Despite what Cortés had learned about the need for numbers and cavalry, they had been sent ahead because they would travel more slowly and would need more time to cover the same ground. As it turned out, they paid for their commander's arrogant decision with their lives.[27] Cortés's own force was large enough to be relatively invulnerable while on the move. No one tried to stop them, not even when they reached the city. They passed easily through the silent streets to Axayacatl's palace, where they were greeted by their compatriots with great joy. It was to be the last laughter the Spaniards shared for quite some time, for the next morning, the Mexica attacked.

The signs of trouble had begun three weeks earlier. The resentment of the city's people had become evident when they stopped delivering food to the strangers. A young woman who had been paid to do their laundry was found dead near their quarters, a clear sign to others not to do business with them. The Spaniards sent clusters of armed men to the market to obtain food, and they stored what they brought back. Meanwhile, the city people were preparing for an important holy day, the celebration of Toxcatl, at which the altepetl's warriors danced before a huge figure of the god Huitzilopochtli. Pedro de Alvarado, who had been left in charge, said that he began to fear they planned to use the dance to launch a war. This seems highly unlikely; there were far more efficient ways for the Mexica to overcome the Spaniards, as events would later prove. But Alvarado was not known for his acumen. Perhaps he simply believed that a struggle was coming and that whoever attacked first would secure victory. In that case, he sought only an excuse, and the days of warlike dancing provided one.[28]

What followed was etched in the altepetl's memory for many years to come. Thirty years later, a survivor told a young listener what had happened:

> The festivity was being observed and there was dancing and singing, with voices raised in song. The singing was like the noise of waves breaking against the rocks. When … the moment had come for the Spaniards to do their killing, they came out equipped for battle. They came and closed off each of the places where people went in and out [of the courtyard]…. And when they had closed these exits, they stationed themselves in each, and no one could come out anymore.
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> When this had been done, they went into the temple courtyard to kill the people. Those whose assignment it was to do the killing just went on foot, each with his metal sword and leather shield…. Then they surrounded those who were dancing, going among the cylindrical drums. They struck a drummer's arms; both of his hands were severed. Then they struck his neck; his head landed far away. Then they stabbed everyone with iron lances and struck them with iron swords. They struck some in the belly, and then their entrails came spilling out…. Those who tried to escape could go nowhere. When anyone tried to go out, at the entryways they struck and stabbed him.[29]

Yet a few did escape, for it was they who told posterity what had happened. They hid where they could. "Some climbed up the wall and were able to escape. Some went into the various [surrounding] calpolli temples and took refuge there. Some took refuge among those who had really died, feigning death…. The blood of the warriors ran like water."

That evening, Mexica warriors raised their cry promising vengeance. The Spaniards and those Tlaxcalans who were still in the city walled themselves into their "fortress" and waited. The Mexica attacked en masse, but they couldn't penetrate the wall of crossbows and steel lances. Then suddenly, they ceased their attack. For more than twenty days, they left the Spanish alone in silence and uncertainty. Thirty

years later, an old man recalled what they had been doing. “The canals were excavated, widened, deepened, the sides made steeper. Everywhere the canals were made more difficult to pass. And on the roads, walls were built, and the passageways between houses made more difficult.”[30] They were preparing, in short, for a cataclysmic urban battle. During that period, Cortés and his army reentered the city and made their way back to their quarters.

When the warriors were ready and felt the strangers had grown hungry enough, they attacked. For seven days, Tecuichpotzin and her sisters listened to the sounds of battle—to the rising murmurs and then shouts of their own warriors, and then the noise of the harquebuses (a heavy matchlock weapon) firing grapeshot among them, and the hissing crossbows slinging forth iron bolts or whatever came to hand. The fighting began anew every day at dawn as soon as it was light enough to see. The Spaniards could not escape, but the Mexica could not penetrate their defenses, either. At length Moctezuma tried to speak to the people from a rooftop, conveying his words through the booming voice of a younger man who served as his mouthpiece. His message went something like this:

> Let the Mexica hear! We are not their match. May the people be dissuaded [from further fighting]. May the arrows and shields of war be laid down. The poor old men and women, the common people, the infants who toddle and crawl, who lie in the cradle or on the cradle board and know nothing yet, all are suffering. This is why your ruler says, “We are not their match. Let everyone be dissuaded.”[31]

In later years, these words were taken out of context and used to try to prove that Moctezuma was a coward, interested only in saving himself. But all the old histories and prayers make it clear that the Nahuas understood a ruler to have one paramount duty—and that was to save the lives of his people, down to the youngest babies, so that the altepetl could continue into the future. A ruler who lost his head, or who was arrogant and stubborn and committed his people to unwinnable wars, was the lowest of the low. He did not have a chief’s wisdom, the perspective of a true leader.[32] Moctezuma had eighteen years of experience as a ruler of tens of thousands of his people and was well aware of how many of the people around them hated the Mexica. Furthermore, he had spent the last half year conversing in depth with Malintzin and the Spaniards, and he knew that many more of the strangers were coming. He understood that in this case, no victory would be permanent. He was simply telling his people the truth as he saw it.

The young warriors, however, did not see the situation this way. It was not their duty to be circumspect but rather to fight to the death, if necessary, to defend their honor. A younger half brother of Moctezuma, the militant Cuitlahuac of Iztapalapan, emerged as the de facto leader of the city’s enraged young men. The long-term consequences of their actions were not uppermost in their mind. What they knew was that they could endure no more. Speaking through Malintzin, Cuitlahuac’s messengers informed Cortés in no uncertain terms of how things stood:

> They were all determined to perish or have done with us, and … I should look and see how full of people were all those streets and squares and rooftops. Furthermore, they had calculated that [even] if 25,000 of them died for every one of us, they would finish with us first, for they were many and we were but few. They told me that all the causeways into the city were dismantled—which in fact was true, for all had been dismantled save one—and that we had no way of escape except over the water. They well knew that we had few provisions and little fresh water, and, therefore, could not last long because we would die of hunger if they did not kill us first.[33]

Cortés understood that escape from the island city offered the Spaniards their only hope of survival. There was one causeway left still connecting the isle and the mainland, but the segments connecting its separate segments had been destroyed, so that it was impassable. They would not let this stop them: some of the men worked all through one night constructing a portable bridge out of whatever wood they had available. Others packed the most important tools and valuables, including the gold they had collected for King Charles. Cortés organized a guard of thirty men who would surround and escort Malintzin and the Tlaxcalan princess "Luisa" (the nobleman Xicotencatl's daughter, now the common-law wife of Pedro de Alvarado), the two women being at this point the Spaniards' most valuable assets. He also ordered that "Isabel" and her siblings, Moctezuma's children, were to be taken along as hostages. According to the Indians, this was the moment when he commanded that Moctezuma be killed, lest the tlatoani serve as a rallying point for his people, though Cortés himself never admitted he had done so. He insisted that the angry young warriors had killed their own king.

Before midnight on the seventh day, the Spaniards suddenly broke through the gates of the palace in what was at first an organized body; they then traveled as quietly as possible down the avenue that became the causeway over the lake. The portable bridge served them well at the first place they found themselves facing open water, but they were unable to pick the bridge up and move it to the next location where it was needed. They went forward with only some wooden beams they had taken from the palace to help them with the next crossings. Some later said it was a woman who first saw them and shouted aloud, sounding the alarm. Warriors in canoes descended on their fleeing enemies from all sides: they were intent on destroying the makeshift bridges and stabbing upward at the armored horses on the causeway, as they were vulnerable from below. They killed fifty-six of the eighty or so horses that night. At the second place where the causeway was broken—and where there was no bridge, just a few boards—the escaping forces drowned in droves. The Mexica later recalled what the Spanish never spoke of: "It was as though they had fallen off a precipice; they all fell and dropped in, the Tlaxcalans … and the Spaniards, along with the horses and some women [they had with them]. The canal was completely full of them, full to the very top. And those who came last just passed and crossed over on people …"—they hesitated over the words—"… on top of the bodies."[34]

