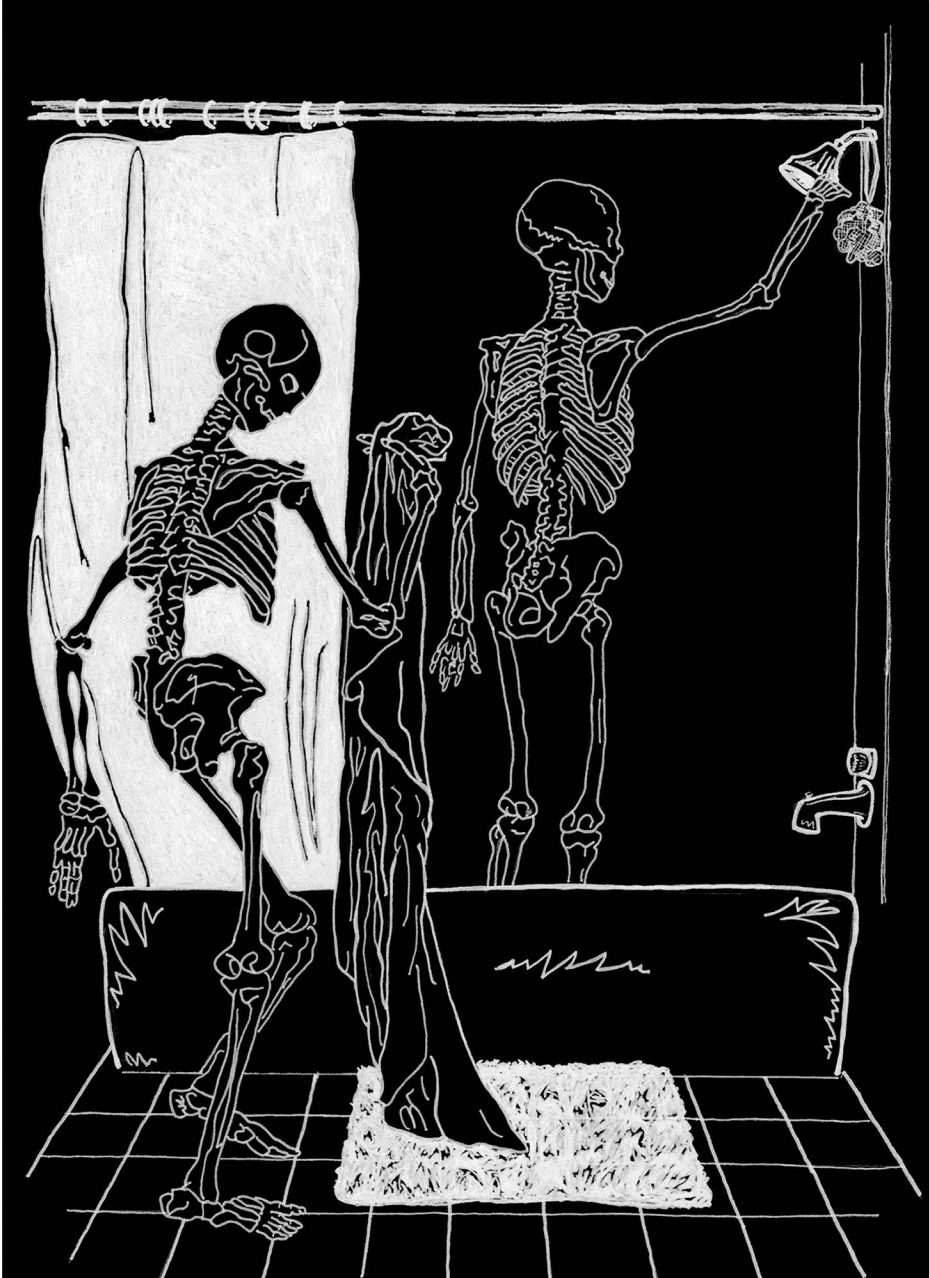


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The Monument

The ravages of conquest and war have diminished his body, but his soul remains unquenched. He still has people killed—careless servants or bad cooks, mostly—yet even that has slowed. He’s grown tired of our blood, or perhaps now feels his entry through the gates of Heaven would look better lined with gold and silver.

