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Opening extract from

Samurai Assassin

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CHAPTER 1

RAIN STOPS PLAY

Tom looked out of the window and grinned. It was a beautiful summer's day, and he couldn't wait to get outside.

"You're going to love tennis," he said to Zuma. "It's great fun."

Zuma picked up Tom's tennis racquet and looked at it curiously. A frown wrinkled her blue-painted face. "What's this?" she asked. "Is it some sort of weapon?" Without waiting for a reply, the Aztec girl shrieked a battle

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cry and took a wild swing with the racquet.

Tom yelped as she knocked one of his mum's best ornaments off a shelf. He dived across the room, catching the china figure just before it hit the floor.

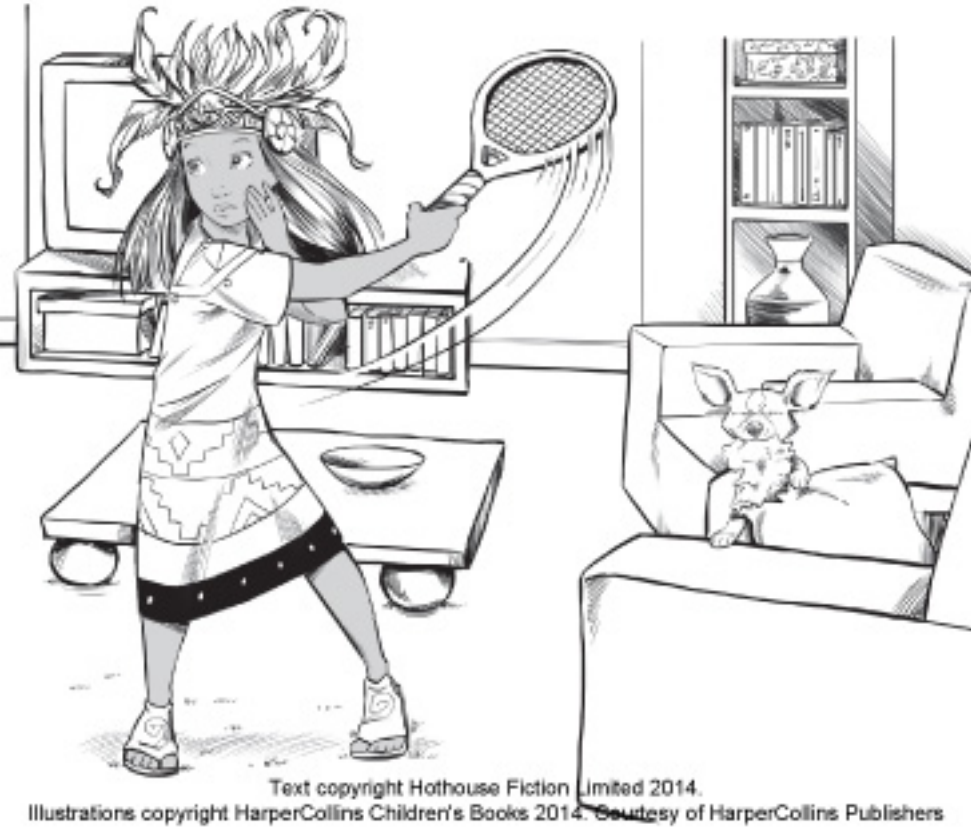
"Be careful!" he gasped. "You know I'm the only person who can see and hear you. If you break anything, *I'll* get the blame!"



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A low growl made Tom turn round. Chilli, Zuma's Chihuahua dog, was crouched on the sofa, baring his teeth at one of the cushions as though it was a rival dog. Then he leaped on the cushion and began pulling out the stuffing with his teeth.

Tom groaned. "And *please* keep Chilli under control," he added.



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Zuma wasn't listening. She was still inspecting the tennis racquet. "It's not very sharp," she said. "Which part do you hit your enemies with?"

Tom grabbed the racquet out of Zuma's hands before she could do any more damage.

"It isn't a weapon. Tennis is a *game*," he explained. "Two players use these racquets to hit a ball to each other across a net."

"Oh, a *game*," Zuma replied. "My people had games too."

Tom instantly forgot about Chilli eating his mum's cushions. He loved history and hearing Zuma's stories about the Aztec world. "What sort of games?" he asked.

"The most popular was called Ulama," Zuma told him. "Two teams knocked a ball round a court using their hips. The ball was very heavy so the players were always

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covered in bruises. Though of course it didn't matter for some of them."

"Let me guess," said Tom. "The players were sacrificed after every game, right?"

"Don't be silly!" Zuma rolled her eyes. "Only the *losing* team was sacrificed."

Tom shook his head. He was amazed that Zuma could talk about human sacrifice so calmly. After all, she had narrowly escaped being sacrificed to the rain god, Tlaloc! Though the Aztec god did get his own back by magically trapping her in a drum. And if Tom hadn't beaten the drum in his dad's museum, she'd still be locked inside it.



Since then, Tom

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had been trying to help Zuma win back her freedom by finding six gold coins that Tlaloc had scattered throughout time. They had found one in the American Wild West, but there were five more to collect – and Tom knew Tlaloc wasn't going to make their challenges easy!

But until the god appeared again, there was time for a game of tennis. And Zuma and Chilli could cause less damage in the garden than they could inside Tom's house.

"Come on," he said firmly. "There's another racquet in the shed. I'll show you how to play."

Opening the back door to the garden, Tom blinked in surprise. Seconds ago the sky had been bright and sunny. Now it was pouring with rain!

Zuma nervously peered outside. "Is it

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Tlaloc?" she asked. The Aztec god usually appeared in a cloud of rain.

"I don't think so," replied Tom. "It's probably just a shower. But we can't play tennis now. Let's go inside and play on my computer instead."

He led the way upstairs, Chilli bounding round his ankles.

"Com-puter?" said Zuma. "What's that?"

But Tom didn't get a chance to explain. As he walked into his bedroom, he stopped suddenly, making Zuma walk into his back. Chilli began growling.

"Uh-oh!" said Tom quietly. It was raining *inside* his bedroom.

Tom and Zuma looked up. The ceiling was covered with dark, swirling clouds. Thunder rumbled and a loud, threatening laugh boomed out.

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"Tlaloc!" cried Zuma.

The face of the Aztec god formed in the clouds above them. His skin was as blue as Zuma's. Eyes bulged out of his feathered head. When Tlaloc opened his mouth, Tom saw two rows of sharp fangs. He gulped. The god looked even angrier than before.

"Tremble, slave – it is indeed Tlaloc!" the god thundered. "Enough games! It is time for your next challenge. And this time you will not be so lucky…"

Before Tom could say anything, Tlaloc's face disappeared. The rain grew softer, turning into a sparkling mist. Chilli whimpered, and Zuma scooped up the little dog into her arms. As the mist thickened, Tom felt like he was standing on air. He closed his eyes as he travelled down the tunnels of time.

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