Approximately two-thirds of the Spaniards died that night, and probably an even greater proportion of the many Tlaxcalans still in the city, about six hundred Europeans and many more Indians. Cortés estimated the dead at two thousand, including the indigenous.[35] Almost all of the men who had come with Narváez were killed, for most of them were in the rear. The only ones who stood a good chance of surviving the ordeal were those who departed first. They had surprise on their side, and the makeshift bridges were still in good condition. Those who came later faced a disaster zone. Bernal Díaz, who had a horse at that time, had been ordered to act as a rear guard. When he was old, he still struggled with his conscience whenever he thought of the "Noche Triste," as it was called, for he had certainly not remained behind until the bitter end. "I declare that if the horsemen had waited for the soldiers at each bridge, it would have been the end of us all: not one of us would have survived. The lake was full of canoes…. What more could we have attempted than we did, which was to charge and deal sword thrusts at those who tried to seize us [from below], and push ahead till we were off the causeway?"[36] They had lost everything—the gold, their guns, most of the horses. But the few hundred who were left still wore their armor, still had their swords—and could not be easily attacked if they stayed together. And they still had Malintzin and the Tlaxcalan princess. It was toward Tlaxcala that they now turned.

Cortés was told that all the Mexica hostages, including Isabel and her siblings, had been killed in the mêlée, but that was not the truth. The girls had been recognized, and their people surged forward to help them. Isabel's brothers had, in fact, accidentally been killed. Later, as the people collected the masses of bodies, "they came upon Moctezuma's son Chimalpopoca lying hit by a barbed dart."[37] But Isabel was pulled into the arms of her people, along with her sisters, and taken to Cuitlahuac.

Then, in a matter of weeks, the smallpox struck.

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LA VIRUELA HAD COME ABOARD one of Narváez's ships as an invisible passenger, perhaps in a scab in a blanket. Or perhaps it was carried by a man who did not know he was sick until they landed, since the ten-day incubation period was longer than the voyage from the Caribbean. In essence, the microbe was part of the panoply of military advantages that had accrued to the Old World. The people had always lived with their farm animals, exposing themselves to myriad viruses, but then the highly developed trade and transportation routes had spread the germs with deadly efficiency. The only silver lining was that those who did not die of a particular pest were immune from it for the rest of their lives. And in this regard, their vulnerability suddenly became a source of strength when they met the people of the New World. Most of the Europeans had been exposed to the smallpox before, and they were, in effect, inoculated. But the indigenous were a previously unexposed population, utterly without defenses.[38]

When the pox reached a new altepetl, the wave of death rose for about sixty days, in some places taking as many as a third of the people. Then the epidemic receded, for by that time there was no unexposed

person left to contract the disease. It had been carried to surrounding towns, and so the wave arose somewhere else. It had already reached Tlaxcala by the time the Spaniards and their surviving allies had dragged themselves back there. Maxixcatzin (Ma-sheesh-KAH-tzeen), one of the four kings, was dying of it, along with many thousands of his people. Those leaders who were able came together for a series of great council meetings; there they debated for twenty days. Many saw the Spaniards as a plague of hungry grasshoppers who had come in a time of sickness; they pointed out that the strangers' war-mongering had already cost the lives of hundreds of young Tlaxcalan warriors. These leaders were for killing the Spaniards, finishing the job that the Mexica had started. But others reminded the more militant that they knew from their own experience that twenty-odd horses and a few hundred Spaniards could inflict extraordinary damage. And the woman who the strangers called doña Luisa—the Tlaxcalan princess who was in a relationship with Pedro de Alvarado—informed the men in council that the Spaniards who were here were but the forerunners; thousands more were coming. Malintzin likewise agreed that it would be wisest to stay the course, cement the alliance, and use the victory they would ultimately attain to gain the upper hand over Tenochtitlan. Eventually, this side carried the day.[39]

