

THE CONQUISTADOR'S WIFE

CHORUS 8: END OF AN EMPIRE

Midnight. July 1, 1520. Fearing that the fragile peace they had won from Moctezuma would soon turn into bloodshed, the Spanish forces fled for their lives, slipping out of Moctezuma's palace with their native allies close behind. They hoped the heavy rains and moonless night would provide cover as they escaped the city, their horses and packs loaded with treasure.

Cortes muffled the horses hoofs with burlap and carried wooden boards to cross the canals. But fate was not with them this night. At the 4th canal, the Mexica attacked. Their warriors had pulled sections out of the causeway making the Conquistadors' exit impossible. Cortes watched helplessly as his horses dove into the water and blood spilled. On that "Sad Night"—La Noche Triste—only one out of three of his men reached the mainland. The rest were killed in battle or, worse still, captured for human sacrifice.

Popular legend claims that Cortes wept under a tree as he saw the massacre. He vowed then to return. And so he did, a year later, putting the city under siege, blocking their food supply and bringing with him a small pox epidemic that killed Mexica by the tens of thousands. Yes, Cortes finally conquered Tenochtitlan, but only by destroying this magnificent city he had come to love.