

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 Their exchange reveals an empire in quiet crisis: the emperor withdrawn and erratic, his sister bristling at his decisions, and key figures like Cuitlahuac conspicuously absent.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 Nahuatl 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 sully 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.