I bring Hernán Cortés his chocolate atole, not too thick and not too hot. I don’t think he’d have my head for bad atole. But then his likings and routines are almost now my own, to the point that I don’t even think about them. I can now sing in my head, even visit the temples of Teotihuacán if I like, and when I return the atole will be perfect, as if by magic, on the fire in front of me. The gift of escape has come with time, but even so I must step carefully. Condors may grow old, but their claws stay sharp.

I kneel and bow as I place the drink on his desk, next to his candlelight. He places his feather in the inkwell, then lifts my head up by my chin. He pats me on the cheek.

“Huitzi, my child,” he says. “Soon, I’ll pass to the hands of our God Jesus Christ, and you’ll be free.”

I touch my head, then my heart, then each of my shoulders in turn. “May God forbid it,” I say.

He looks down at me with a gentle smile. “If I were younger you might bear me children too,” he says. “But all I ask now of our Lord is to let my memory live on in the hearts of men.” He gazes to the ceiling, his expression long and pious. He looks like the endless saints hanging from the palace walls. In Cortés’s religion, everybody suffers. It is a philosophy extended down to those in servitude.

I say to him what I hear the sculptor say when Cortés is looking for assurance. “Chicahua says the grandeur and scale of your new monument will leave even King Carlos looking like a peasant.”

“Glory to God in the Highest,” he says. I’ve never understood why he uses that phrase in response to affairs that are squarely of this world, but I nod. I always do.

Chicahua has gained a special place in the Palace of Cortés, his status unrivaled among the Mexicas here in Cuauhnahuac. He comes and goes unsupervised, outfitted in jaguar furs and peacock feathers, and sometimes sits to

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dinner with Cortés himself to speak of the future. It is said that Chicahua holds mystic powers, having assured Cortés of victories in Teotihuacán and Veracruz well before these were guaranteed. As I served them dinner once, I heard Chicahua say that he could hear God through sculpture, and that he simply produced the shapes that the God wished for his subjects on Earth to see.

I wonder which God Chicahua hears.

Chicahua is a master of the European techniques. Early on, seeing his talent, Cortés sent Chicahua to study with the Spanish masters, to replace his crude and blocky Mexica style. After his return, Chicahua became Cortés's personal memorist, documenting his conquests in tablets and sculptures so that his exploits may be known even by illiterates like me. Outside of the palace, the largest of these sculptures looks down at everyone from a giant pedestal, as if to remind us that Cuauhnahuac is now called Cuernavaca. I shudder every time I pass the statue on the way to the market, fearing the large bronze thing will fall on my head. We Mexicas use stone, and we build on the ground. Mother Coatlicue wants to feel us close to Her and to use materials She provides.

Cortés has not stopped gazing at the ceiling, as if his insistent stare will one day bore a hole directly to the heavens above. "Bring Chicahua here," he says. "I want to hear of his progress myself."

I bow and take my leave, my hands reflexively checking that Cortés's slippers are exactly where he expects to find them should he decide to wash. I make my way barefoot through the cavernous palace to the covered courtyard of the palace, where I am sure to find Chicahua working on the Monument. Day and night, Chicahua hammers and chisels, scrapes and smooths, fires and cools. He has asked for more gold and silver from Cortés than I thought existed in all the caves of Sultepec, but he has only asked for small amounts of iron. Like everyone, I am filled with curiosity, for thick red drapes have been hanging from the ceiling to the floors around the courtyard for more than twenty moons. On Chicahua's request, Cortés imposed a penalty of death for peeking or spying on the Monument, so all of us servants steered clear.

I ring the large bell just outside the drapes.

"What?" yells Chicahua from behind them. He does not open them.

"It's Huitzi," I say, "Master Cortés would like to see you."

"Tell him I'm busy," he yells.

