

'AN AZTEC WEST WING' **GUARDIAN**

ÁLVARO ENRIQUE

'LIVELY, ARRESTING' **THE TIMES**



'A TRIUMPH' **FINANCIAL TIMES**

YOU DREAMED OF EMPIRES

'A MISCHIEVOUS FANTASY' **TLS**

ÁLVARO ENRIGUE

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Hypothermia

Sudden Death

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You Dreamed of Empires

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Vintage, Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Vintage in 2025

First published in hardback with the title *Tu sueño imperios han sido*
in Spain by Editorial Anagrama in 2022

First published with the title *You Dreamed of Empires*
in Great Britain by Harvill Secker in 2024

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The epigraph comes from the Nahuatl text *Legend of the Suns*,
1558, translated into English by Natasha Wimmer from the
Spanish version by Ángel María Garibay

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House
Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529920659

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For Aimé, of course.

And for Miquel and Dylan and Maia and Emilio G.

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Again they asked, 'What will the gods eat? Everyone is looking for food.' Then the ant went to collect kernels of corn from the Mountain of Sustenance. Quetzalcoatl met the ant and said to him: 'Tell me where you got that.' Many times he asked, but the ant wouldn't tell. Then the ant said: over there.

Legend of the Suns, 1558

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NOTE TO ENGLISH-LANGUAGE READERS

Dearest Natasha:

As promised, here's the new novel. This time around it's a little more polished, which I hope will make the translation process less torturous for you. With age comes insecurity and I spend more time revising than writing.

I've smoothed out the spellings of the Nahua names as best I can, but I'm sure there will be inconsistencies and mistakes. Sorry. We can go through them, but the main ones are right: Atotoxtli, Tlilpotonqui, Malinalli, etc. They look as strange to me as they do to you, though I was born and raised in Mexico City.

Note, for example, that in the novel, the stress in *Tenochtitlan* falls not on the *a*, as it would in Spanish, but on the *i*. And the word is spelled with an *x*: *Tenoxtitlan*. It's more or less the name as it would sound in Nahua instead of Spanish or English: *Tenoshtítlan*. It has nothing to do with purity – I couldn't care less about that. I just prefer how it sounds: it has the warmth of the language of the ancient Mexicans if you stress the right syllable and pronounce the *x* as *sh*. Same with the other names: *Atotoxtli* is hideous if you pronounce it with a hard *x*. *Atotoshtli*, on the other hand, is easy to say and has a beautiful sound. *Caxtilteca*, the name the Nahua give the Spaniards, works the same

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way: *Cashtilteca*. And *Caxtitlan* – in other words, Castile – is pronounced *Cashtítlan*, with the accent on the *i*.

The *tl* sound exists in English and isn't hard to pronounce: *Atlantic*, for example; but it's more of a challenge when it falls at the end of the word. In Nahuatl it was common for names to end in *tl*. I'm sure you've come across a *Xochitl* (Flower), like Moctezuma's niece in the novel. It isn't pronounced as it's written. We say *Sóchil*, and the language is *Nahua*, not *Nahuatl*. The name *Xochitl* appears only a few times in the novel, but the emperor *Axayacatl* comes up constantly. It's hardly a common name – I don't know any *Axayacatls* – but by association I would pronounce it *Ashayácal*. Sonorous, succinct and smooth.

You'll spot an inconsistency: I kept the familiar *Moctezuma* instead of replacing it with the Nahuatl *Moteucsomá*, because I like it better. This is a novel, and in novels – thanks to Cervantes – even the spelling must obey the story. The *c* and the *t* together are a contained explosion, like the character who bears the name.

Don't worry too much about the Nahuatl words you come across. Mexican readers won't know right away what a *macehual* or a *pipil* is either. Let the meanings reveal themselves: the brain likes to learn things and we're wired to register new words. I don't think it's necessary to explain that *huey tlatoani* means great lord of Tenochtitlan – you get that as the story progresses. And I think it will follow logically in readers' minds that *huey Caxtilteca* means a Castilian lord. You don't need experience of parliamentary systems to understand how a European government works when you watch a political TV series made across the Atlantic, do you? And to state the obvious, a *calpulli* isn't the same thing as a neighbourhood and a military academy isn't the same thing as a *calmecac*, though

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they are alike in some ways. As you read, everything will become clear.

The intention is not to give lessons in Nahuatl. It's simply to recover the sounds of the language in some places. There's nothing nostalgic about it, nor am I driven by ideology. All of the spellings and all the Nahuatl terms are open to discussion. I realise that if an English speaker can say *Moscow* instead of *Moskva*, there's no reason I should say *Tenoxtitlan* instead of *Tenochtitlan*, but I'm a writer and words matter to me. They may signify and signal, but I believe they also invoke.

