2

People of the Valley

1350S–1450S

A young man goes to war. The Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Selden. A.1, folio 63r.

By 1430,[1] Itzcoatl (Eetz-CO-wat),or Obsidian Snake, felt confident that he had won the gamble of a lifetime. He felt sufficiently certain that he would be able to retain the position of tlatoani of the Mexica—and indeed, high king of all the central valley—that he took time off from the battlefield and ordered a ceremonial book burning. All the old painted histories that led their readers to expect a future different from the one he had in mind—those that led people to think his half brother's sons were the ones destined to rule, or that Tenochtitlan was bound to remain only a minor city-state—were to be tossed into a bonfire in a great sacrifice to the gods.[2] The paintings on rolls of deerskin and the accordion-fold books made of thick parchment crafted from maguey plant fibers—and all the stories they contained—crackled and popped in the red heat before they turned to ash.[3] There was an old riddle in Nahuatl: "What is the scarlet macaw leading, the raven following?" And the answer was *tlachinolli*, a conflagration.[4] It must have been satisfying for Itzcoatl to watch the black billows of rising smoke. He probably knew that many people were already saying he had only won his power thanks to the brilliant military performance of his more noble half brother's son.[5] But in the long run, it didn't matter what they said. It was he who had emerged as high king. His deeds would literally be carved in stone, and he would see to it that his descendants ruled. He would be known to have brought his people to their turning point; he was in the midst of pulling them out of obscurity and weakness to a position of extraordinary strength.

***

ITZCOATL'S WORLD HAD never intended him to govern. Although his father had been chief of the Mexica for decades, Itzcoatl himself was just the son of one of the *tecpan* (palace compound) women who was far from royal. His half brothers by more important mothers had names that harkened back to the thirteenth century—like his brother "Huitzilihuitl," Hummingbird Feather, named for the ancestor-king who had been father to the feisty Shield Flower. Itzcoatl's name was his alone—no one before him ever bore it, nor would it be passed on to descendants. His life story was uniquely illuminating.

Itzcoatl's chieftain father had been called Acamapichtli (A-cahm-a-PEECH-tli). Fittingly, the name meant "Fistful of Reeds," for it was he who had been set up as the Mexicas' first tlatoani after they built their town on the island in the reedy swamp. The Mexica had managed to turn themselves into an independent entity at last by making friends with their on-again, off-again enemies, the people of Culhuacan. Acamapichtli's father was a Mexica man who had married a Culhua woman of some rank, but he himself had been killed in one of the periods of rancor. The son had survived the violence. In the middle of the 1300s, the Mexica had requested that he be allowed to become their king; obviously, as a son of a Culhua woman, he would keep his people loyal to Culhuacan. And so it had been settled. The Mexica at last had a recognized tlatoani with his own, symbolic reed mat, or throne. In Nahuatl terms, they had finally arrived.[6]

Admittedly, their island was available only because no one else wanted it. People of the central basin had long lived by farming corn and beans, but the swampy conditions of the central lake area ruled out full dependence on agriculture. Not that the Mexica gave up the project entirely; they had observed that on the southern shore of the lake, their rivals the Xochimilca (whose warriors' ears the Mexica had, in the distant past, cut off) did very well by constructing *chinampas*. These were gardens arduously built in shallow waters by piling up mud and silt, and then trapping some earth above the water level by constructing a wooden or straw-basket ring wall. The chinampas, though difficult to build, were immensely fertile, and the Mexica were thus quick to follow their neighbors' example. They also developed their fishing skills, grew adept at collecting birds' eggs, and learned to gather certain kinds of insects as well as the highly nutritious blue-green algae. As a boy, Itzcoatl passed his days flitting about in a canoe (he called it a little *acalli*, meaning literally a "water house") and then contributing whatever he foraged to the family pot. He came to love the shimmering, aquatic world he knew so well. All his people did. The artists among them grew adept at painting on walls and deer hides, and their work often featured the tiny crayfish and spiral shells found in the blue-green waters.

Sometimes the themes of the evening music and song were also inspired by the vibrant waters of the lake. Someone blew a conch shell; another man played a drum decorated with blue-green gemstones; a third might dance, his legs covered in strips of tinkling bells. The mood was sometimes achingly sad: the kingdom of Tlaloc, the rain god, and of Chalchiuhtlicue (Chal-chew-TLI-kway) or Jade Skirt, his wife, could be a mournful world, representing as it often did, not only life but also death. "I cry. What in the world have we done to deserve this?!" The singer could take on the persona of a fish, perhaps a weaker one hiding in the reeds speaking to a stronger one, "I am a sand fish, you are a trout." In happier times, Itzcoatl' s people often sang not of the dim watery world but of birds fluttering in the light. Sometimes, in especially haunting moments, they might bring together the two traditions, aquatic and aerial, and sing a special poem aloud, harkening back to their historical roots, and referencing their proud warrior tradition represented by the eagle and the jaguar: "Your home abounds in jade water whorls … You hid yourself [meaning, you

died] among the mesquite plants of the Seven Caves. The eagle was calling, the jaguar cried. And you, a red flamingo, went flying onwards, from the midst of a field to a place unknown."[7] The "place unknown" was one manifestation of the land of the dead, a special one that received the spirits of those brave enough to die in war or by sacrifice. As they sang in the firelight, the Mexica felt that they had reason to be grateful to the gods who had brought them to this moment. It had not been so long ago that they were wanderers, dependent on the Culhua people, or anyone who would temporarily take them on as hired bowmen. Now they made war only when they wanted to. Now they had a town of their own. True, the water still threatened to take it back from them. Reeds grew everywhere, and their square adobe houses didn't last well in swampy conditions and had to be constantly rebuilt. The people, however, grew extremely practiced at building dikes, causeways and canals, and soon were able to build streets, like those of other towns. Neighborhoods contained an extended kin group or *calpolli* (literally, "great house"), with its own leading families who took responsibility for organizing labor and war parties in support of the chief, Acamapichtli, and in turn were offered greater deference. Such a family was termed *pilli*, or *pipiltin* in the plural; we would call them nobles. Others were called *macehualli*, or *macehualtin* in the plural. The word meant more than commoner; etymologically, it referred to those deserving of land, and hence of their own space in the polity.

At about this time the people made the collective decision to add a layer of gravel to their original adobe shrine—where the eagle had purportedly landed—so they would have a base platform strong enough to begin to build a large pyramid.[8] Certain priests dedicated themselves to caring for the temple and began to create painted books for posterity. With their history recorded on animal skins, the priests could announce that the people had reached the end of a fifty-two-year cycle, that it was time to ceremonially "bundle" the years, as they put it. They held a great feast day and marked it as a significant moment in their histories.

