

1. The Age of Violence

We found ourselves tied up to posts near a lake and multiple roaring fires. We'd been captured while working on an irrigation system for an apple orchard in the highland town of Saltillo, where King Philip II of Spain had given us land grants for services rendered. The Indian tribe who captured us was in the vicinity of Saltillo foraging for food. They numbered a few dozen. They were still living in the Stone Age, one of about two hundred roving bands of nomadic Indians that traveled through northeastern New Spain. They could not have been more different from the Indians six hundred miles to the south in Mexico City, who cultivated corn, beans, squash, and lived in the city, practiced religion, writing, and government.

The Indian bands in the northeastern frontier were savages. They had no religion, not even a polytheistic form of worship, and their leadership was weak. They were driven by the daily quest for food. They had the swollen bellies of a high-bulk but protein deficient diet. This was a telling sign of cannibals — those who were starved for protein.

The Chichimeca Indian chief sent us an interpreter named Ana. Ana stood apart. She was probably a slave. She was tall with an oval face, large black eyes, and a prominent nose. Ana also had beautiful hands with long thin fingers. She was thin, but she didn't have a protruding belly. I could tell she wasn't of their tribe even before she spoke. She wore distinct clothing, deerskin, wrapped in a serape, the colorful traditional shawl of the Tlaxcala Indians. The Chichimecas had their naked bodies covered with red war paint and they looked similar in features.

"I am Diego de Montemayor, a farmer and rancher of Saltillo. I speak Nahuatl and some Chichimeca dialects," I told Ana. "I've been here for thirty years, since I was eighteen year old. I have a family and would like to return to them. You look like a Christian woman. If you can help me, please do so. I will reward you."

Upon hearing me speak, Ana stared at me for a few seconds, astonished. One of the Indians turned crimson, and slapped me for daring to speak his language.

Ana commanded us to strip off our clothes and take off our boots. As soon as we did so, some of the Indians took our clothes and put them on. They had no immunity to European diseases like smallpox and they would soon get sick and probably die. I wished to tell them of this danger but. . .

The Chichimeca ordered us to sing and dance an Indian song on a raised platform in the nude.

"We are good . . . We are good," we sang, repeating what Ana taught us.

The Indians put their hands to their faces and laughed at us. “What shit singing. Listen to them. They can’t sing. They’re shit.”

They were all laughing at us and hooting.

This was a great humiliation to the four of us. I was captured along with Alberto del Canto, the red-haired Portuguese mayor of Saltillo, his paisano Juan Pérez Chocallo, and Cristóbal de Sagastiberri, Basque.

I heard them talk about what the night held for us. This was a revenge party. The Gran Chichimeca accused us of being the slave raiders who had ambushed one of their encampments and kidnapped twenty Indians to sell on the slave market in the south, murdering four Indians from their tribe in the process.

I was no slaver, but Alberto and his two comrades were. They formed hunting parties of four to ten men to capture Indians. I had witnessed Alberto and his men go out on many occasions, despite a law from the Spanish crown prohibiting slave-trading. Because we lived on the northern frontier on the fringes of society, the government found it difficult to enforce its laws there and Alberto and his followers took full advantage.

After our performance on the platform we were tied up to our posts again and given a beating with blunt clubs, sticks, fists and feet. Even the youngsters in the tribe joined in, throwing rocks at us.

We knew better than to howl because they would consider us weak-willed men and kill us like sheep. This torture lasted all night. It was like an audition to join their tribe. If we survived the night, the four aggrieved mothers of the murdered Indians would become our