

CHAPTER
20

Section 1

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Feathered Serpent*
by Scott O'Dell

This novel by American author Scott O'Dell is set in Mexico in the 1500s. The narrator, Julián Escobar, is a young Spanish seminary student who becomes embroiled in the struggle between the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortés and the Aztec emperor Moctezuma (Montezuma). In this excerpt, Escobar returns to Moctezuma's palace with an urgent message from Cortés. What happens when Moctezuma and Cortés finally meet at Tenochtitlán?

We arrived in Tenochtitlán to find torches flaming everywhere along the causeway, the plaza strewn with flowers and filled with a curious throng, word having reached the city of the beast with a voice like thunder that ran much faster than a deer and carried a man on its back.

Indeed, so curious were the Indians that as they lost their fears, they began to press around us and had to be driven away. So keen was their delight, I regretted that the stallion had only a small part of his once magnificent tail to show them.

Lord Tzapotlan led us to the Emperor's palace, I still riding Bravo and the dwarf clinging on behind. A place for the stallion was waiting, and for us a series of rooms, sparsely furnished but with braziers burning and flowers scattered about.

Lord Tzapotlan had water brought to us in silver bowls and then disappeared, saying that he would see the Reverend Speaker and arrange for our meeting. I thought because of the important message I carried that the Emperor would be anxious to see us. But Lord Tzapotlan came back in a short time with distressing news.

"The Great Emperor," he said, "has locked himself away. He is taking neither food nor drink. He has only Tenayuca, his trusted soothsayer, at his side."

"You understand the urgent message I carry from Captain-General Cortés?"

"It is understood," the lord said. "I spoke of it to the wizard."

"The Emperor won't talk to you?"

"He'll talk to no one except to Tenayuca."

We waited that night with no word from Lord Tzapotlan. But in the morning one of the servants

said that she had heard that the Emperor had left the palace secretly during the night and gone to the temple of Uitzilopochtli, where he had prayed for a sign from the war god.

The Emperor remained in the temple for two days, praying and burning incense, surrounded by wizards.

On the third day at noon, Lord Tzapotlan came and led me to a chamber different from the one I had visited before. The walls and ceiling were bare and painted a pearly white, which gave me a feeling that I was suspended in the sky, floating high among drifting clouds.

Moctezuma was sitting on a mat that was the same color as the walls, woven of dovelike feathers. I stood before him in my bare feet, out of respect, and gave him the message that Cortés had given me, only softening it somewhat from the harsh words Cortés had angrily spoken.

A confused man, thin and visibly different from the proud emperor I had once talked to, sat before me. He seemed even more confused than on the morning he had shown me the painting of the Spanish ships.

A servant brought forth a long-stemmed reed packed with a brown substance, which he had lit. The Emperor put the stem in his mouth and sucked on it. Smoke came out from his nostrils. He did this but once, then put it aside, as if it were suddenly distasteful. . . .

"Tell me," he said, "you of the sunlit hair, with whom I hoped to talk during many hours, to whom I wished to make princely gifts, who fled from me not knowing that I planned for you the most exalted of deaths, tell me. . . ."

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Moctezuma paused. I began to wonder if he had lost the thread of his thought or if he had changed his mind about what he had started to say.

"Tell me," he said, moving his gaze from the dove-colored walls that seemed to drift about like clouds, "tell me, why did you flee?"

"Truly," I said in a firm voice, "I fled because I did not want to die on the altar stone."

"But when we talked before, you agreed that it was a great honor to die and be transported to a warrior's heaven, the place of flowers and hummingbirds and life everlasting."

"I discovered, thinking about it later, that I was not yet ready to visit this place of hummingbirds and flowers. I have more battles to fight, many more prisoners to take."

At that moment, looking at the Emperor's goldshod feet, I saw them move nervously back and forth. I took from this that my answer had diminished me in his eyes. He was silent for a long time.

"I showed you," he said at last, "the pictures my artists painted of Cortés and his captains. They do not look like you, but still they have an air about them, all these men who call themselves Spaniards, that I find about you. Are you one of them? Are you a Spaniard?"

I nodded.

"A Spaniard in the army of this Cortés?"

"No, I am a seminarian.

Someday I hope to be a priest. I was cast away on an island off the coast, among the Maya."

"I have heard of a white man who was left on this coast. He became a great cacique."

"The man you name is Gerónimo de Aguilar."

"You are not a spy for this Cortés?" the Emperor said.

"No."