In taking their past seriously, they were implicitly taking their future seriously, too. The chief Acamapichtli, the half-Culhua nobleman who had attained authority through his tight connections to the powerful state of Culhuacan, also brought with him a noble Culhua bride. Some said her name was Ilancueitl (Ee-lahn-KWEY-eetl), Elder Woman Skirt, though others said that such a name must have belonged to his mother. Since it was a chosen, symbolic name, it could easily have belonged to both women. Certainly the Culhua wife, whatever her name, did not expect to remain Acamapichtli's only woman, but it was understood that she was the primary, or First Wife, not necessarily chronologically but in the sense that her sons would rule in the next generation. Later, the bards of other communities would make the claim that she was barren, and that it was a woman from their own hometown (whichever one that was, depending on who was telling the story) who had eventually mothered Acamapichtli's heirs, though the children were passed off as Ilancueitl's. Be that as it may, there was certainly no concept of primogeniture. It would have been utterly impractical in such a fluid world in which the people needed a highly competent leader, not merely one who happened to have been born first.

Older boys, however, certainly had an advantage over younger ones. As the sons of a chief's most powerful wife grew up, their personalities and relative athletic abilities caused one among them to be perceived as the most likely heir, while his full brothers grew to accept expectations that they would be high priests or powerful military figures who stood by his side. All would be equally well rewarded for their efforts with gifts of land and other forms of wealth, so it was to all of the full brothers' advantage to support the one who seemed most like an appropriate chief.[9] In this case, the child who was groomed as the heir was called Huitzilihuitl, Hummingbird Feather, in honor of the thirteenth-century chief of that name.

Besides his full siblings—the other children of Acamapichtli's noble Culhua wife—Huitzilihuitl had many half brothers, among them Itzcoatl. Obsidian Snake's mother had been no one of any importance. She had been, in fact, a slave—a beautiful slave girl from the nearby town of Azcapotzalco (Ahz-ka-po-TZAL-ko). People said she had spent her days selling vegetables in the street before she was turned over to the king. Noblemen loved to gamble and often gambled away their slaves; or perhaps she had been used to settle some other type of debt or presented to the high chief as a gift to curry favor.[10]

It may seem unlikely that a future Mexica king could be the son of a slave. Traditionally, the subject of slavery in the Aztec world has been a vexed one. Because the Aztecs were disparaged for so long as cannibalistic savages, serious scholars have been loath to write anything that might be perceived as detracting from their moral worth; associating them in any way with famous slave societies was hardly going to help matters. Thus the idea was often promulgated that Aztec slaves by definition were prisoners of war taken for sacrifice to satisfy a religious compulsion, and that household servants were a different category altogether: they were a collection of people who had voluntarily sold themselves into temporary slavery to pay debts, or who had been condemned to enslavement as punishment for a crime. However, modern scholars now acknowledge that the reality was quite different. Some prisoners of war (usually men) were indeed sacrificed, and some household servants had in truth indentured themselves or been sold by their chief as a punishment. But there were also many other enslaved people. As in the ancient Mediterranean world, the households of wealthy and powerful men contained numerous female slaves taken in war. Some were princesses, and might be treated almost like wives, depending on the circumstances. Others were more ordinary, and Itzcoatl's mother was one of these.[11]

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Itzcoatl's mother was brutalized. She may have been, but given what Itzcoatl later managed to accomplish, it isn't likely. Throughout Mesoamerica, it was understood that the children of enslaved women were never slaves themselves. Indeed, it was essential that the condition not be inherited; otherwise many towns would soon have had more slaves than free people, and their world would have been torn asunder. Thus even in her worst moments, Itzcoatl's mother would have known that her children by the king would be privileged. She may possibly have been proud and hopeful for her young son's future. But even if she harbored ambitions on behalf of her boy, she would never have thought it possible that he would one day rule. That privilege was reserved for the sons of noble women from the

most powerful of towns.[12] Times of crisis, however, often bring unexpected results, and so it would eventually prove in this case.

In the meantime, the boy called Itzcoatl grew up expecting to serve his royal half brother as a loyal warrior, and he did so. Huitzilihuitl, the heir, became king, and he ruled successfully for twenty-four years, conquering numerous smaller and more vulnerable city-states and demanding tribute from all of them. The men of Tenochtitlan left their island with some frequency and set forth as a united group, armed and dangerous. They danced before they left and they danced when they returned, wearing gorgeous head-dresses that transformed them into frightening beasts—eagles, jaguars, serpents and coyotes. Their shields, decorated with iridescent feathers, also bore the images of such creatures, but they could introduce an element of ironic distance from their animal alter-egos as well, showing not a coyote, for instance, but rather a man dancing as an upright coyote.[13] These eager warriors readily allied with others to bring down those who tried to lord it over them or who had resources they desperately needed. Xochimilco and even the once-dominant Culhuacan were reduced to subsidiary status. Huitzilihuitl began, in short, to put the new town of Tenochtitlan on the map, and from there it grew into a small city. Huitzilihuitl's list of conquests was long in the telling around the evening fires.

The most important war Huitzilihuitl waged was arguably the one against Cuernavaca, the region to the south where wild cotton grew so well that people had begun to cultivate it and use it to weave cloth. It was a valuable crop, for cotton did not grow in the mountainous region. Cuernavaca was thus a rich city-state and its chief a powerful man. He also had a "most admirable" daughter, the lovely Miyahuaxihuitl (Mee-ya-wa-SHEE-weet, Corn Flower Gem), whom many chiefs eyed with interest as a marriage partner. Rulers everywhere "asked for her," using the most respectful term for a marriage relationship. When Huitzilihuitl's emissaries approached the Cuernavacan chief, he laughed at them. The town of Tenochtitlan, although on the rise, was by no means the alliance he had in mind for his child. "What is Huitzilihuitl saying? What will he provide for my daughter there in the midst of the waters?" The king couldn't refrain from a bit of sarcasm. "Perhaps he will clothe her using the fibers of marsh plants, since he makes his own loincloths out of them?" Then he decided to move from the customary round-about speech to a more direct style. "Go," he said. "Tell your ruler Huitzilihuitl that you are definitely not to come here again."[14]

After that, the tellers of the tale opted to depart from a realistic account of events. They did not choose to dwell on the carnage of the ensuing war or the many years it lasted, since the two peoples later became allies:[15] such things are better forgotten. Instead, they used an old Nahua myth to interpret what happened. The disappointed Huitzilihuitl went off by himself and prayed to his people's god, Huitzilopochtli (Wee-tzeel-o-POCH-tli), meaning "Left-Footed like a Hummingbird." He thus had the special powers associated with both left-handedness and the magical, suspended (and fearsome) hummingbird, and he was especially tied to the king, Huitzilihuitl, whose name meant "Hummingbird Feather." As always, the god told the supplicant what to do, and naturally, Huitzilihuitl proceeded to do as the god directed. "He stood within the

boundaries of the lord of Cuernavaca. Then he shot a dart, a prettily painted and marvelously crafted reed, in the center of which was inserted a precious jade—most valuable and shimmering brightly. And it fell in the middle of the courtyard where the maiden Corn Flower Gem was confined." The girl marveled at it and picked it up. Sensing the stone's power and feeling a strange desire for it, she suddenly popped it into her mouth. Then the mesmerized young woman swallowed the precious gem by accident and—like other girls in numerous other Native American ancient stories—conceived a child.[16]

