

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.