

The New Fire

from Chapter I

After the sun set on the last day of the century, in the world of the mexica the last fire was also extinguished. In the five unpropitious days that had preceded this moment, tears had smothered every hearth. Despair had destroyed the simulacra of the domestic gods, garments had been rent, ornaments shattered. The sacred fires on the temples had already been extinguished. The demons of desolation hovered over the ashes and in the shadows, and above all in people's hearts. Pregnant women wore masks of sorrow on their faces. The People of the Sun had gathered together on the slopes of Mount Uixachtecatl. Like an immense, anxious rose of souls they scrutinized the sky, in holy terror that the motion of the stars might come to a halt. Priests with long, wild hair, their black robes embroidered with skulls, huddled at the summit, preparing the sacrifice. They had gone up in procession as the day waned, with the most noble of prisoners as a tribute. Warriors with an eagle headdress on their head and others in jaguar skins stood guard over the Lord of Mankind, Montezuma, the second with that name, gaunt from days of fasting. At his side was a sleepy-eyed child. Like all children, the boy was not to fall asleep that night, otherwise in a terrible dream he would be turned into a rat. He squeezed Montezuma's hand and whispered:

"Papa, tell me again why the fire is extinguished on this night."

"Because this is how it was in the beginning," said Montezuma, "when darkness enveloped the Earth. At that time men were like children and trembled from the cold. The gods crowded together around the hearth, in Teotihuacán, and looked into each other's eyes, to see who should be sacrificed in the fire that would give birth to the Sun. The vain Tecuciztecal and the humble Nanahuatzin came forward. The first proffered ears of gold, quetzal feathers, jade and red coral. The second offered thorns stained with blood and practiced fasting and penance. When the time came for the trial, Tecuciztecal, sumptuously dressed, approached the fire four times, but did not have the courage to enter it. Nanahuatzin, on the other hand, covered with sores, did not hesitate for a moment; he closed his eyes and plunged into the fire, and was consumed without uttering a moan. And from the ashes the Sun was reborn. So then Tecuciztecal leapt into the flames in disgrace, and was transformed into the Moon. And the Sun and Moon appeared in the sky, motionless, to the wonder of the gods. They all offered themselves up in the sacrifice of death, so that the Sun and Moon might move."

The child would have liked to hear the rest of the story, but his father pointed to Aldebaran, the star that touched the zenith. Endless sighs rose up in the night, and loud shouts, and cries of joy, because the end of the world had been averted for another century. The supreme High Priest, crowned with quetzal feathers, a gold earring and green stone dangling from an earlobe, raised a finger and the prisoner, naked, was laid out on the convex stone. Four priests held him by the arms and legs, and a fifth one tightened a wooden collar in the shape of a serpent around his throat. The High Priest slashed open the man's chest with the sacrificial knife and swiftly cut out his heart, which he laid in the bosom of the gods. Then he rubbed two sticks together over the wound, in a gesture as ancient as the magic of fire, and the new fire seemed to rise from that gaping laceration. Four messengers lit their torches there.

"Run to the four corners of the valley!" shouted the High Priest pouring forth precious water. "Let every hearth be lit, in the land of the mexica!"

Since time had not stopped, other seasons passed. And one day, in that time of year dedicated to the gods of war and hunting, the wooded slopes of another mountain filled with warriors. They came together joyfully in the ritual of hunting. They spent the night in huts made of leafy branches. The younger ones listened excitedly to the stories of the older men, who told about the contest between man and beast, where cunning and courage triumphed over ferocity. When the first light of dawn penetrated the foliage, the warriors formed

a long column and began the hunt, slowly closing in on the animals, like a noose. Then they massacred them, with arrows, spears and slings. As tradition called for, those who killed a roebuck or a coyote received a gift from the emperor. Montezuma himself, a hunting enthusiast, had taken part in the ritual, offering everyone food and drink. So devoted was he that at sunset, when the warriors returned to Tenochtitlan with their trophies, he decided to embark on a solitary hunt along the shore of the lagoon. He armed himself with a blowpipe and using his breath and little clay balls killed quite a few birds. But at the end of this pleasurable diversion, some fishermen came to him with a large gray-feathered bird that had a round mirror in the middle of its forehead.

“Where did you find it?” asked Montezuma.

“O Great Lord, it was caught in a net” the fishermen replied, kneeling before him.

Montezuma approached the bird and leaned over the mirror: at first all he saw was the reflection of his thirty years, a long face which in the light of the setting sun seemed veiled by a golden mask, its beard thin and sparse. So he spoke to the bird:

“Where are you from? If you only knew how much we love birds! In my palace there is a royal bird sanctuary, with gardens, and fresh and salt waters, and numerous men serve them as if they were serving Montezuma.”

But these words died on his lips, when he saw his face sink in the mirror. And in place of his image he saw the stars, sun and moon light up, night and day, the sky and the sea... He saw a swarm of warriors pale as death, looking like a monstrous cross between men and deer. They were coming from the East. Then everything, even the bird, suddenly vanished. The fishermen, though seeing their Lord trying not to falter, dared not touch him, but instead went away. For a while the emperor floundered in the uncertainty that he may have been dreaming, but following this vision in the magic mirror, miracles multiplied throughout the realm.

