



## PROLOGUE

**T**HE PROCESSION BEGINS at the palace, wending its colorful way through the streets of Tetzcoco like the tail of the Feathered Serpent himself, elite troops arrayed behind the vanguard of musicians and ministers. Mother sits straight and regal beside me on our litter, smiling with benevolence at her adoptive city. The widening spiral of our journey takes us through all six of the boroughs, each with its particular variation on the typical architecture of our region:

Public steam baths and shrines, brick cubes teeming with people, steam, incense. Working-class houses, clustered around shared patios, echoing with the shouts of children, the yips of dogs, the cackling of turkeys. Merchant estates, guarded warehouses burgeoning with precious goods. Aristocrat mansions, white stone walls sprawling silent in the shade of cypress trees.

The streets are packed with citizens, joyful at the prospect of peace after so many years of battle and loss. Some shout praise for the Queen Consort, but the majority chant my name.

*A-col-miz-tli! A-col-miz-tli!*

It's hard to describe the humble love that fills my chest at the sound. I am the Crown Prince; one day I will rule over this happy throng. Though I can never be one of them—though luxury and privilege are my birthright—I have learned from my father the king that my job will be to protect them, to work to make their lives better, and to provide culture and stability.

And most of all, to defend the hybrid heritage of our people: the Acolhua Way.

It is a huge responsibility, but one I look forward to with relish. To spend my days defending and sharing knowledge, learning and creating beautiful things, improving the lot of my fellow human beings—what else could I possibly desire? Heaven's blessings shower down on me like flower petals.

Two faces appear amid a cluster of aristocrats in the Chimalpaneca borough to shake my joy for a moment: Atototl, my half-sister, and her husband, Lord Nonohualcatl. Though they nod in deference, I see their smiles shift as I turn away.

Their sneers snag at my thoughts, like a sour note in the midst of a lovely melody.

We make our way past the municipal gardens and zoo, over the river, and into the sacred precinct. My gaze sweeps up the steps of the Pyramid of Duality, towering over the city like a symbolic mountain that brings us closer to heaven.

I think of my public dedication upon its summit two years ago, my solemn consecration as Crown Prince of Tetzcoco. As I knelt there, my father—sturdy as a ceiba, tall and imposing—placed the coronet upon my brow.

“Acolmiztli,” he said, “My forelock and fingernail, my flesh and blood. In time you will sit upon my throne.”

Not until today, however, has the reality of royal succession truly sunken in.

I will be these people’s king.

Thankfully, that day lies far in the future. My father is healthy and strong. Undefeated. So why this uneasiness in my heart?

It’s my half-sister’s wry smile. I doubt her loyalty.

I try to dispel my worry with my favorite pastime: imagining all that I will build around me when I am king. New temples soaring up from the earth, a center for music and literature, better drainage systems for the commoners, a royal financing of repairs to older homes so that commoners can more comfortably fulfill their duty to gods and king.

As we turn to make our final approach to the southern gate, the litter dips unexpectedly at one corner. I reach out to steady my startled mother, who recovers with her usual elegance and straightens the coronet upon my brow in turn.

I cast my eyes at the guards escorting our litter. Father has entrusted that role to the youth captains of the calmecac, . . . including my bastard older half-brother Yancuilli. He returns my look with a defiant smirk.

My chest tightens. I can’t help but be suspicious of my rivals’ grins. My conniving half-sister or cruel half-brother may decide to arrange my death. They resent my title. They despise being at the margins of power. And there are factions in this city that—dissatisfied with the war my father triggered fourteen years ago—might use them to legitimize a coup, . . . which would begin with my assassination.

It’s the sort of possibility that all princes face, everywhere. The palace is often more dangerous than the battlefield. Alliances shift. Jealousies grow. Only one prince can become king at a time, after all.

Being so close to that ultimate power is intoxicating. It's no surprise royal families disintegrate into factions bent on betrayal and assassination attempts.

"Ignore him," Mother whispers.

I realize that I have been staring at Yancuilli. I turn to face the Queen Consort, who continues waving without dropping the veneer of her smile.

"I would if he were the only one. However—"

My words are cut off by the sound of conch trumpets to announce our arrival at the gate of the city. We are greeted with bows and salutes from my uncles Acatlohtli and Coyohuah, as well as other leaders of our army and community, gathered there to usher in a new era of peace.



The porters set the litter down, gently this time. Attendants rush forward to help Mother and me descend.

Through the arch of the gate we see two clusters of men approaching along the southern road, flanked to the east by fields of maize, glittering gold in the morning light. On the right strides my father, the king of Tetzcoco, accompanied by his prime minister, his brother General Acatlohtzin, and his personal guard. To his left comes a similar group led by my maternal grandfather, the king of Tenochtitlan, vassal of the Tepaneca Empire that has waged war on us for fifteen years.

The two kings exchange friendly looks as they walk, laughing at each other's jests. They have just signed one of the most important treaties of our times. I should rejoice to see them so relaxed.

Instead, my stomach feels tightened into knots.

