You Dreamed of Empires

Álvaro Enrigue’s *You Dreamed of Empires* reimagines the fateful 1519 meeting between Hernán Cortés and Aztec emperor Moctezuma in the grand city of Tenochtitlan. Blending history with hallucinatory storytelling, the novel explores the clash of civilizations, the unpredictability of fate, and the distortions of historical narrative. With dark humor and rich prose, Enrigue crafts an alternative vision of conquest, power, and the dreamlike haze of empire at the brink of collapse.

I. Before the Nap

The chapter opens with a charged diplomatic lunch between Cortés's conquistadors and Aztec nobility in the palace of Axayacatl, where cultural tensions surface immediately. Captain Jazmín Caldera's visceral disgust at sharing a meal with blood-smeared priests underscores the Spaniards' alienation in this sophisticated yet alien world. Cortés, ever the strategist, tests boundaries by boasting of his Tlaxcalan allies—a gambit that backfires when Princess Atotoxtli extracts the truth from Caldera about their encampment. The scene crackles with unspoken threats, as the Spaniards grasp they're walking a knife's edge between honored guests and sacrificial offerings.

Within Moctezuma's palace, political fault lines emerge as Atotoxtli confronts her brother about housing the foreigners in her chambers. Their exchange reveals an empire in quiet crisis: the emperor withdrawn and erratic, his sister bristling at his

decisions, and key figures like Cuitlahuac conspicuously absent. Meanwhile, the conquistadors wander Axayacatl's labyrinthine halls like men in a dream—Badillo tending their prized horses in an orchard, Caldera leading armed men through identical corridors that mirror their geopolitical disorientation. The palace becomes a microcosm of Tenochtitlan itself: breathtaking yet unknowable, its hospitality laced with menace.

Central to these collisions is Malinalli, the Nahua translator whose baptism as Doña Marina symbolizes the fluid loyalties of the conquest. Floating in a flower-strewn pool, she weighs her precarious value to Cortés against the ghosts of her royal past. Her antique Nahuatl unsettles the Aztec elite, just as her presence unnerves the Spaniards who rely on her. Nearby, the cihuacoatl Tilipotonqui moves through shadowed corridors, parsing Moctezuma's obsession with the "cahuayos" (horses) while sensing disaster in the missing Tlaxcalan lords. Every interaction hums with mutual incomprehension—the Spaniards marveling at a Venice-like city they cannot control, the Aztecs observing these gold-obsessed interlopers with wary fascination.

As dusk falls, Moctezuma's melancholic murmur—"days of blood and shit"—hangs over the chapter like a prophecy. The Spaniards' naive confidence (Alvarado's boots sullying pristine cushions, their lost soldiers shouting through palace walls) contrasts with Aztec patience, both sides circling toward inevitable violence. Even the siesta ritual takes on ominous weight: this is the last pause before history fractures. When the emperor requests mushrooms to "summon sleep," the reader feels the coming storm—one that will sweep away empires, identities, and the very meaning of conquest.

II. Moctezuma’s Nap

The chapter opens with the ritual precision of Moctezuma’s afternoon nap—an act of imperial discipline that momentarily suspends the entire machinery of the Aztec empire. The silence demanded by his sleep is profound, yet its cessation, marked by the ringing of a silver bell, sends ripples through Tenochtitlan like a stone dropped in water. This carefully orchestrated pause becomes a metaphor for the fragile calm before historical upheaval, as the emperor’s rest coincides with the Spaniards’ uneasy acclimation to palace life. Aguilar, ever the observer, smokes his pipe while Caldera frets over clean clothes and cultural codes, their exchange laced with dark humor about impending sacrifice. The scene underscores the surreal tension of the moment: two civilizations hovering on the brink of collision, each misunderstanding the other’s rituals.