To begin with, Montezuma could no longer sleep. It was then that he began to hear a voice that spoke to his soul. One night in the royal palace he entered the Bird House, wrapped in his turquoise mantle, followed by a pack of soothsayers, astrologers and necromancers, so bent over that they seemed to be following the scent of his tracks. He was the only one wearing shoes. In the pavilion of the winged predators he did not deign to look at the vultures, but stopped in front of the eagles’ aviary, lost in thought. At a nod from him, a noble servant threw a turkey to those incarnations of the Sun. With his eyes fixed on the rostrums competing for the shreds, Montezuma spoke these words to his retinue:

“In the dreams of our ancestors, before they came to conquer this land, an eagle alighted. And when the eagle flew off at sunrise, they set out on their march. After much wandering and suffering and fighting, they reached this place where today the House of Birds stands. Then they heard the eagle’s cry, though they did not see it, hidden as it was by reeds and marshes. Finally a sign appeared: at the entrance to a cave, its talons dug into the crest of a cactus, the eagle they had dreamed about was devouring the serpent. What am I, Montezuma, to think, since last night I dreamed of a serpent devouring an eagle? And who can tell me what that fire in the sky is? It shines so brightly it turns night into day, but it casts darkness in my heart.”

“The stars are uneasy, like my Lord” the astrologer began. “This fire not only appears at night and vanishes at dawn, but reappears, high in the sky, like a temple of light, when the sun appears on the horizon. It is an inauspicious sign”.

“Another flame was ignited, O Great Lord” said a frightened voice. “The temple of Totleco burned. The priests were crying and shouting: “Put out the sacrilege!” But the water thrown onto the blaze turned into the vomiting of a volcano”.

“A thunderbolt fell on the house of the fire god and reduced it to ashes” said a soothsayer. “The sky was serene and no one heard the thunder”.

“Three stars danced in the sky” said a great authority of the Book of Destiny, “with long tails of light. They fell headlong to where the sun rises, amid a cloud of sparks and the cries of your people”.

“The waters of the lagoon were calm and there was no wind” they all said together, “but suddenly the waters churned and the waves surged into many houses in Tenochtitlan.”

“At night you can hear moans and sobs” said a necromancer. “A woman gave birth to a child with two heads...”

Montezuma turned and said:

“If the mother kills him, have her stoned! Bring the baby to my palace”. And he continued raging: “All these

signs confuse me. You speak of the stars yet you don't dare raise your eyes from the ground. Out of my presence, astrologers, soothsayers, necromancers!"

They all slipped away. Montezuma was alone for only a moment, when he saw someone who dared to disobey his command, someone coming toward him with a torch. Montezuma immediately recognized the feathered mantle, the stride and regal figure of old Nezahualpilli. He was extremely surprised and disconcerted. No one had announced the visit of the chief of Texcoco and he thought this might be an apparition, not his ally in the flesh. Montezuma considered Nezahualpilli the king of necromancers and believed that he had great and mysterious powers in the art of divination. Not that he considered them superior to his own worldly powers, or was fearful of Nezahualpilli. He had great respect for Nezahualpilli, who because of his age could be his father. He not only saw Nezahualpilli as a ruler who was his ally and as a soothsayer, but held him in high regard as his wisest counselor. Moreover, Montezuma thought, how could it be otherwise, since Nezahualpilli was engendered by the seed of Nezahualcoyotl, the greatest lord in the history of Texcoco? There is no area in which Nezahualpilli has not endeavored to be worthy of his father, starting with that of justice and honor, to the extent that his decrees of conviction did not spare either his firstborn son or the woman he loved, when they betrayed him. These were Montezuma's thoughts concerning the individual who appeared before him like a specter in the night, the only person who would be able to solve the enigma that was worrying him. And in fact Nezahualpilli began:

"When the plumed Serpent disappeared into the blue water, towards the East, he left this prophecy: 'On the day of my birth, which is Ce-Acatl in the year One Reed, I shall return'."

"So it was the god Quetzalcoatl, that serpent that I dreamed about?" Montezuma asked. And Nezahualpilli nodded:

"Tonight we met in a dream."

"Tell me" Montezuma said eagerly, "what did you see?"

Nezahualpilli lowered his eyes:

"That you, Montezuma, shall lose your kingdom."

[...]

from Chapter II

Towards dawn one day in the Year of the Reed, that of the prophecy, the Uey calpixqui, grand minister, came before Montezuma, out of breath. He was so shaken that he neglected his ceremonious duties as chamberlain and forgot to take off his shoes. He announced that messengers had arrived from the coast, having seen a miracle on the waves of the sea. Montezuma, no matter how prepared he was, experienced the shock of an earthquake deep inside and felt himself stagger. But despite his great agitation, he received the news with resignation. He looked at the morning star, the shining heart of the plumed Serpent, and addressed these thoughts to it:

"From what blue depths have you returned, Quetzalcoatl? And what if you are not the one we are expecting? But it is you, is it not, the god who sacrificed himself in the fire to be reborn as a star? You who descended into the netherworld of Mictlán to revive the bones of the dead. We destroyed the bodies of your chosen people, but their spirit lives on in us. In some way, we are the descendants of the Toltecs: you do not wish to avenge yourself on us, do you?"

Montezuma then ordered that the messengers be brought before him. The heralds appeared in humble garments, bowed low three times and knelt before him. Given their agitation over the things they had seen and their nervousness at finding themselves before the Lord of Mankind, whom they were seeing for the first time, they were trembling like motherless puppies, and their throats were so dry from swallowing, that they were unable to speak. Most of all, they were afraid of being sacrificed as messengers of doom.

"Lord...", "My Lord...", "O Great Lord...", they barely managed to utter. Then they resorted to the paintings that they had brought, unrolling them and, still on their knees, holding out their arms to show them to Montezuma. The drawings were somewhat indistinct, with uncertain lines, these too traced with a trembling hand. Nevertheless it was clear that they depicted a ship, a couple of tenders, several pale-skinned men and a few black men, some on deck and some busy fishing.

"It's a temple floating on the blue waters... And these creatures seem like men, but in truth they must be teules, gods". [...]