Over to you. *Abrazo recio*,

Á.

PS: Attached is a list of characters, with correct spellings, names, nicknames, and roles for reference.

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THE CAXTILTECA

Captains

Hernán Cortés (Hernando, El Malinche, huey Caxtilteca):
Captain general of the Caxtilteca expedition

Pedro de Alvarado: Cortés's cousin; second in command of the Caxtilteca expedition

Jazmín Caldera: Principal investor in the Caxtilteca expedition and third in command

Luengas, Vidal, Oviedo, Lugo, Olid: Other captains

Translators

Gerónimo de Aguilar: Andalusian priest; castaway and slave of the Maya lord of Akumal; translator from Maya to Castilian

Malintzin (Malinalli, Marina, María del Mar, Tenepal): Nahua princess of Olutla; courtesan of the Maya King Tabascoob; translator from Maya to Nahuatl on the Caxtilteca expedition

THE TENOCHCA

The Colhua

Axayacatl: Emperor (huey tlatoani); father of Moctezuma; dead

Tizoc and Ahuitzotl: Emperors (huey tlatoque); younger brothers of Axayacatl; dead

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Moctezuma: Son of Axayacatl; emperor (huey tlatoani) and supreme general of the armies of the Triple Alliance, consisting of the cities of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tacuba

Atotoxtli: Princess; empress; daughter of Axayacatl; sister and wife of Moctezuma

Cuitlahuac: Younger brother of Moctezuma; lord of Iztapalapa; general of the Mexica army and next in line for the imperial throne

Cuauhtemoc: Son-in-law of Moctezuma; general of the Mexica army and second in line for the imperial throne

The Mexica

Tlilpotonqui: Cihuacoatl (mayor) of the city of Tenochtitlan and supreme general of the Mexica army

Tlacaelel: Heir to the post of cihuacoatl

I. Before the Nap

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Captain Jazmín Caldera, native of Zarzales, Extremadura, couldn't eat the turkey broth with flowers, though it looked exquisite and he was starving. He had been assigned a place at the table between the priests of Xipe and Tezcatlipoca. Draped like a cape around the shoulders of the former was the decaying, blackened skin of a warrior sacrificed who knows when, while the latter's matted locks, neither cut nor washed since he'd taken orders at the temple, were crusted with many moons of sacrificial blood: quail daily, sometimes turtle or wolf, but on major festival days – of which there was one each month – warrior blood, preferably Tlaxcalteca.

Jazmín Caldera reached out his hand for the fine lacquered cup, into which a woman had poured chocolate frothed in water with honey, chile and vanilla, and breathed in the scent as deeply as he could, trying to ignore the wolfish aroma exuded by his dining companions. He looked up towards the head of the table. The captain general of the expedition was watching him fixedly, those icy eyes ordering Jazmín to be quiet and eat his soup once and for all.

Caldera turned his gaze to the left. The priest of Xipe was painted from head to toe with black and blue stripes. Under the human skin he wore as a cape, he had on a white robe patterned with shoots of corn in a featherwork design. Two

enormous jade discs hung from his ears, set around the edges with gold and silver snakes. They must have been hideously heavy, surely painful. Under his lip was a gold labret: a little dog's head. It slipped in and out of sight each time he took a swallow of soup or chocolate, as if playing in a little skin house.

The priest of Tezcatlipoca was dressed less luxuriously, in a plain red robe. His body, or what could be seen of it, was painted black, except for the part of his face between nose and chin, which was also red. The ribbon that tied up the towering, malodorous thatch on top of his head could have graced the swanlike neck of the daughter of a Spanish grandee: freshwater pearls, little jade heads, and coral animals chasing each other along a trail of silver thread. His teeth were filed sharp as a cat's.

Jazmín returned his attention to his plate, to his cup of chocolate, and then again to the captain with his unrelenting stare, seated at the head of the table elbow-to-elbow with Princess Atotxotli. Now the captain raised his eyebrows to punctuate the urgency of his command: Eat! Caldera lifted the cup of chocolate and took a long swallow. Though the drink was possibly his favourite of all the many extraordinary new things he had tried since they had landed, it nearly came back up. It was impossible to dissociate it from his tablemates' reek of coagulated blood.

Even so, the immediate thrill of the cacao, to which the new arrivals were as yet unaccustomed – a tickle at the base of the neck, a shudder of the spine, the tremendous urge to do something, anything – made him suspect that he could handle the soup despite the stench. He picked up the dish, and as he raised it to his mouth, he felt spasms again. He set it down. Now the princess was watching him curiously too.