Within the palace’s labyrinthine corridors, the conquistadors grapple with their paradoxical status as both honored guests and potential captives. Caldera’s awkward attempt to don Aztec garments under Aguilar’s guidance—a comic yet poignant scene—reveals the Spaniards’ vulnerability beneath their bravado. The friar’s tattooed body and fluent cultural navigation contrast sharply with Caldera’s pale, horseman’s physique, highlighting the dissonance between European and Mesoamerican ideals of masculinity. Meanwhile, Cortés and Malinalli’s private exchange exposes her growing linguistic autonomy, a secret that threatens to upend the power dynamics of translation. When she reveals a priest’s ominous warning—“This wall has eyes”—the chapter crackles with paranoia, suggesting the palace itself is an active participant in the unfolding drama.

Moctezuma’s post-nap inertia mirrors the empire’s political stagnation. Resisting the demands of governance, he lingers in bed, delaying audiences and avoiding the regalia of power. His request for Atotoxtli—to be summoned only after her own smoke-induced calm—hints at the strained familial alliances underpinning the empire. The chapter’s quiet moments are its most revelatory: Aguilar’s wry observation that their reality would be dismissed as “chivalric romance bullshit” if ever recorded, or Caldera’s fleeting arousal at the thought of Tenochca warriors “dying to take a nibble of his leg.” These glimpses into the protagonists’ psyches lay bare the absurdity and terror of their predicament, where cultural fascination and mortal peril intertwine.

As the afternoon wanes, the Spaniards’ boisterous bathing in the palace pool becomes a metaphor for their entire enterprise—a disruptive splash in the still waters of an ancient civilization. Caldera, watching his comrades with detached unease, recognizes their ghostly transience: “a pack of ghosts” destined to either conquer or be consumed. The chapter closes with Moctezuma’s deliberate inaction, a sovereign’s hesitation that speaks volumes. His refusal to rise—to fully awaken—prefigures the empire’s fate, suspended between ritual and reality, between the old world and the new storm gathering at its gates. The nap ends, but the dream of empire lingers, heavy with portent.

III After the Nap

The chapter opens with the cihuacoatl, Tilipotonqui, navigating the chaotic aftermath of political decisions made by Emperor Moctezuma, particularly regarding the arrival of the Caxtilteca (Spanish conquistadors). The empire is beset by crises: venison shortages due to Otomí warriors disrupting hunts, a Texcoca civil war affecting lake trade, and the resurgence of the Quetzalcoatl cult. Beneath these surface issues pulses a deeper tension—Moctezuma’s waning trust in Tilipotonqui and rumors of rebellion. The emperor’s isolationist tendencies, replacing officials with loyalists, have crippled governance, leaving Tilipotonqui to manage incompetence and unrest. Meanwhile, the Council convenes mysteriously, summoned by Tilipotonqui’s own son, Tlacaelel, signaling a shift in power dynamics. The cihuacoatl grapples with the implications, suspecting his role is being undermined as the empire teeters on the brink.

Moctezuma’s erratic behavior—hallucinogen use, paranoia, and detachment—contrasts with his past brilliance. Flashbacks reveal his obsession with the Caxtilteca’s "cahuayos" (horses), which he views as key to imperial dominance. His sister, Atotoxili, critiques his shortsightedness, warning that internal strife (rebellions in Texcoco, Tlaxcala’s defiance) outweighs the newcomers’ threat. Yet Moctezuma, swayed by priests and visions, insists on diplomacy. A pivotal meeting with the Majordomo of the House of Darkness underscores his tactical genius but also his growing reliance on manipulation—spreading myths of Quetzalcoatl’s return to control the narrative. Tilipotonqui, though skeptical, aligns with Moctezuma’s plans, only to later regret enabling the Caxtilteca’s advance, which destabilizes the empire further.

Parallel to political drama, cultural tensions emerge. The Spanish, led by Cortés, oscillate between awe and brutality. Cortés, insecure about his impending meeting with Moctezuma, asserts dominance by raping Malinalli (La Malinche), his translator, while dreaming of Christianizing the city. Meanwhile, Jazmín Caldera, a Spanish captain disguised as a Colhua noble, explores Tenochtitlan's market and temple complex, marveling at its order but sensing impending doom. The Mexica, too, are divided: Cuauhtemoc, Moctezuma's son-in-law, prepares for war, while Atotoxili negotiates with Malinalli, offering protection in exchange for intelligence. The chapter highlights the collision of worldviews—Spanish pragmatism versus Mexica spirituality—and the personal betrayals that mirror larger conflicts.

