

## THE FALL OF THE AZTECS

1519: Tenochtitlán

### Portents of Fire, Water, Earth, and Air

One day long ago, the soothsayers flew to the cave of the mother of the god of war. The witch, who had not washed for eight centuries, did not smile or greet them. Without thanking them, she accepted their gifts—cloth, skins, feathers—and listened sourly to their news. *Mexico*, the soothsayers told her, *is mistress and queen, and all cities are under her orders*. The old woman grunted her sole comment: *The Aztecs have defeated the others, she said, -others will come who will defeat the Aztecs.*

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### The Capital of the Aztecs

Dumbfounded by the beauty of it, the conquistadors ride down the causeway. Tenochtitlán seems to have been torn from the pages of Amadís, *things never heard of, never seen, nor even dreamed . . .* The sun rises behind the volcanoes, enters the lake, and breaks the floating mist into shreds. The city—streets, canals, high-towered temples—glitters before them. A multitude comes out to greet the invaders, silent and unhurried, while innumerable canoes open furrows in the cobalt waters.

Moctezuma arrives on a litter, seated on a soft jaguar skin, beneath a canopy of gold, pearls, and green feathers. The lords of the kingdom go ahead sweeping the ground he will tread.

He welcomes the god Quetzalcoatl:

*"Thou hast come to occupy thy throne,"* he says. *"Thou hast come amid clouds, amid mists. I am not seeing thee in dreams. I am not dreaming. Unto thy land hast thou come . . ."*

Those who accompany Quetzalcoatl receive garlands of magnolias, necklaces of flowers around their necks, on their arms, on their breasts: the flower of the shield and the flower of the heart, the flowers of fine perfume and of golden hue.

Quetzalcoatl is a native of Estremadura who landed on American shores with his whole wardrobe on his back and a few coins in his purse. He was nineteen when he set foot on the wharf at Santo Domingo and asked: *Where is the gold?* He is now thirty-four and a captain of great daring. He wears armor of black iron and leads an army of horsemen, lancers, crossbowmen, riflemen, and fierce dogs. He has promised his soldiers: *"I will make you in a very short time the richest men of all who ever came to the Indies."*

Emperor Moctezuma, who opens the gates of Tenochtitlán, will soon be finished. In a short while he will be called *woman of the Spaniards*, and his own people will stone him to death. Young Cuauhtemoc will take his place. *He* will fight.