The Spaniards were in bad shape. The Mexica had harried them at several points, so that they had to travel in a tight cluster, with the horsemen surrounding those on foot. Whenever they stopped to rest, they established lookouts in every direction. They had found that most of the villagers fled before them, afraid not only of Spaniards but also of what the Mexica would do to them if they were thought to have helped them. The beleaguered travelers ate the supplies they found in the abandoned altepetls; they even ate a wounded horse when he died. By the time they found succor in Tlaxcala, many of their wounds had festered, and more men died. Cortés himself needed to have two fingers on his left hand amputated.

While they rested, Cortés and his closest companions discussed their options. Some were for making for the coast and either leaving or regathering their strength there. But Cortés was convinced that they should do the opposite, that they should stay where they were and make a show of strength. The Mexica had many enemies, but they had some friends, too; perhaps more importantly, they had the entire the countryside living in fear of them. If the Spaniards were going to gain and keep enough indigenous allies to secure a permanent victory, they had to be perceived as the strongest force in Mexico, the one group most feared on a long-term basis, not a group who would soon leave. They could not be just another playing piece on the chessboard of local politics; they had to be by far the most frightening figures in the game.

Through Malintzin, Cortés gathered intelligence from the Tlaxcalans. Whenever a nearby altepetl was found to have entertained emissaries from Tenochtitlan, he gathered his horsemen and made another one of his famous early morning raids. The Mexica let it be known that they were offering a year's tribute relief to all who refrained from going over to the strangers—implicitly reminding everyone that they were the leaders who were there to stay and that they wouldn't forget who their friends and enemies were after these interlopers were forced to withdraw. But that was a distant reward compared to the immediate threat of

having mounted lancers ride through town, burning and killing with impunity. Meanwhile, the Spaniards also offered to reward those who came over to them. “They see,” wrote Cortés in the midst of these events, “how those who do so are well received and favored by me, whereas those who do not are destroyed daily.” [40] Malintzin, who had always counseled that responsible leadership entailed caution, circumspection, and peaceful overtures toward the powerful strangers, would have reminded all those to whom she spoke that if they swore loyalty to Cortés’s king, the Mexica would be destroyed, and the endless wars between the altepetls would cease forever. The Mexica had been strong enough to guarantee peace among their subjects in the central basin, but these newcomers were far stronger. It was a foregone conclusion that the Spaniards would ultimately be victorious, went the argument for laying down arms, for they had the edge, and they weren’t leaving. Their victory would prevent future chaos and retaliatory wars throughout a much larger swath of land than just the central valley.

More of the indigenous were gradually learning what Malintzin and Moctezuma had understood months before—that far more Spaniards were coming, and would bring more of their arsenal with them. While resting in Tlaxcala, Cortés had forced every man to turn over whatever gold he possessed so it could be collected and used to buy horses and weapons in the Caribbean. He then sent a number of mounted men to the coast, charged with repairing one of the boats and setting forth to make the purchases. They found to their delight that seven more ships had already arrived. One came from Cortés’s father, who had been working to collect goods for his son since his message first arrived with Puertocarrero. Early the next year, three more fully stocked ships appeared. Cortés grew increasingly jubilant. “When on the 28th of April [1521], I called all my men out on parade and reckoned eight-six horsemen, 118 crossbowmen and harquebusiers, some 700 foot soldiers with swords and bucklers, three large iron guns, fifteen small bronze field guns and ten hundred weight of powder, … [we] knew well … that God had helped us more than we had hoped.”[41]