The chapter crescendos with ritual and foreshadowing. Moctezuma, high on mushrooms, consults the god Huitzilopochtli in the temple, receiving cryptic advice about "many possible futures." Simultaneously, Cortés and his men desecrate the temple, vomiting at the sight of sacrifices, their hubris contrasting with Aguilar's caution. Caldera flees the Spanish camp, symbolizing dissent within the conquistadors. As drums signal nightfall, the city's bridges rise, trapping the Spanish—a metaphor for the empire's closing grip on its fate. Tilipotonqui, Cuauhtemoc, and Atotoxili convene, acknowledging Moctezuma's decline but clinging to loyalty. The chapter ends with Moctezuma's detached murmur—"Hmm, it's late for my bath"—underscoring his tragic blindness to the cataclysm approaching.

Themes: Power erosion, cultural dissonance, and the tension between strategy and superstition dominate the chapter, setting the stage for the empire's downfall.

Cortés’s Dream

This chapter centers on the pivotal encounter between Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor, in the blue throne room of Tenochtitlan. The scene is laden with tension, as Cortés and his men are forced to adhere to strict ceremonial protocols—removing weapons, veiling their faces, and maintaining silence until addressed. Moctezuma, though seemingly hospitable, exudes an air of controlled power, while Cortés struggles between arrogance and nervousness. The cultural divide is stark: Cortés, dressed in European finery, contrasts with the barefoot, feathered nobility of the Aztec court. The translators, Malinalli (La Malinche) and Aguilar, mediate the exchange, but misunderstandings persist, foreshadowing the inevitable clash between the two empires.

The chapter takes a surreal turn when Moctezuma offers Cortés a hallucinogenic cactus, the "cactus-of-tongues," promising it will allow them to communicate without translators. Under its influence, Cortés experiences a prophetic vision of the Spanish conquest—Tenochtitlan’s fall, the death of Moctezuma, the rise of New Spain, and centuries of colonial rule. The vision blends historical events with dreamlike distortions: his men turn into animals, Moctezuma transforms into an eagle-like deity, and Cortés sees himself as both conqueror and pawn in a larger cosmic drama. The sequence underscores the novel’s magical realism, blurring the line between fate and hallucination, while hinting at the cyclical nature of power and destruction.

Upon waking, Cortés is convinced of his inevitable triumph, believing his vision confirms Spanish dominance. However, reality subverts his expectations. Moctezuma,

now speaking in Nahuatl (unintelligible to Cortés), summons his brother Cuitlahuac, who brutally kills Cortés by breaking his spine—a symbolic reversal of historical events. Meanwhile, Moctezuma orders his warriors to prepare for war, signaling the Aztec resistance. The chapter’s abrupt shift from dream to violent reality critiques the arrogance of colonial narratives, suggesting that history could have unfolded differently. The recurring motif of the "ant" (a silent but inevitable force) reinforces the theme that empires, no matter how grand, are subject to unseen forces beyond their control.

The chapter closes with the Aztec empire mobilizing for battle, while Cortés’s broken body lies discarded. Moctezuma, adjusting his crooked tiara, walks away, embodying the fragility of power. The narrative then jumps forward in time, briefly summarizing the fall of Tenochtitlan, the spread of smallpox, and the eventual establishment of New Spain—events that Cortés foresaw but failed to truly understand. The acknowledgments reveal the novel’s literary influences, from Borges to Calderón, framing the story as a meditation on history’s fluidity and the illusions of empire. Ultimately, this chapter serves as both a climax and a deconstruction of conquest myths, leaving the reader to question whether Cortés’s dream was prophecy or delusion.