The Nahua tellers of the tale and their rapt audience would have said in that moment that the joke was on the overly proud Cuernavacan king; his beloved daughter had been duped and would now bear a child by a father she would by no means have chosen herself. But they would have recognized that the situation was laced with irony. The lovely Corn Flower Gem may have shed tears that night, but the apparently powerless girl would eventually come into her own: her child, after all, was named Moctezuma[17] (later to be known as Huey Moctezuma, or Moctezuma the Elder), and he was destined to rule over the Mexica and many tens of thousands of others.[18]

For the moment, however, in the palace compound in Tenochtitlan, the Mexica high chief Huitzilihuitl probably was not paying a great deal of attention to any children born to a Cuernavacan woman taken in war. He was leading his people as effectively as possible in a series of military campaigns, enlarging the territory he governed. He was able to be so successful largely because under his leadership Tenochtitlan had become a client, so to speak, of what was currently the single most powerful city-state in the region. The head or "boss" state was Azcapotzalco, the leading town of the *Tepanec* people, a group of Nahuas who had arrived much earlier than the Mexica and dominated the western shores of the great lake in the center of the valley.[19] After each victory, the Tepanecs, of course, took the best lands for themselves, but a goodly share was set aside for their lieutenant-state, Tenochtitlan. Or, if the victors decided that the losers were not to forfeit their lands but to pay tribute instead, certain villages were told to pay the Tepanecs in future, and others were instructed to deliver goods to the Mexica. It is not certain why the Mexica were chosen as the favored lieutenant state. Probably the swampy nature of their island territory rendered them more mobile than other peoples; because they did not have much farmable land, they were not as tightly tied to cycles of planting and harvesting. No town in central Mexico had a standing army; all the men were potential warriors, and they had to fit in their fighting with their farming. The Mexica, however, lived as much off fish, bird eggs, and algae as they did from maize. This meant they were relatively poor and hungry compared to others to start with; working closely with the highly agricultural Tepanecs, however, their mobility in any season gave them a kind of power.

Unsurprisingly, given the patron-client political relationship, Huitzilihuitl took a bride from a Tepanec town as his primary wife, meaning that her sons were expected to rule after him.[20] (The town was called

Tlacopan and was later to be an important place; the Spanish, who couldn't pronounce it, turned it into "Tacuba.") When Huitzilihuitl died, Chimalpopoca (Chee-mal-po-PO-ka, Smoking Shield), a son by the Tepanec bride, inherited the throne, exactly as expected.

By now, Tenochtitlan's ruler was fully recognized by everyone as tlatoani, or "speaker" on behalf of an independent, self-governing community. In the Nahua world, each community that boasted its own tlatoani was called an *altepetl*. The word literally meant "water-mountain," for in the old days, the Nahuas nearly always settled where they had not only a hill from which to defend themselves but also a source of water. At Chimalpopoca's ascension, there were days of prayer, followed by a great feast and a ceremony in which Chimalpopoca seated himself on the symbolic reed mat and promised to protect his people as their tlatoani. At this point, the Mexica were powerful enough to take themselves quite seriously: the public speeches and the commitments made between Chimalpopoca and his people lasted for hours. Eventually, a priest peppered the young ruler with rhetorical questions, to which the new monarch and the people were ultimately meant to respond "No" with all their energy:

> Will you see a time of fear? Will it fall to you to declare war? Will the altepetl be engulfed in war? Will it be your responsibility? Will the altepetl crumble in war? Will it be surrounded by enemies? Will there be agitation, tremors? Will the city lie abandoned, lie darkened? Will it become a place of desolation? Will our people be enslaved?[21]

"No!" they answered, and "No!" again. They would win the wars, not lose them. They would not be enslaved. Then, to demonstrate his prowess, Chimalpopoca set off on the initial military campaign required of every new king. He returned victorious; his people were optimistic. Chimalpopoca ruled for about ten years, bringing multiple new towns under Mexica control.

***

THEN IN THE MIDST of Chimalpopoca's reign a great political crisis rocked the Mexicas' political world. In 1426, the king of the powerful town called Azcapotzalco, Tezozomoc (Te-zo-ZO-moc), who had ruled since 1370, died in his bed. The Tepanec leader had personified power in the valley for so many years that when he died, people looked uncertainly at each other. Suddenly the old king's sons lunged forward into action—but they did not move to defend their family's turf, as one might expect. Instead, they turned on each other with murderous intent.

This seems puzzling at first. It seems less so when we think about the fact that polygyny had created a situation in which there were many potential claimants to any throne. The Nahuas were so accustomed to the phenomenon that they did not see it as a problem. They saw it as a net positive, and, in fact, they were not entirely wrong. Whatever our modern sensibilities may tell us, polygyny does have many benefits. It offers obvious pleasures to the senior male with multiple wives, and even the wives in such situations often

say that it is a help to them as they age to bring younger women into the household, as many hands make light work. Nahua wives certainly never sought or expected romantic love from a husband; it did not surprise them when men were fickle, nor did anyone in their world blame the women. Furthermore, polygyny generally eliminates any possibility of a king dying without an heir, and it creates a veritable clan of young men who pride themselves on their relationships to each other and who will stand together in times of crisis.

Such, at least, is the theory. In reality, even a woman who has never expected a permanent partnership with a man can be hurt when she is supplanted by a rival. And the pain may possibly be not the woman's alone but also her children's. "Hey, mother," went one Nahuatl song, "I am dying of sadness here in my life with a man. I can't make the spindle dance. I can't throw my weaver's stick."[22] The singer was taking the role of a captive wife, and she meant that as an extraneous household woman, she could not look forward to a dignified old age as her children gradually took over the family wealth and family duties. Yet this, after all, speaks only of personal pain, likely to be utterly irrelevant in a political sense. What is far more important in a larger sense is that the system can work well only when the vast majority of people fully agree as to which wife is primary—that is, when they all think alike as to whose sons should inherit. If there is significant doubt about that, a civil war is imminent, for factions of royal half brothers born of different mothers, divided by visceral, childhood-based hatred are there at hand, ready and willing to lead the people as they defend their different visions of their people's future.