Word spread quickly among the local communities about the present strength of the Spanish forces. We know that they were always assessing whether or not to believe Malintzin’s argument from various incidents. At one point after the war had actually started, the Spaniards lost a battle: several dozen men were cut off from their company and then captured and killed. Some of the indigenous allies withdrew at once, but they soon returned. Spaniards later said that they returned because their priests had augured a great Mexica victory within the next eight days, which did not occur, and thus the people lost faith in their priests. That may have been part of the reason for their return to the Spaniards’ side. After all, in one of their own histories—indeed, one of the earliest written, probably in the 1540s—the indigenous writer recalls the people’s profound disappointment on another occasion when some priests promised them a victory on the eightieth day, which never occurred, and in fact the promise only cost them more lives. But in this case, something else had occurred: messengers had come from the coast carrying word of the arrival of yet another ship, and they brought powder and crossbows as proof, which would have been visible to any

indigenous who were spying on them. Almost immediately, in the words of Cortés, "all the lands round about" made the decision to return to their erstwhile allies.[42]

Many altepetls—or rather, certain lineages within altepetls—needed little convincing to throw in their lot with the strangers. Due to old internal tensions, these family lines and their followers were ready and willing to fight with the powerful newcomes. In Texcoco, for instance, Moctezuma had only recently worked to dispose of undesirable heirs to the throne to make way for his nephew, Cacama, and Huexotzincatzin had been executed for singing with the Lady of Tula. Some of Huexotzincatzin's full brothers had accepted bribes in the form of land. Yet since the death only a few years before of the old king, Nezahualpilli, the altepetl had literally been split in two, as the youngest brothers of Huexotzincatzin, the executed poet-heir, had emerged as a potent force and had been given—or had taken—the northern half of the realm. One of these younger brothers, Ixtlilxochitl (Eesh-tlil-SHO-cheet), an extremely successful warrior, decided to seize the day and ally with the strangers in order to oust Moctezuma's favorite, Cacama, and unite Texcoco under his own and his full brothers' control. Cortés was delighted with him, calling him "a very valiant youth of twenty-three or twenty-four years" who worked hard to bring along "many chiefs and brothers of his." He admitted that the brothers were not at first "so firm in their friendship as they afterwards became." But thanks to the efforts of Ixtlilxochitl, thousands of Texcocans were soon fighting on the side of the Spaniards.[43]

In the meantime, as the Spanish forces waited for reinforcements and worked on creating alliances with the local people. Martín López, a shipbuilder in their company, taught the Tlaxcalans how to build brigantines to sail on the great lake. Canoe makers, carpenters, ropemakers, weavers … all were needed. They built twelve different boats in pieces, and then, when the time was right, carried them to the shores of the great lake and assembled them there. The Tlaxcalans quickly learned to work the sails and maneuver the large, fast-moving boats. In later years, when they told their children about the conquest, this was what some of them mentioned first and recorded in their earliest annals.[44] It was an empowering, even thrilling experience, and it became an important long-term memory. In the short term, though, it meant that Cortés and his forces would never be dependent on the causeways again.

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IN TENOCHTITLAN, TECUICHPOTZIN lived each day in fear. Her joy at being rescued from the strangers and seeing them in flight had been short-lived, for the terrible disease had come soon after her rescue, and her relief at seeing the epidemic abate had been even briefer. Cuitlahuac, her father's younger brother and the new tlatoani, had died of the smallpox after only some eighty days of rule.[45] With every family in the city devastated, they could not even mourn their ruler properly, as their religion demanded. The people did their best to regather their strength and rebuild, managing just day-to-day efforts. In the meantime, the man who emerged from the council as the new tlatoani was Cuauhtemoc (Kwow-TAY-

moc). He was from the other branch of the family—the one descended of Itzcoatl—a son of the former king Ahuitzotl. He had a Tlatelolcan mother,[46] so he had Tlatelolco's support. And as the Tlatelolcans were the possessors of the big market on the north side of the island to which many local people were still bringing their produce, they had significant strength in these tumultuous times. Cuauhtemoc's election would have seemed appropriate to Tecuichpotzin at first, but within weeks, the full force of a new horror struck her.