"Please don't make me do that," I beg. "He'll be displeased."

There is no sound for many moments. Finally, though, I see him punching through the drapes, trying to find the opening. When he emerges, I see that he is covered in gold and silver dust. His feathers and fur hang lopsided from his body; he has been careless putting his costume on. His eyes look sunken in, his face taut.

"I can bring water for you to wash," I say.

He waves my offer away. "Let him see. It's almost time, anyway."

I want to ask him what he means, but I can't just talk with him like I do with the others. I've already said enough, asking to be spared from going back without him. I walk behind him, eyes to the ground, as we head back to Cortés's study.

Before we enter the study, Chicahua seems to have a change of heart about his appearance. He asks me to get him a bowl of water, and I run to my own quarters to get my own clay pot, filling it with fresh water. Chicahua dips his hands into the bowl, scrubbing his face and his arms and spilling water everywhere. I will have to clean it later. He rubs his face dry on his jaguar skin, and I wonder what Tezcatlipoca would say. No matter, I think, as the Jaguar God no longer holds Chicahua's heart.

He knocks on the door of Cortés's study, then enters the room, ceremonious and grave.

"Don Cortés," he says, bowing slightly, "you wished to see me."

Cortés looks up from his writings. "Praise the Lord," he says, "my boy is here." He gazes at Chicahua from his feet to his head. "You are not eating," he observes.

"Don Cortés," he says, "I am eager only to finish the Monument. God has given me his vision, and I work day and night."

"Praise be to God," says Cortés, placing his feather on the desk, and fully turning in his chair to face the mystic. "What divine sight did He bestow on you, Chicahua?"

"One of you, Don Cortés, surrounded in riches, silver and gold, surveying your feats. Your kingdom is so vast that it takes up the entire courtyard, stretching to the very walls and ceiling."

Cortés closes his eyes and smiles. He's heard this hundreds of times, yet Cortés does not tire of hearing his glory sung.

"Tell me about the ceiling, Chicahua."

Chicahua bows. "The ceilings, Don Cortés, are all of solid gold, with a

splendor rivaled only by the Lord's original creation. From the Sun, a ray of light shines upon thee, wrapping you in light."

This is the part that intrigues me most. How has Chicahua sculpted light? As a young girl, I would walk past one of Chicahua's marble sculptures, a naked, plump woman with one hand in the air. Somebody had put a thin veil on her head and left it there, perhaps to shield her shame. Years passed. Then, one day when I was tall enough to reach her head, I reached for the veil. I discovered the veil itself was sculpted, so delicate and real that I had never noticed it was stone.

I only dream of what Chicahua might fashion out of pliable, supple gold.

Cortés is rapt as he savors Chicahua's every word. "My likeness," Cortés whispers. "Tell me about my likeness. Have you captured me as I instructed?"

"Indeed, Don Cortés. Standing atop Tenochtitlán, holding a flag bearing the Holy Cross in one hand and a map on the other."

Cortés nods. "The King himself will brave the oceans to see this marvel, Chicahua."

"In all of Europe," says Chicahua, "there is not a single plaza, not a single courtyard, where the earth and sky themselves pay tribute to the central figure."

Cortés loves to hear that part. He adds his favorite line. "At most," he says, "they get a horse to sit on." His smile grows wider.

"There will not be a Monument of greater glory," says Chicahua. "It is befitting the Master of the New World."

"Praise be to God Almighty," says Cortés. He bows his head and blesses himself. When he opens his eyes again, his rapture is gone, and his gaze is stern. "I've been waiting patiently, Chicahua, but my well runs dry, and I am of ill health."

Chicahua bows. "Your exploits are vast," he says, "and I have not wanted to miss a detail. But I am happy to say, Don Cortés, that in one week, as the sun sets in the West, you will finally gaze upon the Monument."

Chicahua's declaration even takes me by surprise. I will finally be able to see Chicahua's masterpiece, and the ray of golden light.

Cortés's own face softens, brightens. "One week?" he asks.