The annals tell us that warfare exploded at such moments in the towns across Mexico, time and again.[23] The extensive fighting at first seems confusing, but upon closer observation, it usually fits certain patterns. In the Nahua world, since the different wives of a chief were often from different city-states, these fratricidal conflicts often had an ethnic dimension as well. When Maxtla (MASH-tla), son of Tezozomoc of Azcapotzalco, rose against his half brother, the presumed heir, and killed him,[24] Maxtla was undoubtedly assuming that he would receive help from his mother's home village, and he did. At the same time, he turned against Azcapotzalco's former allies, whose royal houses were all intermarried with the maternal family of the half brother he had killed, specifically, the royal household of the town of Tlacopan. This meant that Maxtla also targeted Tenochtitlan's chief, Chimalpopoca, who had a Tlacopan mother. Nahua historians offered different versions of a terrible story of treachery and death. In one, Maxtla invited Chimalpopoca to his home, as if to welcome him to the celebration feast of his new reign, but then had him strangled to death.[25]

However the deed was done, there was pandemonium back in Tenochtitlan. The borders with Azcapotzalco were considered closed (they used the word that meant "closed off"), once it was understood that people who crossed into the other's territory were liable to be attacked. For years the Tenochca people's political choices had depended on the will of the boss state of Azcapotzalco. What were they to do now? For a brief spell of sixty days, Chimalpopoca's young son ruled, then suddenly he fell. His name was

Xihuitl Temoc, or Fallen Comet.[26] The epithet seems too perfect to have been his real name; the boy did have ancestors of that name, but one wonders if the bards applied it to him after the events unfolded, as often happened. It is not known exactly how he died, but probably it was in some sort of battle or skirmish. It does not seem likely that he was also assassinated by Maxtla, for he would surely have known what had happened to his father, Chimalpopoca, and would have learned caution from that disaster.

Perhaps he had been betrayed in some way by Itzcoatl. It was, after all, Itzcoatl who came to power next. By now, Itzcoatl was at least forty years old. No one tells us when his birthday was, but he had lived through the twenty-four years of his half brother Huitzilihuitl's reign, plus another ten years under his nephew, Chimalpopoca, and he would have been conceived at least a few years before his father's death. He may, indeed, have been much older than forty in 1426, as he would die of what was perceived to be old age fourteen years later. In any case, he was certainly a seasoned war leader, unlike Chimalpopoca's still-young children. That might explain why people followed him in this emergency. But Huitzilihuitl's son by the Cuernavacan princess was available, and other sons as well, among them one named Tlacaelel, who had been born in the 1390s and already held a high position.[27] There was no genuine need for the royal family to turn to Itzcoatl, Grandpa Acamapichtli's son by the slave girl. Itzcoatl, the "Obsidian Snake," must have been distinguished by more than a long year count or respected resume; others also had these qualities. He must have had charisma, and ambition, and a subtle mind.

Itzcoatl's plan was to take advantage of the very same type of fissures that had created this emergency in the first place: he clearly understood that polygyny lay at the very heart of politics. It was an issue to be taken extremely seriously. Itzcoatl planned to ally with the ousted noble family of Tlacopan, but it was going to take more than that to win the war that he had in mind. Maxtla wouldn't have killed his half brother by a Tlacopan mother if he hadn't believed that that he had sufficient allies to back him in his power grab. Itzcoatl would need additional allies—people who would join him because they had far more to gain than to lose by challenging the status quo in the polygynous system in which they were all enmeshed. He turned to another city-state suffering from a comparable polygyny-induced civil war, and he sided with those who were presently losing, who were hungry for allies and desperate with rage. He was taking a great risk, and some of the historians later said that many among his people begged him simply to implore Maxtla for mercy. Let Maxtla name a puppet king and be done with it. (Perhaps, indeed, that is who the ill-fated Fallen Comet had been.) They insisted that they would pay whatever tribute Maxtla set rather than face slaughter. But Itzcoatl did not listen to such counselors. Instead, he sent emissaries to a place called Texcoco (Tesh-CO-co).

On the eastern side of the lake, on the shore opposite that of the Tepanecs, the dominant ethnic group had for many years been the Nahuatl-speaking people known as the *Acolhua* (A-COL-wa). Their leading town was Texcoco, sometimes called the Paris of ancient Mexico, so beautiful were its buildings and so fine its artwork. Like Tenochtitlan, Texcoco had for years been somewhat dependent on Tezozomoc, the

godfather-like king of Azcapotzalco who had died suddenly. Naturally, under these circumstances, Texcoco's king had as his primary wife one of Tezozomoc's daughters, and her sons were poised to inherit power.[28]

Among the Texcocan king's women, however, there was one whom he liked much better. She was Matlalcihuatl (Ma-tlal-SEE-wat, Blue-Green Woman), who was a Tenochca noblewoman, probably a daughter of Huitzilihuitl, and thus a sister of the murdered Chimalpopoca.[29] Texcoco, an old and well-established city-state, chafed more than Tenochtitlan did under the oppressive leadership of Azcapotzalco. (It is, after all, easier for a new kid on the block to accept the bossiness of a charismatic boy who offers to befriend him than it is for a longtime resident who once led the local gang to cede his place to such a figure.) Perhaps to make a political point, the Texcocan king sometimes favored Blue-Green Woman's children over his Azcapotzalcan primary wife's offspring more than was quite wise.

Meanwhile, as a result of Azcapotzalco's great power, a Texcocan princess had been given as a minor wife to the high chief Tezozomoc's son.[30] It was understood that her children were not to inherit. Indeed, her status in the household necessarily mirrored her hometown's status in relation to Azcapotzalco. Texcoco was the weaker state, and thus her children were necessarily weaker than their half siblings by Tepanec mothers. Tezozomoc may even have used the girl to underscore her hometown's dependency upon him by having her take lesser roles in public ceremonies or events. In any case, the young princess found her status humiliating and her life in general a misery. Still, she was by no means a prisoner, and eventually she fled home and took up with another man from her hometown. She simply acted as though she were free to marry. The history tellers loved it when they got to this part of the story on starlit evenings, for it allowed them to enact some of the dialogue they delighted in delivering: "Now, when Tezozomoc found out that his daughter-in-law had married, had taken a husband in Texcoco, it made him furious. He summoned his captain, and a few others who came along, too, and he said, 'I have heard, I have learned, that War Arrow of Huexotla (Way-SHO-tla) has bedded the former wife of [my son], your comrade. He has slept with her. My lords, hear me! I am angry, I am insulted.'"[31] Later, when war came, and the Tepanecs further discovered that the woman's son by their chief was also living in his maternal grandparent's lands of Texcoco and was fighting on his mother's side, not on their side, they were livid. "What a scoundrel! Would anyone want to make war on his own father?!?"[32]

In the tales that were told, women caused these wars: "It was said that there was war because of a concubine," one historian wrote in another case.[33] Yet in the 1420s war had not really come to Mesoamerica because of a runaway wife—she was only a metaphor for the uppity Texcocans—but because of a broader political situation. The Texcocan king had decided he was powerful enough to take a political risk to try to gain his ends. He began to insist that his sons by his Mexica wife would indeed inherit, thus indicating that he would no longer accept Texcoco's status as a client state of Azcapotzalco. Changing his relationship to his wives was tantamount to making an important public pronouncement. Tezozomoc and

the Azcapotzalcans did not wait for more. Hundreds of them crossed the lake at dawn in dozens of canoes ringed by their bright-colored shields. The boats slid silently through the still waters. Then the warriors rushed ashore and began to kill without mercy.[34]