Cuauhtemoc and his advisers understood all too well what was happening in the Mexican countryside—that despite their resounding victory in July, people far and wide were still considering allying with the strangers. The Mexica had not been too afraid that they would be attacked while they were laid low with the pestilence, for all the people in the country were affected by it at about the same time, including all the Spaniards' allies and potential allies. But the Mexica became afraid as the survivors recuperated and regained their full strength, for the season of warfare would start again soon. If they could not prevent the defection of the majority of the surrounding altepetls, then they would almost certainly be destroyed. Cuauhtemoc believed the only response was to make a show of brutal force.

Moctezuma's living sons were a threat to Cuauhtemoc and his policies. Two had died in the fighting on the night of the Spanish retreat, but a number were still alive. Cuauhtemoc had the support of most Tlatelolcans, but the sons of Moctezuma had the support of many, possibly most, of the Tenochca. Perhaps more importantly, these sons would have been taught by their father, Moctezuma, that overt warfare against these strangers was futile and counterproductive. They thus represented an opposing school of thought; they offered an alternative to the war that the city was undertaking. Fortunately for Cuauhtemoc, they were also vulnerable: these sons of Moctezuma could be presented as weak, as emblematic of the mistakes that had been made. That is how Cuauhtemoc went about describing them. Then, in short order, he had six of them killed; some said he even killed one with his bare hands. The Tlatelolcan noblemen—who held Cuauhtemoc entirely blameless—explained, "The reason these nobles were killed is that they were favoring the common people [in desiring peace] and trying to see to it that shelled white maize, turkey hens, and eggs should be collected so that they could have them submit to the Spaniards." Among those who were killed was Tecuichpotzin's only full brother, named Axayacatzin, after the past king. Now, Tecuichpotzin was left with only two living half brothers, little boys who had managed to survive the pox and were too young to be considered a threat.[47]

In the midst of the carnage, Cuauhtemoc came for Lordly Daughter Tecuichpotzin herself. He did not want to kill her, though. Instead, he wanted to marry her and make her bear his children. Doing this rendered his rule legitimate in many more people's eyes, for his heirs would thus be tied to both branches of the royal family. The union was in keeping with the custom of having a new tlatoani from a different branch of the family marry a daughter or another close relative of the man he had replaced. In this case, it was even more important that Cuauhtemoc have the girl by his side. Ever since she had been gifted to the strangers, her name was sometimes paired with that of their enemy, Cortés, by the people in the

countryside, whenever they weren't pairing him with Malintzin (with whom they sometimes confused Tecuichpotzin, probably to the royal family's shame). It had to be shown that this symbolically important girl who carried both royal lines within her belonged to him, and to no one else. This he told her, in deeds if not in words.[48]

In the wider world, however, Cuauhtemoc's power remained far from absolute. Despite his ferocity—and he did bring many allies to the city, among them some of the loyal Texcocans, even some of the brothers of Ixtlilxochitl—he was unable to keep enough of the altepetls on his side. Gradually, as the Europeans' technological advantages won over the surrounding peoples, the city folk found themselves increasingly cut off from food supplies. Their isolation was not yet complete, but it was growing. They were grateful for their chinampas, for the birds and the fish and the algae in the lake, and for those who still flocked to their banners. Around the fire at night, they sang songs in celebration of loyalty.[49] And as weeks turned into months, they prayed.

Then one day, the enemy came. Though the Mexica had anticipated this, it was still somehow a shock. The strangers had been moving around in the local area for a number of months and had been seen assembling their boats across the water in Texcoco, on the eastern side of the lake. Still, everybody had assumed that their approach to the island would be a gradual affair. The people had not realized how fast the ships could move when in full sail with the wind behind them or how many people they could carry. One morning, the brigs made straight for the neighborhood of Zoquipan (or "Mudflats") on the island's shore. The residents ran about frantically, calling to their children. They tossed the little ones into canoes and paddled for their lives. The lake grew full of their craft, and the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans entered an uninhabited quarter. They looted it, then returned to their ships.[50]

