

PROLOGUE



1500 AD, Mexico

As far as Zuma was concerned, there were only two good things about being a human sacrifice. One was the lovely black pendant the tribal elders had given her to wear. The other was the little Chihuahua dog the high priest had just placed next to her.

I've always wanted a pet, thought Zuma, as the trembling pup snuggled up close. Though this does seem like an extreme way to get one.



Zuma lay on an altar at the top of the Great Pyramid. In honour of the mighty Aztec rain god, Tlaloc, she'd been painted bright blue and wore a feathered headdress.



The entire village had turned out to watch the slave girl being sacrificed in exchange for plentiful rainfall and a good harvest. She could see her master strutting in the crowd below, proud to have supplied the slave for

today's sacrifice. He looked a little relieved too. And Zuma couldn't blame him. As slaves went, she was a troublesome one, always trying to run away. But she couldn't help it – her greatest dream was to be free!

Zuma had spent the entire ten years of her life in slavery, and she was sick of it. She knew she should be honoured to be a sacrifice, but she had a much better plan – to escape!

“Besides,” she said, frowning at her painted skin, “blue is not my colour!”

“Hush, slave!” said the high priest, Acalan, his face hidden by a jade mask. “The ceremony is about to begin.” He raised his knife in the air.

“Shame I'll be missing it,” said Zuma. “Tell Tlaloc I'd like to take a *rain* check.” As the priest lowered the knife, she pulled up her



knees and kicked him hard in the stomach with both feet.

“*Oof!*” The priest doubled over, clutching his belly. The blade clattered to the floor.

Zuma rolled off the altar, dodging the other priests, who fell over each other in their attempts to catch her. One priest jumped into her path, but the little Chihuahua dog sank his teeth into the man’s ankle. As the priest howled in pain, Zuma whistled to the dog.

“Nice work, doggie!” she said. “I’m getting



out of here and you're coming with me!" She scooped him up and dashed down the steps of the pyramid.

"Grab her!" groaned the high priest from above.

Many hands reached out to catch the slave girl, but Zuma was fast and determined. She bolted towards the jungle bordering the pyramid. Charging into the cool green leaves, she ran until she could no longer hear the shouts of the crowd.



“We did it,” she said to the dog. “We’re free!”

As she spoke, the sky erupted in a loud rumble of thunder, making the dog yelp. “Thunder’s nothing to be scared of,” said Zuma.

“Don’t be so sure about that!” came a deep voice above her.

Zuma looked up to see a creature with blue skin and long, sharp fangs, like a jaguar. He carried a wooden drum and wore a feathered headdress, just like Zuma’s.

She knew at once who it was. “Tlaloc!” she gasped.

The rain god’s bulging eyes glared down at her. “You have dishonoured me!” he bellowed. “No sacrifice has ever escaped before!”

“Really? I’m the first?” Zuma beamed



with pride, but the feeling didn't last long. Tlaloc's scowl was too scary. "I'm sorry!" she said quietly. "I just wanted to be free."

"You will *never* be free!" Tlaloc hissed. "Unless you can escape again..."

Tlaloc banged his drum, and thunder rolled through the jungle.

He pounded the drum a second time, and thick black clouds gathered high above the treetops.

"This isn't looking good," Zuma whispered. Holding the dog tightly, she closed her eyes.

On the third deafening drum roll, the jungle floor began to shake and a powerful force tugged at Zuma. She felt her whole body being swallowed up inside... the drum!