The Texcocans soon sent the young Azcapotzalcan-fathered nobleman who was living among them to try to make peace. It was a vain effort, and Tezozomoc's men killed him. Eventually, the old Texcocan king was also killed in a skirmish; he had paid a heavy price for attempting to throw off Azcapotzalco's yoke. Some said that his son by Blue-Green Woman, his Mexica wife, saw his father's death from high in a tree where he was hiding. Perhaps he did. Others said he was hiding deep in a cave at the time. That may have been more likely, but it could equally as easily have been a poetic device; in Mesoamerican storytelling tradition, crucial moments of transition often revolved around caves, whence a new form or force emerged from darkness. The boy's name was Nezahualcoyotl (Nez-ah-wal-CO-yot), or Hungry Coyote, and whether or not he was witness to the killing of his father, it was certainly emblazoned in his consciousness. He fled and hid in Tlaxcala (Tlash-CA-la), a town to the east that was not under Azcapotzalco's sway. It seems to have been there that Itzcoatl's emissaries came looking for him years later, during the great political crisis. The two lords—Nezahualcoyotl and Itzcoatl—were related, through Blue-Green Woman, Nezahualcoyotl's Mexica mother; now Itzcoatl had an offer to make to his young kinsman.[35]

He explained that he had a triple alliance in mind. If the Texcocan families who were loyal to Nezahualcoyotl would fight against Maxtla of Azcapotzalco, alongside the Mexica and the recently demoted people of Tlacopan, they could probably win. Victory over Azcapotzalco, the valley's most powerful city-state, would bring extraordinary rewards. Nezahualcoyotl's days as a scavenger would be over: he would become the recognized tlatoani of Texcoco, instead of the derided half brother of the ruling king.

Nezahualcoyotl responded that it would not be an easy task to collect loyal families to follow him into battle, as Tezozomoc, after attaining power, had made his own grandsons (his daughter's children by the old Texcocan king) the rulers of most of the region's villages. It was even said that Tezozomoc had his people ask local children who were no more than nine years old if their current ruler was the rightful one. At that age, the children did not have the circumspection necessary to edit their responses: they gave away their families' political position as it had been discussed it in the privacy of their own homes. Some of the prattling children's families had been brutally punished since.[36] But the fear that had been engendered by such acts had also bred anger. Nezahualcoyotl said that he was game, indeed eager, to join the alliance; he would gather what followers he could.

The ensuing battles were brutal, but village by village, the supporters of Maxtla the Azcapotzalcan were brought down. Within a year or so—the sources vary as to date—Itzcoatl was able to declare himself tlatoani of the Mexica. He was implicitly *huey tlatoani*, or high chief, of all the valley. He soon had

Nezahualcoyotl ceremoniously declared tlatoani of Texcoco, and within another year or so after that, they had between them killed all of Nezahualcoyotl's remaining Azcapotzalcan half brothers and the husbands of his Azcapotzalcan half sisters. They recorded in their histories: "Nezahualcoyotl sought out the descendants of Tezozomoc in all the places where they were ruling; conquests were made in as many places as they were found." Maxtla himself fled and disappeared in 1431.[37]

The kings of Tenochtitlan (of the Mexica people), Texcoco (of the Acolhua people), and Tlacopan (of the Tepanec people) now ruled the valley as an unofficial triumvirate. There was no formal statement to that effect. Later generations would say that they initiated a Triple Alliance, even though in a literal sense there was no such institution. In a de facto sense, however, there most certainly was what we might call a lowercase triple alliance. No one moved in the central valley without at least one of these three kings being aware of it, and beyond the mountains that surrounded them, in the lands that they gradually conquered, they had many eyes. They worked together to bring down their enemies; they divided the resulting tribute payments judiciously between them. The Mexica, with the largest population and having played the most important role in the war, got the largest share, but they were careful not to engender resentment among their closest allies by taking too much.[38]

It was a complex web that they wove among them. In a certain sense, the political lay of the land remained almost unchanged. In general, each altepetl continued to rule itself, choosing its tlatoani as the people thought best, and rotating tasks and responsibilities among the various segments that composed it, in the same fair-minded way as they always had. And if several altepetls had a tradition of governing themselves as a unit, as a "greater altepetl" at least in their foreign affairs, then that tradition generally continued, too.[39] A sort of democracy continued on a local level, in the sense that people continued to discuss local matters among themselves and arrive at solutions that pleased most of them. The same arrangement was allowed even to the non-Nahuas who were conquered. The central valley's triumvirate was satisfied that it should be so, as long as these other communities fought alongside them when called upon to do so, participated in public works—like the building of roads or great pyramid temples—and paid their assigned tribute on time. "This was no Rome," one historian has commented succinctly, meaning that the Mexica had no interest in acculturating those they conquered, no desire to teach them their language, or to draw them into their capital or military hierarchy.[40]

Yet despite the maintenance of local tradition, in an economic sense the region was profoundly changed. Each altepetl that fell under the sway of the triumvirate had to pay tribute wherever it was assigned. Often the financial exigencies were head-spinningly complex. One part of a greater altepetl might be assigned to pay tribute, for example, to nearby Texcoco, their regional boss town. But by the terms of the peace agreement, the next segment of the same greater altepetl might pay their taxes to Tenochtitlan. They might pay part of the tribute (such as a certain number of bales of cotton) once a year, and another part (such as some bags of corn or beans) three times a year. By necessity, the calendar grew increasingly consistent

across more and more territory, for Itzcoatl's collectors were timely, and the people had to be ready to receive them. Different villages had adopted the calendar at different times, so one altepetl's year One Reed might be another one's Two Rabbit. Now they were forced to try to synchronize their time counts. The calendars were never perfectly aligned, but they began to come closer.[41]

On one level, Itzcoatl enforced the same kind of tribute collection system that would have been in place under Tezozomoc of Azcapotzalco in the old days—and probably others before him in the deeper past. But now the central valley's net of power spread wider. With three altepetls working together, the armies they could send out were larger, the roads they had been able to build were longer. Altepetls that had been far from old Tezozomoc's grasp now came within the central valley's reach. Many resisted, but those who fought back against the new arrangements tended to lose. Then they were faced with tribute payments in perpetuity that sent shudders down every wise chief's spine: they were tasked not only with sending corn and beans, or chocolate and cotton, but also with supplying people to serve as sacrifices in the religious ceremonies of the central valley. A chief knew that this tax meant he would be forced to constantly make war against his neighbors if he were to avoid sending his own people's children to the cutting stone. It was enough to make anyone think twice before resisting. And chiefs had had it inculcated in them from an early age that a good chief was a responsible chief, one who avoided battles he was likely to lose and preserved his people's lives in order to protect the future of the altepetl. An impetuous chief could be referred to derogatively as a "child."[42]

If a town had fought strenuously against the Mexica with any significant degree of success, and yet ultimately lost, then its fate was even worse. The Huaxtecs (WASH-tecs) to the northeast, for example, fought back like wild animals; their reputation for it became fixed in local lore, together with their sad destiny. "The soldiers from all the allied provinces took many captives, both men and women, for they and the Mexica entered the city, burned the temple, sacked and robbed the place. They killed old and young, boys and girls, annihilating without mercy everyone they could, with great cruelty and with the determination to remove all traces of the Huaxtec people from the face of the earth."[43] Their story was to serve as a lesson to other potentially recalcitrant altepetls. And so it did.