Over the ensuing weeks, a pattern emerged. The foreigners used their cannon to knock down the walls that the Mexica had built as obstructions and even demolished whole buildings. Then they sent in their indigenous allies to fill in the canals with rubble or sand, while the long-range crossbows and guns guarded them. Once the Spaniards had access to a flat, open space, they could easily maintain control of it with their horses and lances. Every day, the Spaniards killed dozens of the Mexica at a minimum; once they killed several hundred in a single day. One of the warriors, when he was an old man, remembered: "Bit by bit they came pressing us back against the wall [at Tlatelolco], herding us together."[51]

The old one remembered other elements as well, especially how hard he and his companions had made the Spaniards' task. They contested every single foot of ground; at night, they sometimes managed to re-excavate canals that had been filled in. Famous warriors performed death-defying deeds and occasionally managed to topple a horse and bring down the rider. Twice they were able to isolate and bring down large groups of the Spaniards (once fifteen of them, once perhaps fifty-three). They sacrificed the prisoners atop the tallest pyramid in full view of their ashen compatriots, then strung their heads in a grisly necklace and left it hanging in the air. The courage of individual warriors sometimes stunned the younger boys who

watched. On one occasion the Spaniards reached a neighborhood no one had thought they would reach until the next day. They began to seize the women and children who had not yet evacuated. A warrior named Axoquentzin (Ah-sho-KEN-tzeen) came running. His rage seemed to lend him superhuman strength. He ran out into the open and picked up a Spaniard and whirled him around until he dropped a girl whom he had seized. Then Axoquentzin picked up another man and flung him about. But this sort of action couldn't go on forever, and the Spaniards brought him down: "They shot an iron bolt into his heart. He died as if he were stretching out when going to sleep." Thirty years later, such stories lived on in the people's collective memory and in the songs they sang. The fearlessness of their greatest warriors made them deeply proud.[52]

At no point do the warriors seem to have been awestruck or paralyzed with fear by the strangers' weapons. Instead they analyzed them in a straightforward way:

> The crossbowman aimed the bolt well. He pointed it right at the person he was going to shoot, and when it went off, it went whining, hissing, and humming. And their arrows missed nothing. They all hit someone, went all the way through someone. The guns were pointed and aimed right at people…. The shot came upon people unawares, giving them no warning when it killed them. Whoever was fired at died if some dangerous part was hit: the forehead, the nape of the neck, the heart, the chest, the stomach or the abdomen.[53]

Unfortunately, when the Mexica secured some of the powerful weapons and tried to use them themselves, they were unable to do so. At one point, they forced captured crossbowmen to try to teach them to shoot metal bows, but the lessons were ineffective, and the arrows went astray. The guns, they soon learned, would not work without the powder the Spanish had. Once, when they captured a cannon, they concluded that they had neither the experience nor the ammunition needed to make it useful. The best they could do was to prevent it from falling back into enemy hands, so they sank it in the lake. They learned not only to make extra-long spears to rival Spanish lances but also to zigzag their canoes so quickly in unexpected patterns that the Spaniards could not easily take aim from their brigantines. Yet such tactics could not bring them victory; they could only hinder their enemies. The old men remembering their people's efforts found it too painful to say this directly, but one came close. "In this way, the war took somewhat longer."[54]

On one occasion the Spaniards decided to build a catapult, thinking that it would petrify the Indians. Cortés wrote: "Even if it were to have had no other effect, which indeed it had not, the terror it caused would be so great that we thought the enemy might surrender. But neither of our hopes was fulfilled, for the carpenters failed to operate their machine, and the enemy, though much afraid, made no move to surrender, and we were obliged to conceal the failure of the catapult by saying that we had been moved by compassion to spare them."[55] Here, Cortés was merely assuaging his feelings. The Mexica by no means believed his claim that only compassion stayed his hand, and in fact, for them, the incident bordered on the humorous:

> And then those Spaniards installed a wooden sling on top of an altar platform with which to hurl stones at the people…. They wound it up, then the arm of the wooden sling rose up. But the stone did not land on the people, but fell [almost straight down] behind the marketplace at Xomolco. Because of that the Spaniards argued among themselves. They looked as if they were jabbing their fingers in one another's faces, chattering a great deal. And [meanwhile] the catapult kept bobbing back and forth, going one way and then the other.[56]

But the moments the warriors could joke about were few and far between. The Mexica knew that they were losing. They had no way to explain the discrepancy between their power and that of their enemies; they had no way of knowing that the Europeans were heirs to a ten-thousand-year-old tradition of sedentary living, and they themselves the heirs of barely three thousand. Remarkably, through it all, they seem to have maintained a practical sense of the situation: they knew what needed to be explained. They did not assume greater merit or superior intelligence on the part of their enemies. Rather, in the descriptions they left, they focused on two elements: the Spaniards' use of metal, and their extraordinary communication apparatus. The old men talking about their experiences used the word *tepoztli* (metal, iron) more than any other in reference to the Spaniards: "Their war gear was all iron. They clothed their bodies in iron. They put iron on their heads, their swords were iron, their bows were iron, and their shields and lances were iron." They grew ever more specific: "Their iron lances and halberds seemed to sparkle, and their iron swords were curved like a stream of water. Their cuirasses and iron helmets seemed to make a clattering sound."[57] When the elderly speakers paused in wonder at the events, it was to ask how the word had gone out so efficiently to so many people across the sea about their marvelous kingdom.[58] The warriors had seen the ships—but not the compasses, the navigation equipment, the technical maps, and the printing presses that made the conquest possible. What is striking is how quickly they realized that these issues were at the heart of the matter.

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THE FIGHTING LASTED for three months, far longer than the Spaniards would have thought possible, given the effects of the smallpox and the starvation to which the Mexica were ultimately reduced. Once, after more than four weeks of war, the warriors shouted to the Tlaxcalans that they wished to speak to the woman, she who was one of the people from here. When Malintzin came, they offered full and immediate peace—on condition that the Spaniards would return to their home across the sea. "While we stood there arguing through the interpreter," Cortés remembered, "with nothing more than a fallen bridge between us and the enemy, an old man, in full view of everyone, very slowly extracted from his knapsack certain provisions and ate them, so as to make us believe that they were in no need of supplies." The Mexica went on to outline terms—undoubtedly giving the specifics of the tribute they would offer—for

they stood in conversation for some time without having Malintzin pause to translate. It was agreed that she would summarize afterwards. “We fought no more that day, for the lords had told the interpreter to convey their proposals to me,” said Cortés. He rejected those proposals in the morning.[59]

The Mexicas’ efforts to demonstrate that they were not short of courageous warriors or of food supplies could not mask the truth for long. By August 13, their remaining corner of the city had come almost to a standstill. “On the roads lay shattered bones and scattered hair. The houses were unroofed, red [with blood]. Worms crawled on the roads, and the walls of the houses were slippery with brains.”[60] The survivors had eaten everything they had, down to deer hides and tiny insects and lizards, and even softened adobe bricks. Dysentery was now widespread among them. Cuauhtemoc went to the Spaniards in a canoe and gave himself up, together with some close advisers and his wife, Tecuichpotzin.[61] He asked only that his people be allowed to go to the countryside to seek food. The fighting stopped, and word spread among the populace that they could walk out, go to family in other altepetls if they had any, or bring precious possessions to trade for food, or simply beg. Those who were children at the time remembered the feeling of release, the surge of hope and joy as they sped along the broken causeways or waded and swam across the lake with surviving adults. The young ones heard cries of lamentation in the distance, as some of the adults gave vent to their grief, and some saw young women being seized by individual Spaniards despite the agreement.[62] But the children couldn’t help feeling happy at this change in their fortunes. They did not understand as yet that their world as they knew it was ending. A hollow-eyed Tecuichpotzin watched them go.