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CHAPTER 1

SHOWSTOPPER

Tom Sullivan peeked round the curtain at the side of the stage. His school talent show had just started and he was helping out behind the scenes. On stage a girl from Tom's class was singing a pop song – badly. Beside Tom, Zuma put her hands over her ears.

"Ouch!" the Aztec slave girl complained. "She sounds like a howler monkey with a sore tooth!"

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Tom grinned. In her feathered headdress and blue skin paint, Zuma looked ready to take to the stage herself. Chilli, the tiny Chihuahua dog in Zuma's arms, yapped in agreement. Tom had to be careful not to say anything in reply. The backstage area was crammed with performers getting ready for their turn in the spotlight, but Tom was the only person who could see Zuma and Chilli.

"Watch out!" Tom told a group of dancers called Break Quake. "Someone spilled a drink on the floor. It's slippery." He pointed to a small puddle on the floor and pushed back the stage scenery, giving Break Quake some space.

Zuma watched the dancers warm up. Only a week had passed since Tom had beaten an Aztec drum in his dad's museum,

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accidentally freeing Zuma and Chilli from it. Since then, the three of them had travelled through time looking for six golden coins hidden by the fearsome rain god, Tlaloc. So far, they had visited the Wild West and Medieval Japan, and found two of the coins. If they recovered all six, Zuma would win back her freedom.

On stage, the singer took a bow and the audience clapped. Tom pulled a rope and the curtain came down. "OK. You're next," he told Break Quake. "Take your places. Ten seconds."

The dancers rushed past, jostling Mr Jenkins the caretaker, who had arrived with a mop and bucket to clean up the puddle.

Mr Braintree the drama teacher, walked out in front of the curtain. "Next, we have the *amazing* Break Quake dance group. Let's

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give them a very warm welcome…"

The clapping grew louder. Some of the audience began whistling and stamping their feet. Backstage, Tom switched on the music and tugged the rope to lift the curtain. The dancers ran on stage and started their routine.

"I wish people could see me," Zuma said, tickling Chilli's ears. "I've got heaps of talent. I could have won this competition standing on my head."

"Oh yeah?" whispered Tom, out of the side of his mouth. "How?" Zuma had been brave and clever during their adventures, but she hadn't shown Tom a special talent.

"For your information, I'm a fantastic gymnast," said Zuma "Watch this!" She put Chilli on the floor, took a step forward and launched herself into a handstand.

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Right where the caretaker had just mopped the floor.

Zuma squealed as her hand slipped on the wet surface. She toppled into Tom, who stepped back into Mr Jenkins's bucket, knocking it over and sending soapy water flooding out across the stage. Immediately,

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one of Break Quake skidded and crashed into another dancer. Both of them landed on top of a girl, who was spinning on her back at the front of the stage. As the dancers slid about, Mr Braintree rushed on stage to help, only to lose his footing and go tumbling to the floor. The performance was ruined.

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"Oh noooo!" Tom moaned. As Mr Braintree looked over towards him, the teacher saw the overturned bucket at Tom's feet. His eyes narrowed.

Behind Tom, Zuma had picked herself up, a guilty expression on her face. She grabbed a rope and pulled on it. Everyone was staring at Tom in stunned silence, so no one noticed when the curtain seemed to come down on its own.

Mr Braintree stood up and wiped bubbles from his eyes. Break Quake were slowly getting back to their feet. All of them were glaring at Tom. They walked offstage without a word.

"We'll talk about this later," Mr Braintree growled at Tom. "Right now, we've got a show to save." He disappeared in the same direction as the dancers.

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Zuma looked at Tom and smiled nervously. "I'm… er… I'm sorry," she said.

Tom picked up the bucket. "So, you're a *brilliant* gymnast, are you?" he said glumly.

"I forgot about the wet floor," Zuma mumbled. "I'm really sorry."

Tom sighed. "At least things can't get any worse," he said.

At that moment, thunder rumbled across the stage. A cloud appeared over Tom's

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head. A narrow rainstorm began to fall on him like a spotlight. He groaned.

"I think you spoke too soon," said Zuma.

Together, they looked up. Rolling clouds had blotted out the stage lights. Tlaloc's face appeared in the clouds, his eyes bulging angrily.

The rain god opened his mouth to speak, revealing a line of sharp fangs. "I see you are shaking with fear, mortal," he bellowed.

Trying not to show his fear, Tom stood up straight. "Actually, I'm laughing at how silly you look," he replied.

Tlaloc snarled. "Soon you *will* be quivering with terror," he hissed between clenched fangs. "You have been lucky so far, but luck cannot last forever. You will never find the next gold coin. Zuma is doomed!"

A sparkling mist rose up and a swirling

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wind blew across the stage. Glancing at Zuma, Tom saw she was holding Chilli tightly. Tlaloc's strange mist swirled round him, and then the stage began to disappear as they travelled through the tunnels of time.

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