"You have seen Cortés. You have talked to him. You have brought a message from Cortés. You were with him, so my ambassadors say, in Texcáala and Cholólan. What do think of this Hernán Cortés?"

I had no difficulty in answering this question.

"He is a ruthless man, cruel and ambitious and without fear of anything or anyone, even you, Revered Speaker."

"He says, he has said many times, since the day he left the sea, that he comes to visit a city about which he has heard marvelous things and to pledge me loyalty and. . ."

"The loyalty is only to himself," I broke in.

"To pledge loyalty and to inform me about his king and his god. Lately, in a message sent from Texcáala, he scolds me about the Aztec gods and our rites. We have worshipped our gods from the long beginning. In our own way. And we know them to be good. Your gods may be good, also. Is this why he wishes to come, to scold me again?"

"It is not why he comes," I said. "He comes as a conqueror to subdue the city, to kill all those who seek to defend it, to kill you yourself should you dare to oppose him."

Moctezuma showed no emotion at these words. He turned his gaze to the wall, to the stars I had not noticed before painted there among the clouds, and fell silent.

I left with the strong belief that he would oppose Cortés' entry into the city and that Lord Tzapotlan, who had heard of the happening in Texcáala and himself had seen the carnage in Cholólan, would stand firmly behind him. My belief, however, was not borne out.

No sooner had Cortés appeared on the outskirts of the city than the Emperor went forth to greet him, carrying presents of gold. With the Emperor were Cacámáztin, Revered Speaker of

Texóco and Tlácopan, and a company of Arrow, Eagle, and Jaguar Knights, bedecked in feathers and jade insignias, who swept the causeway clean and scattered it with flowers as the Captain-General advanced.

The lords supported Moctezuma upon a litter, beneath a rich canopy of green feathers, and when Cortés was close at hand he descended and walked on bare feet to meet him. A number of lords went ahead, sweeping his path, laying cloaks so that his feet would not touch the earth.

Upon seeing the Emperor, Cortés jumped from his horse. When the two came close, each bowed to the other. Moctezuma welcomed Cortés and he, speaking through Doña Marina, who stood at his side proudly holding aloft his personal banner, wished the Emperor good health.

“He [Cortés] comes as a conqueror to subdue the city, to kill all those who seek to defend it, to kill you yourself should you dare to oppose him.”

Cortés then brought out a necklace of colored glass, dipped in musk to give it a pleasant odor, and hung it around the Emperor's neck.

As he did so, Cortés attempted to take hold of him in a hearty Spanish abrazo. But the lords who stood around Moctezuma quickly grasped Cortés' arms, for they felt that this was an indignity.

Afterward, Hernán Cortés made another complimentary speech, thanking Moctezuma for being there to greet him, and saying that it rejoiced his heart to meet the great Emperor. Whereupon Moctezuma ordered his nephew, the lord of Texcoco, to accompany Cortés and his captains into the city.

They were escorted to a large house located on the plaza close to the royal palace.

Taking Cortés by the hand, Moctezuma led him to a richly furnished hall where the captain was to stay, gave him a heavy necklace fashioned of golden crabs, and disappeared, suggesting that he rest from his hard journey.

Cortés waited until the Emperor's entourage was out of earshot, then called me over and queried me at length.

"The Emperor seems friendly," he said. "Perhaps a shade too friendly. Is he sincere in his protestations? The Indians are good at this game of deceit."

As are you, I thought.

"What do you make of him?" Cortés asked.

"He's confused," I said.

"I gather this from his messages, which changed from week to week, lately from day to day. If I had waited for him to make up his mind I would still be camped in Cholólan. But now that I am inside the gates, what can we expect? Will he strangle us in the night while we sleep—or gather our men for a festival, then treacherously fall upon them?"

As you did with the men and women of Cholólan, I wanted to say.

"The Emperor has a vast army," I said. "He should be treated with respect."

"I intend to, but I am not here to trade compliments and gifts. Remember this when you talk to him. And do so at once. He seems to put trust in you. Remind him that we come here in the name of God and our King. And do not forget, I have allies, an army of five thousand Texcaltéca camped in the hills. In the meantime, I trust him with all my heart."

Activity Options

1. **Writing for a Specific Purpose** With a small group of classmates, write a skit about the meeting between Cortés and Moctezuma. Then assign roles and perform your skit for the class.
2. **Making Judgments** Jot down vivid descriptive details that you find in this excerpt. Then draw a sketch to illustrate the meeting between Moctezuma and Cortés.