Beside me, Mother sighs, content. Her eyes glitter with happy tears. "Long have I prayed for this moment. Reunited with my father. Watching three generations of my family's men standing together in harmony."

I reach out and take her hand in mine. She squeezes it in return.

"You deserve this happiness and peace, Mother."

As if prompted by my words, the corn shudders with movement.

Hundreds of Mexica warriors explode from their hiding place amid the stalks, weapons held high as they descend upon my father's party. His brother and personal guard find themselves engaged in a vicious fight, trying to keep the enemy from the king of Tetzcoco.



But my father is one of the greatest warriors in Acolhuacan. He spins away from the attackers and seizes his father-in-law, his ceremonial sword at the man's neck.

"No!" Mother cries, bolting toward the gate, swept along with the battalion of elite warriors that have accompanied our procession and who now rush to help protect king and city. But her attendants stop her, clinging and pleading.

Our soldiers enter the fray alongside the king's guard, clashing with the traitorous Mexica as Father continues to force Grandfather forward, toward the city. But the king of Mexico-Tenochtitlan manages to slip free, seizing an obsidian sword from a fallen warrior. It is a big two-handed weapon, its wooden body the length and shape of an oar, with black razors along the edges of the paddle that glint deadly in the sunlight.

The two men square off, circling each other, ignoring the battle around them as they prepare to duel.

My heart is thundering wildly. I would hurry to Father's side, but I would be dead in moments if I stepped beyond these walls.

I'm no fighter. My martial arts are mediocre at best.

Movement to my right. I flick my eyes over to see Yancuilli, inching toward me, sword in hand. I realize I'm unsafe even inside the city.

My half-brother advances, a grin splitting his blunt features. The muscles of his bare chest and abdomen tighten as if preparing for attack. The topknot that crowns his head reminds me that he has actually been in battle, and captured an enemy soldier or two.

A screech pierces the din. Overhead, an owl wings its way over the city.

Harbinger of death.

But before Yancuilli can attempt anything, Uncle Coyohuah throws an arm around his shoulder and pulls him to me faster. My father's brother-in-law is unarmed, but his bright regalia and authoritative voice are as good as any shield or weapon.

“Good thinking, Yancuilli,” Coyohuah says, giving me a sidelong glance of warning. “We must protect the Crown Prince from the Mexica, no matter the cost. Guard his left flank. Hand me your dagger, and I shall cover his right.”

The bastard mutters a curse as he complies.

My gaze returns to the patch of road right outside the gate. Father and Grandfather are slamming their weapons into each other’s shields, each attempting to wear the other down. But the weight of the weapon Grandfather has chosen wears *him* down. I can see his muscles straining with every blow.

Then, Grandfather’s shield cracks. He falls to his knees.

“Yield!” howls Father, lifting his sword to strike.

“Never!” spits the king of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. “Long live Emperor Tezozomoc!”

Pulling a dagger from his belt, he buries it in Father’s thigh.

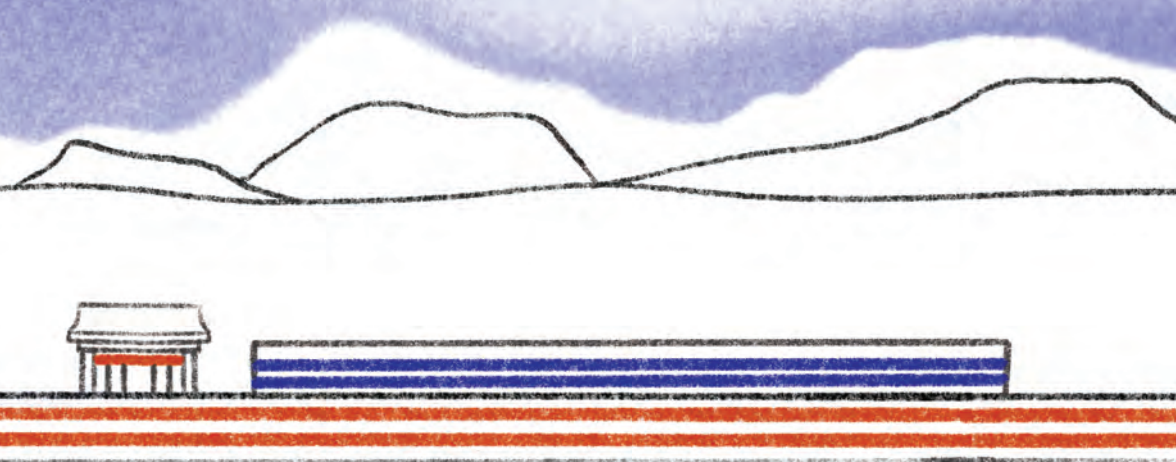
The sword swings in a downward arc, the obsidian razors at its edges sliding along Grandfather’s defiant throat.

A spray of blood spatters Acolhua soil and the king who protects it.

And Grandfather’s body goes sprawling lifeless in the dust.







{I}

FALL