Jazmín raised his eyes, looking everywhere but towards the

priests and the captain general. He gazed directly across the table, past the heads of Aguilar and Malinalli, people he assumed were used to eating even human flesh. He looked at the wall and thought about the city of Selenites swelling on the other side. He returned in his imagination to its temples, canals, and floating neighbourhoods ringed by giant rectangular rafts, each identical to the next in shape and size, where the Mexica grew their vegetables and flowers. He remembered his spiritual exercises at the Jesuit school in Trujillo, and in his mind's eye he saw the lake that surrounded the city, preventing the Spaniards from escape if the emperor gave the order to loose his eagle warriors; he envisioned the volcanos that had been such torture to cross, standing sentry over the Anahuac Valley, scattered with white cities and fortified with towers and temples. Again he saw Amecameca, the start of the Iztapalapa causeway across the lake, the flower arch, mythical Moctezuma and his retinue, and the moment when the idiot captain general almost sank everything by trying to hug him. They had entered the city; the mayor had lodged them in Axayacatl's palace, so lovely and serene; and they'd been invited to eat right here, in the hall of emperors past, with the princess's entourage. They had come to the very heart of the great, invincible city of Mehxicoh-Tenoxtitlan, and their task was almost complete.

Everything was a little hazy, muddled. All of it an honour perhaps undeserved. They had made it here with staggering effort and lunatic determination, and they had proved themselves to be good soldiers, going on when no one else would have, always betting against the odds. It meant something. But that had been the road, the hustle, a game – played to the death, but a game in the end. Now that they were in the palace and in the presence of the princess, it seemed to Jazmín that

the ship might start to take on water anywhere. The captain general – sitting amid such grandeur, such saturnalian figures – suddenly looked like what he'd been back in Cuba: an ill-favoured and artless son of Extremadura. They were provincials, nobodies, hicks. One blunder could reveal that they were really a bunch of loudmouth bastards who claimed to have come in the name of an emperor they never had a hope of meeting, when in truth they didn't even represent the adelantado of Cuba, whom they'd given the slip in order to do what they were doing.

Jazmín sighed. He returned his gaze to the table, but couldn't bring himself to take his plate in his hands. In the calmest of voices, friendly as if he were commenting on the pleasing warmth of the Anahuac sun, he said that they would have to forgive him, but nobody could eat like this.

The captain general smiled slightly, tilting his head. He moved his jaw back and forth a few times. Each time he jutted out his chin his eyes narrowed a little: a ghastly sight. Jazmín nodded his own head discreetly as if pleading for his superior's patience, but really he only wanted the man to stop making that nightmarish face. He picked up the soup plate again in both hands, breathing deeply to lock in its scent, and again the smell of dried blood and decaying skin got in the way. Lowering the plate, he set his palms on the linen tablecloth and closed his eyes. He kept his composure. Controlling his nausea and tone of voice, he glanced right and left at the priests. I mean, what is this? he asked. And he smiled at the captain general as if begging for pity.

Cortés took a generous swallow of soup and bellowed his delight. He smiled at Princess Atotxotli, seated next to him. With a pleasant expression still on his face but his fists clenched on the linen cloth – his knuckles white with rage at Caldera's

insubordination – he said quietly, almost in a sing-song: Shut up and eat the soup, son of a bitch; we are the empress's guests. Caldera smiled. I can't, he replied; if only you knew what they smelled like, Hernán, this one here must have eaten mashed-up babies for breakfast. The captain general returned his smile and, as if commenting on the sweetness of the chocolate, said: You think you smell of roses? Shut up and eat, then vomit later all you want. Malinalli, the Nahua translator, raised her eyes from her plate. In Maya, she asked Aguilar, the Spanish translator, whether they should translate what Caldera and Cortés were saying for the benefit of the princess, nobles and priests crowded around the table. He whispered in her ear, also in Maya, that he didn't think so, it was just conquistador chatter.

Malinalli spoke Nahuatl and Maya, but not Spanish. And Aguilar spoke Maya and Castilian, but not Nahuatl. The conversations between the Colhua and the people she and everybody else called the Caxtilteca still had to pass through a double filter. Now she felt the punch of Princess Atotoxtli's gaze – the princess was the emperor's sister but also his wife – waiting for her to translate what had been said. She lifted her face, smiled, and said in Nahuatl: They are saying how delicious everything is. The princess twitched her mouth as if to suggest she didn't believe a word of it. The translator shrugged. In a bid for patience she said: They are savages, of course; they like the taste of the juice of rotting fruit they bring from their own lands, so they can't believe there is such a thing as chocolate.

The priest of Xipe, who had just annihilated his soup, burped modestly and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing his make-up a little. He said in Nahuatl, as if talking to himself: They're imbeciles and they smell like dogs and caca; I say we sacrifice them now before we get used to