"The end is near," says Chicahua. "I must attend to many details. Allow me to take leave, Don Cortés."

Cortés looks to me. "See to it that Chicahua has food and water." He raises his hand and flicks his wrist at both of us. "Waste not a moment longer."

Chicahua and I bow, then file out the door. I walk silently behind Chicahua, imagining the ray of light.

"Huitzi," he says as he walks, "I have known you since you were a child."

I nod, even though he is in front of me. Maybe mystics can see behind them.

"I've seen the future with this monument," he says. "Both the past and the future."

I tense, wondering if he's now expecting a reply. I have nothing useful to offer a master sculptor who can peer through time.

Thankfully, he continues. "Huitzi, neither Cortés nor I will be of this world much longer. You are young, and you have your life ahead of you."

As I wonder whether this is a new prophecy, he stops dead in his tracks, and I come within a fingernail of bumping into him. He spins, gets on his knee to face me, and takes me by the shoulders. His eyes are wide, bloodshot. Maybe, I wonder, God speaks to him through Peyote.

"You must promise," he hisses, "that you'll protect the Monument!"

I do not know what to say.

"Promise!" he says, shaking me. "The Monument will be how people remember your Master!"

I nod quickly. He looks into my eyes, his brow furrowed, and I am certain he sees that I do not know how to begin protecting the Monument. I am neither strong nor clever nor quick. We stare at each other, until he finally releases his gaze and his grip.

"Memory," he says, "is all we have after we turn to dust." He takes my hand, presses something into it, and closes my fingers around it. Chicahua rises, turns around, and hurries away, toward the drapes. I follow him a few more steps, but my curiosity is too great and I sneak away to look at what he's given me. I open my hand, and discover a gold nugget in my palm.

*

I have been looking out toward the hills the entire week, wondering how Chicahua will capture the splendor of the Sun, the ray of light that will shine on Cortés. The castle is so dark that it sometimes seems Cortés has barricaded himself from Tonatiuh, who can only peek underneath doors and through the narrow windows

before continuing on his daily skyward journey. On cold days, I stand in front of the Eastern doors in the morning and in front of the Western doors in the afternoons, chasing Tonatiuh's heat. The wood and the iron absorb the warmth, and I press my face and body against them, wondering what it's like to feel his presence on my skin every day, all year. If nothing else, I might be able to stand in the courtyard from this day on, gazing upon the rays of light that Chicahua has sculpted for the Monument. I am still unable to imagine them.

We have all been scurrying around the courtyard like ants around sugar, cleaning and slapping the heavy drapes with brooms so that we won't choke in dust when the curtains finally fall. A few of the girls have taken to collecting the specks of gold and silver that we pound out, hoping to sprinkle them on jewelry when Cortés has passed and we are free. I myself have started a collection of iron shavings, but only the ones that are shaped into curls. They are hard to find, but if I get enough of them, I will stick them on a ball of clay and make a little sheep that I will hide in a corner of the courtyard near Chicahua's masterpiece.

The hour finally arrives when Chicahua calls for me to go get Cortés, and I run as fast as my bare feet will take me to his study. His door is open, and I find Cortés pacing like an ocelot. He wears a steel breastplate, gloves, and boots. A long, sloping sword rests on his hips, and he holds his helmet in his arms.

"Go before me," he says as he slips on his helmet, "so that they may know Hernán Cortés approaches."

My announcement is unnecessary; his metal boots against the stone floors echo through the entire palace. We approach the Courtyard, step by heavy step, my mind wishing for Cortés to move faster so I can finally see Chicahua's ray of light. By the time we get there, everyone has gathered at the foot of the drapes, saving the center spot for Cortés. Inside, I am on clouds, as my own viewing spot will be the finest of the palace.

I stop in front of the drapes. I dare not touch them, but I stand so close that I can see the red felt fibers move in front of me as I breathe. The clanking comes to a stop behind me, and Cortés places his heavy, steel hands on my shoulders. With no more metal clanking, silence surrounds us.