After such a battle, the long lines of captives were tied together and taken to Tenochtitlan (or perhaps Acolhua or Tepanec country). The terrified prisoners first passed by other villages like theirs, with their flat-roofed adobe houses grouped in squares opening onto courtyards, where the women chatted as they worked, grinding corn and patting out tortillas, while their men labored in nearby fields.[44] As they approached the capital, the towns that were more closely entwined with the center of power were visibly wealthier, their buildings and religious pyramids grander, some even built of stone or wood.[45]

A great causeway was being constructed by the defeated people of Xochimilco. It stretched from the island to the southern shore of the lake, and along this the prisoners walked. Most prisoners were distributed among the nobility after a battle, but those who had been taken by a particular warrior were sent

to their captor's neighborhood temple for sacrifice at local religious festivals, or, if they were young women whom he wanted, to his household. Some were earmarked to be sent to the city's two central pyramid temples, one dedicated to Huitzilopochtli (the Mexica protector god) and the other to Tlaloc (the rain god). The ones not needed in either temple were sold in a slave market—there was a huge one in Azcapotzalco—and might be bought by neighborhoods in need of ceremonial sacrifice victims, or occasionally by men seeking concubines. Women slaves bought for sacrifice could sometimes convince their new masters to keep them alive to work in their household.[46]

Horrendous misconceptions have grown around the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. In novels, movies, and even some of the older history books, hundreds of people at a time were made to climb the narrow steps of the pyramids to the top, where their hearts were cut out and their bodies hurled downward, while the people screamed in near ecstasy below. In reality, it seems to have been a gravely quiet, spellbinding experience for the onlookers, much as we suspect it was in other old worlds, like that of the ancient Celts.[47] The people who watched had fasted and stood holding sacred flowers. In the early decades of Tenochtitlan's life, when the altepetl was still gathering strength, only a few people would have been sacrificed on the monthly religious festival days, and they were always treated as a holy of holies before they died. After a sacrifice, the warrior who had captured and presented the victim kept the remains (the hair and ceremonial regalia) in a special reed chest in a place of honor in his home for as long as he lived.

Most of the victims were men, classic prisoners of war. Not all were, however. In one annual festival, for instance, a young girl taken in war was brought from a local temple to the home of her captor. She dipped her hand in blue paint and left her print on the lintel of his door, a holy mark that would last for years and remind people of the gift she gave of her life. Then she was taken back to the temple to face the cutting stone. It was an ancient tradition among native peoples not to give way before one's enemies: such stoicism brought great honor. Sometimes those who were to die could get through their part without letting their enemies see them sob; sometimes they could not. "Some, in truth, wept," one man remembered later.[48]

The Mexica, like all their Nahua neighbors, believed they owed everything to the gods. "They are the ones who taught us everything," their priests would later explain to the Spanish. "Before them, we kiss the ground, we bleed. We pay our debts to the gods, offer incense, make sacrifices…. We live by the grace of the gods."[49] Each group of Nahuas had carried sacred bundles devoted to its own deity in the long marches from Aztlan; in the case of the Mexica, it was the relics of Huitzilopochtli that they had protected year after year, until they were finally able to bury them beneath a permanent temple. Other altepetls had carried relics of the rain god Tlaloc or his water-world consort, Jade-Skirted Woman. Others honored Quetzalcoatl, Feathered Serpent, the god of wind, who was at home both on earth and in the sky, a crosser of boundaries, special protector of priests. Some were most dedicated to Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror, a mischievous god who led humankind in a dance by assisting chiefs and warriors to bring change through conflict. Cihuacoatl, Woman-Snake, was known by many other names as well, but she was always sacred to

midwives; she often bore a shield and spear, for she helped birthing mothers seize a new spirit from the cosmos. There were many gods and goddesses each of whom appeared with a range of possible traits; today, we do not always understand their characteristics as well as we would like to, for the Nahuas did not write freely of them in the colonial era. They could write openly of history, but it was dangerous to write of the gods. We do know, however, that just as in ancient Greece, all the altepetls honored and believed in a pantheistic range of gods, not just the deity who had especially protected them.[50]

The gods asked human beings to appreciate what had been given to them and to make sacrifices, mostly by bleeding themselves, but sometimes even by giving the ultimate gift, that of human life. If human beings refused to do this, the fragile world might come to an end. Other, prior worlds had ended in disaster; the Nahuas never forgot that they were living under Nanahuatzin's Fifth Sun. In more ancient days one of their own children was probably offered up. This seems to have happened around the world in the earliest eras, before writing existed to document the practice in any permanent way. In the Hebrew Bible, for instance, Hiel the Bethelite begins to rebuild the city of Jericho by burying his eldest son beneath the gate. Likewise, in English lore, Geoffrey of Monmouth, in speaking of Merlin, says that he had to talk his way out of becoming a foundation sacrifice for a king's tower.[51] The notion of a youth dying for his people was hardly unique to the Nahuas.

However, as the Mexica rose, they sacrificed not their own young people but rather, increasing numbers of prisoners of war. They and all the other Nahuas had sometimes sacrificed their enemies: the burning of Shield Flower in 1299 was proof of this. But now the Mexica were nearly always the winners; they were no longer the ones who sometimes died themselves, and the numbers of their victims gradually grew. They allowed politics and the outcomes of wars to affect the numbers who died in any one year. They did this even as they prayed devoutly, even as they wrote heartrendingly beautiful poems and painted their walls with images of shells that looked so real one might imagine oneself in an eternal sea, transcending the struggles of this earthly life.[52] Did they know that the world would not shatter like jade if they did not sacrifice living human beings? Did they laugh cynically at the terror they inspired and the political power they wielded as a result? Probably there were some brilliant strategists and far-seeing, experienced people who did—perhaps like Itzocatl. They would not have been alone among world leaders; we know that there were some Greek and Roman leaders, for instance, who questioned the very existence of the gods yet did not let it shake their worldview.[53] Surely there were many more of the Mexica who simply never thought much about it—like people in so many times and places who choose not to see the pain inflicted on other people when it is more convenient not to. Can we blame them? Should we blame them?

Or perhaps they did think about it, as Itzcoatl himself must have done, and decided that whatever their philosophical views, there was no choice. After all, they did not live in a modern, liberal state, where certain protections are guaranteed to the majority. They simply could not afford too much generosity, for the real world that they inhabited was every bit as dangerous as the cosmos they envisioned. The Mexica

themselves had been on the other side for more years than they cared to remember. For generations, it had been their own young warriors and maidens who faced the fire and the cutting stone. Even now, if they began to lose their wars at any point, it would be their turn again. They knew this, as they sent their sons to practice the arts of war and learned to construct maces with bits of jutting obsidian glass embedded in them. In the midst of words of love addressed to their "little doves," mothers taught their children that the world was a dangerous place. "On earth we live, we travel, along a mountain peak. Over here is an abyss, over there is an abyss. If you go this way, or that way, you will fall in. Only in the middle do we go, do we live." [54]

The image of mothers teaching their children to live with these realities is a compelling one. Everything we know about the Mexica tells us that mothers valued their children dearly, more than anything else in life—they said that they were precious, like polished gems, or iridescent feathers, treasures fit for high kings. They warned them of dangers and begged them to be responsible, to care for themselves and their communities so that the altepetl would go on forever.[55] And children heeded their mothers' words. This was far from a world in which maternal figures were disparaged or in which women appeared as interchangeable sex objects. In the first place, it was generally only the men of noble families—those of the *pilli* class, the *pipiltin*—who had the right to take numerous wives and bring home captive women from the battlefield, for one had to be rich to afford to do such a thing. Even in that situation, who one's mother was mattered to an enormous degree to each child; but one has to admit that from an elite man's point of view, the women may have been somewhat interchangeable. That, however, simply was not the experience of the majority. The majority of the people were of the *macehualli* class, the *macehualtin*, and in their families, one husband lived with one wife, whose cloak had been tied to his in a formal ceremony. Sometimes a household was multigenerational or contained several siblings, but even there, each woman had her own hearth in her own adobe apartment facing onto the common courtyard. A woman raised her own children, teaching them to help her in the labor that everyone recognized was essential. In a world without day care, restaurants, vacuum cleaners, or stores, who would have dared to think that childcare, cooking, sweeping, and making clothes were inessential activities? No one, it seems, for the indigenous sources leave no record of disrespect, or even of veiled misogyny. Women's roles were complementary to those of men, and everyone understood this to be so; the house, the four-walled *calli* was symbolic of the universe itself.[56]

So we should take seriously whatever the women said, for their own people did. Women comforted their children, yet in the same breath warned them in no uncertain terms that they must learn to be ruthless in maintaining order, to do their duty, to take lives or give lives in the eternal wars if necessary. They must be willing to be like the brave but modest Nanahuatzin, who had jumped into the fire to bring forth the Fifth Sun for his people. These mothers would probably have been confused if someone had tried to talk to them about "good and evil." They would have said that all people had the potential to do good or to do harm, that it wasn't possible to divide people into two camps on that basis. To do good, a person had to suppress

egotism and do what was best calculated to keep his or her people alive and successful in the long term. Everyone was expected to give thought to the future. It wasn't always easy. Often one's fate involved doing just what one did not want to do. In some ways, it was not so much gratifying as exhausting, this playing "king-of-the-mountain" for life-or-death stakes.

For the system to work over the long term, Itzcoatl and, later, his heirs had to choose their military targets carefully. They had to be relatively sure of victory, based on rational calculations, not divine promises. Fortunately, the highest level priests were members of the leading noble families, and they seemed to understand this, too. At least, the gods whom they prayed to never demanded that they wage unwinnable wars. There were certain pockets of resistance that were more formidable than most and these had to be handled carefully. The best known was the greater altepetl of Tlaxcala, a large city-state composed of four independent sub-divisions, with four separate but united kings, located just to the east of the central basin. Tlaxcala was relatively wealthy—its name meant "place of the tortillas," or we might say "Bread Town." It was lodged securely in its own highly defensible valley and surrounded by pine woods that served as havens for deer and woodland birds and other game. These people were Nahuas, too, having arrived about the same time as the Mexica—they even shared some of the same myths and stories—and they weren't going to give the latter an inch if they could help it. Early on, the Mexica did launch several attacks against them, but it became clear that they were going to become mired in a stalemate. It was likely as a result of this that the Mexica initiated what they called the "Flower Wars," a kind of Olympic games played every few years, in which the winners, rather than earning a crown of laurels, saved themselves from death. It is unclear whether these games unfolded on a ball court or a battlefield, but probably the latter. The system worked well to keep young warriors on their toes even in times when there was no current war. And it made it unnecessary to explain to anyone why Tlaxcala was allowed to continue to exist without paying tribute. The world at large could assume that Tlaxcala was being left alone to serve as an enemy in the ceremonial Flower Wars. No one needed to discuss the fact that bringing down the large polity would have been far too destructive of Mexica resources, if it was even possible. Leaving Tlaxcala as a free enemy with a recognized role was a clever strategy. The leaders could not have foreseen that one day in the future it would cost them dear, when a new enemy, stronger than they, would land on their shores and find allies ready-made.[57]

Even a highly successful war-based polity of necessity faced certain problems. In this world that Iztcoatl negotiated so successfully, the ongoing wars could make it difficult for the Mexica to trade with far-off peoples. If the question of an attack was always imminent, few people would want to approach the Mexica or their allies even to discuss mutually beneficial business deals. Perhaps for this reason, not just the Mexica but all the Nahuas as if by common consent accepted the existence of certain neutral trading towns along the coasts and along the banks of rivers that led inland from the sea. Near to where the Olmecs had once lived, for example, there was a coastal town called Xicallanco (Shee-ca-LAN-co), and although it was

nestled within Maya territory, numerous Nahua merchants lived there. They facilitated trade with the eastern realms, buying textiles and cocoa, beautiful shells, the plumages of rare birds—and eventually, the birds themselves—as well as other luxury goods. They sold these in exchange for the goods made by Tenochtitlan's craftsmen, as well as excess slaves from the wars launched by the Mexica and their allies, women and children who had not been sacrificed but rather turned over to long distance merchants. Further along the coast, the island of Cozumel was another such neutral zone, and several others existed.[58]

In most of the Mesoamerican world, however, permanent truces did not exist. Warfare and expansion were perennial, for the Mexica state needed to grow wealthier as its polygynous noble families grew larger. And people needed to be kept in a state of suspense in order for their old alliances to last, rather than breaking down over minor arguments. And the battle zones needed to be pushed outward if the inner sanctum of the valley was to know only peace. It would have been a familiar story to any great monarch. Gone were the days when the father of Shield Flower, the warrior maiden, could declare war or make decisions based on his own needs and desires and those of a few companions. Itzcoatl had won his gamble, attaining power, wealth, and glory beyond any of his childhood dreams. But as a result, he had forged a complex political organism, one that, for all his vaunted power, he could not control simply by making a declaration.