"Glory to God in the Highest!" thunders Cortés, his voice echoing through the palace.

Chicahua responds from beyond the curtain. I can tell from his voice

that he is standing not an arm away from Cortés. "Don Cortés," he shouts. "The Monument to your conquests awaits!"

Cortés booms his command. "Pull down the drapes!"

In one motion, eight servants stationed around the drapes pull down. The cloth collapses on itself in a heap, releasing a cloud of dust that mocks our week-long broom whacking. People cough and wave their hands in front of them. Cortés remains silent, his steel gloves unmoving from my shoulders. I have an urge to cough as well, but I don't move.

The first thing I see as the dust begins to clear is Chicahua. He is to the side of Cortés, kneeling, but facing toward the Monument. I have never seen a Mexica give his back to Cortés, but I gather the ceremony calls for it somehow.

The only thing I can see at first is the color of the metals. The entire ceiling, the arches of the courtyard, and an outer band on the floor are all gold. The gold on the floor extends the length of two men toward the center, then blends into an inner band of silver that is also the length of two men. Finally at the center, an iron figure sprouts from the floor.

I hear gasps around me, and Cortés's fingers dig into my shoulders, the sharp edges of his gloved joints cutting into my shirt.

I rub my eyes to see more clearly, focusing on the dark figure. It is an iron statue of Cortés, wearing the exact armor and sword that Cortés now carries behind me. The figure stands tall, proud, and gazing to the West. The statue, as promised, holds a map in one hand and a tall flag on the other. Below the left boot of the statue is the head of an Aztec warrior, fashioned in the blocky style that I had thought Chicahua had long ago forgotten. The warrior's dress lies on its side behind the statue's other foot.

The dark iron gives way to lighter metal, and I too let out a gasp. I see a silver sea of dismembered bodies, carved in such precise and realistic detail that I can almost smell the death. Hands stick out rubble, their tendons screaming in pain. Legs with Aztec rattles on their ankles lay strewn about, hacked off at the thigh, the knee, the shin. I can see down to the marrow of the bone. And the heads—not blocky this time, but all too real, grimacing in pain, anguish, and sorrow. The loose skin around the severed necks looks like it will begin flapping in the breeze.

My eyes are drawn to one head, smiling calmly with eyes wide open as it lies on its

side. The head has the face of Chicahua.

The carnage goes on, terrible and unrelenting, until my eyes reach the gold floor. It is carved entirely in Aztec style. On the ground, all manner of animals—jaguars, rabbits, skunks, serpents—keep the company of our gods. I spot Tlaloc, Huitzilopochtli, Centeotl, and Xipe Totec, frolicking on grass as they must have before the White Man came. All around them, at the very edge of the courtyard, is the giant, open mouth of our Earth mother, Tlaltecuhli. My eyes race up to the ceiling, where Aztec hummingbirds and eagles fly in a glorious, golden sky. In all my dreams, I could not have fathomed Chicahua's ray of light.

From the East, the sun rises, and from that sun a feathered snake made out of solid gold shoots out toward the iron statue. It's Quetzalcoatl, our God of the dawn. He weaves through the air of the courtyard, feathers and scales shimmering, wrapping His golden body around the neck of the statue. Quetzalcoatl's Giant fangs are open, about to swallow the iron head.

I stand breathless, as does every single servant witnessing the Monument. It hits us in waves, as if dark iron in our souls gave way to silver, then gold.

Chicahua still faces the Monument. "I give you your legacy, Don Cortés. May you be remembered this way until the Fifth and final Sun."

I feel Cortés's hands lift off my shoulders. As I hear his sword sliding out of its sheath, I understand the past and future of which Chicahua spoke.

May Quetzalcoatl help me protect the memory.

Author's note: The Palace of Cortés is in Cuernavaca, México, where Cortés retreated in the last years of his life before returning to Spain. He died in Sevilla of pleurisy. To this day, a statue of Hernán Cortés with his boot on the severed head of a Mexica warrior stands in Medellín, Spain.