One of the greatest threats to Itzcoatl's control lay very close to home. Either because he really did love them or because it would have precipitated civil war, or both, Itzcoatl did not kill the surviving sons of his half-brother, the late tlatoani, Huitzilihuitl, Hummingbird Feather. They, presumably for a mixture of the same reasons, continued to support him. They were the ones who by the law of custom should have ruled, not Itzcoatl. But he was the one who had united the Mexica in a time of terrible crisis, found useful allies for them, and led them all to victory. So they worked together during the fourteen years of Itzcoatl's reign. One nephew, Tlacaelel, was an active and successful warrior who made a great name for himself as the *Cihuacoatl*: the name of a goddess had become a title reserved for the man who was the second-in-command after the tlatoani, the inside chief who governed domestic affairs. Supporters of Huitzilihuitl's old royal line—many of them Tlacaelel's own children and grandchildren—liked to say that Itzcoatl really owed everything to Tlacaelel, that he was the one who had defeated the Tepanec villain Maxtla, and that it was his savvy strategizing that helped Itzcoatl govern in the toughest of times. When all the annals, not just those authored or orchestrated by Tlacaelel's descendants, are considered, this version of events strains credulity. If the man were really so indomitable, he himself would have emerged as tlatoani, rather than the bastard son of a slave girl. Still, it is clear that he was a major force to be reckoned with. He must have been satisfied with the power and the income he was given by Itzcoatl, for he maintained his place and went on to become an adviser to four kings over the next several decades. A council of four men from the extended royal family always worked closely with the person serving as tlatoani, and Tlacaelel the Cihuacoatl was the chief of these.[59]

In order to guarantee the continuance of the compromise, it was essential to settle amicably the question of the succession. Years earlier, Itzcoatl had married a woman from the then-powerful boss state of Azcapotzalco; his son by her was named Tezozomoc, after the old godfather king whose death had unleashed pandemonium. Itzcoatl could not present a half-Azcapotzalcan son as the people's future tlatoani, not after the recent war to the death against Atzcapotzalco. Besides, Huitzilihuitl's noble sons would not have been kept in line if they thought they were going to be excluded from the succession forever. So probably even before Itzcoatl died, it was understood that Tlacaelel would keep his lands and titles in perpetuity, and that Moctezuma, Huitzilihuitl's son by the Cuernavacan princess, would be next in line to rule. This Moctezuma was an ancestor of the one who would become world famous in his meeting with Hernando Cortés. Moctezuma was a powerful warrior—his name meant Frowns-Like-a-Lord—whose maternal relatives lived in an important cotton-producing region. Better yet, he was reasonable. He agreed to do what much-less- important Nahua altepetls often did—that is, alternate power between different lineages in a politically expedient rotation. He agreed that though he himself would rule, his own sons would not rule after him. Rather, he would select a daughter or a beloved niece to marry one of Itzcoatl's grandsons (a son of the passed-over son, Tezozomoc), who would be elected as ruler in his turn. Like Itzcoatl, Moctezuma would forego the opportunity to have one of his own sons succeed, likewise on the understanding that a grandchild of his would eventually take over. In this way, they would allow the pendulum of power to swing back and forth between the two family lines, ultimately bringing the lines together through the birth of a child descended from all of them, and the heart of the kingdom would remain at peace.[60]

***

ITZCOATL WAS QUITE RIGHT that his successor would need to be able to count on peace and stability in the inner circle. Though he could not have foreseen exactly where the gravest problems would emerge, he knew that in this life, nothing ever stays the same, and thus no monarch is ever truly secure. It was fortunate that he and his kinsmen settled their differences as effectively as they did, for in their strategic handling of polygyny-induced factionalism, they cemented their hold on power. It was perhaps their greatest stroke of brilliance, what most set them apart in a political sense.

The young Moctezuma was destined to rule for twenty-nine years. In his time, he would expand Aztec territory dramatically and solidify control over rebellious city-states conquered in earlier years. But his successes would not come easily. Relatively early in his reign, a great drought afflicted his people. Locusts passed through the land in the 1450s, and in 1454, the corn did not yield nor did it yield for the next four years. The priests begged the gods to take mercy on the powerless people who suffered, the common folk and the little children. They chanted their prayers to Tlaloc aloud:

> Here are the common folk, the macehualtin, those who are the tail and the wings [of society]. They are perishing. Their eyelids are swelling, the mouths drying out. They become bony, bent, emaciated. Thin are the commoners' lips and blanched are their throats. With pallid eyes live the babies, the children [of all ages]—those who totter, those who crawl, those who spend their time turning dirt and potsherds, those who live sitting on the ground, those who lie on the boards, who fill the cradles. All the people face torment, affliction. They witness that which makes humans suffer. Already there are none who are passed over.[61]

In the countryside, the teenage children left home to look for food, hoping at least to spare their parents the need to feed them. Often they would die, alone on some hill or in some wood, and people would later find their bodies, half eaten by coyotes or vultures.[62] In the city, tribute payments no longer arrived regularly, and the urban dwellers thus could not feed themselves. Times were so bad that some families might sell a child to the merchants who were traveling to the east, to Totonac or Maya country. There the drought was not so grave, and people were interested in buying children cheaply. As slaves, their parents told themselves, their children would not starve. But the Mexica swore to themselves that they would never let themselves be this vulnerable again.

As soon as he could, Moctezuma mounted another military campaign, this time against a former ally that had earlier been subjugated by the Mexica but then had become restive during the drought. The place was called Chalco. It was a powerful Nahua city-state within the central valley, just to the southeast of the lake. Its name meant, in effect "by the shores of the jade waters."[63] There had been some earlier skirmishing, but the war began in earnest in 1455. It took ten years, but in the end the political entity of Chalco was no more. Most of the people still lived, but their royal lines had been ousted. Henceforth, announced Moctezuma, the Chalca people would not rule themselves but would be ruled according to his decrees. Power had been given him by the gods. His brother Tlacaelel, the Cihuacoatl, took as his primary wife a daughter of the Chalcan royal line, and then he took up the reins of power and gave out chieftainships to men of of the Mexicas' choosing. "And for [the next] twenty-one years," said one writer of annals, "there was rule by outsiders."[64]

In the courtyards of Tenochtitlan, the poets and the history-tellers once again told the tale of their altepetl's greatness. Under starlit skies, they held up their painted books. These were new books that they displayed, painted since the time of Itzcoatl's conflagration; the revised histories made it seem absolutely expected that Itzcoatl would rise to power in the place of Huitzilihuitl's sons, and that Tenochtitlan—and not Azcapotzalco—was destined to rule the known world. The bards pointed to the symbolic images of burning temples, representing the conquests the Mexica had achieved. Then they began to talk: they moved

back and forth between the perspectives of the various components of the altepetl, telling their story as a conglomerate whole, twisting the strands together into one, to use their spinning metaphor. Their animated voices carried in the night.

The Mexica had come a long way, the speakers reminded their listeners, from the tragic last days of Shield Flower. They had been hunted wanderers—quite literally, at one point, after the war with Culhuacan—but under Huitzilihuitl, Chimalpopoca, Itzcoatl, and Moctezuma they had strategized and fought and jockeyed for position with such success that the surrounding people who once abused them now feared them, and hunger stalked them only intermittently. Sometimes, it was true, it felt as though they were still just barely hanging on, that there was still a threat at every turn.

But not most of the time. Most of the time, they were feeling quite successful; their stories were laden with their sense of themselves as underdogs-made-good. No one had ever handed them anything. They had been realists and strategists, and they were determined that they would continue to be. Each year, they knew, there would be more to add to their tale. All Nahua peoples were proud of the enduring life of their altepetl, the water-mountain, the community that outlived all individuals. Like Shield Flower, though, the Mexica exhibited an added panache in their pride. They weren’t merely poised between the days that were gone and the days yet to come: they beckoned to the future.