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Opening extract from

Cowboy Showdown

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CHAPTER 1

DRUM ROLL, PLEASE

Tom Sullivan hurried ahead of his dad. He was never able to just walk through the museum where his dad worked. Tom was a history fanatic and he loved being at the museum – there was always so much to see!

"C'mon, Dad," he urged. "I want to look at the 'Treasures of the Aztec World' exhibition before it opens next week."

"It's not quite finished yet," Dad

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warned. "There are still lots of artefacts in shipping crates."

"I don't mind," said Tom. "I can help you unpack."

Tom loved helping his dad at the museum, especially when it was closed to the public. Then he could make as much noise as he wanted, and study the displays without the crowds.

As they reached the Egyptian hall, Tom felt a rush of excitement. Not long ago, in this very place, he'd accidentally broken an ancient statue and freed the princess Isis from a curse. Together, they had travelled through time to find the six lost amulets Isis needed to enter the Afterlife. They'd met pirates and Vikings and Roman gladiators. But even though they'd faced fearsome opponents, Tom and Isis had managed to collect all six jewels.

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It had been the most amazing experience of Tom's life.

Weeks had passed since he and Isis had had their last adventure, and life was much quieter now. Actually, Tom was surprised to find it was a little *too* quiet.

Finally, they reached the Aztec room. As soon as they entered the hall, Tom gasped. He felt as though he'd just stepped back in time to Ancient Mexico. There were still several unpacked crates and boxes, but the things that had been unloaded were amazing.

"The Aztecs created a truly great empire," his father explained. "It reached its peak around 1500 AD. But in my opinion, their most brilliant contribution was discovering something we could not live without."

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"Chocolate!"

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"Chocolate?" Tom laughed. "Well, I guess we really owe them then!" He pointed to a model of a twin pyramid with a squared-off top. "What's this?"

"That's the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan," said Dad. "It was dedicated to the gods Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli."

"Hoo-zee *what*sy?"

Before Dad could reply, a woman appeared in the doorway. "Dr Sullivan, there's a call for you," she said.

"I'll be right back," said Dad, heading to his office. "Take a look round, but be careful and *don't* touch anything."

Tom studied the displays. He saw clay statues with wide mouths and big ears, sword-like weapons and documents written in a strange language. There was even a carved wooden box that looked like a treasure chest.

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In a corner he found a wooden cylinder carved with strange symbols. The label explained it was a drum that belonged to the rain god, Tlaloc, who would bang it to create thunder! Beside it lay two mallets.

This I've got to hear! thought Tom. He reached for one of the mallets, then quickly drew back his hand. Tom knew the rules, but his fingers were itching. It was as if the drum were begging him to play it. He knew he shouldn't, but he was just too curious.

Tom glanced round to be sure there was nobody else in the room. Then he picked up a mallet and gently swung it down.

To his shock, an enormous roll of thunder exploded from the drum. Aztec objects shook on their shelves as the sound echoed through the room.

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Suddenly, Tom wasn't alone any more.

Standing in front of him was a girl about his age. At least he *thought* she was a girl. But he'd never seen a blue girl wearing a feathered headdress before.

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"You freed me from that drum!" the girl exclaimed, throwing her arms round Tom. "Thank you!"

Tom stepped back and nearly tripped over something scampering beneath his feet. A little dog was wildly wagging its tail and nipping at Tom's trainers.

"Don't mind him," said the girl. "He's just showing you how grateful he is. He was trapped in the drum too."

"I didn't *mean* to do anything," said Tom, reaching down to pat the tiny dog.

The girl frowned as she looked round the Aztec hall. "Some of these things look familiar," she said, pointing to a shelf full of pottery. "But you don't." She narrowed her eyes. "Are you my new master?"

"Your new *what*?"

The next thing Tom knew, the girl

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was shifting from foot to foot like a boxer – elbows cocked, hands curled into fists.

"Well, you can forget it," she said. "I'll never be a slave again. I'll fight you for my freedom if I have to!"

Tom had no intention of fighting with this feathery blue stranger. "I'm *not* your master! I just banged the drum and the next thing I knew, you appeared."

"Oh." The girl dropped her fists and grinned. "Then I'm very glad you got me out of there. My name's Zuma. I'm an Aztec slave. Or at least, I used to be."

Once again, the museum was rocked by an ear-splitting thunderclap. But this time Tom and the drum had nothing to do with it. The little dog yelped and jumped into Zuma's arms. Heavy rain began to fall… *inside* the museum!

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Maybe something set off the sprinkler system? Tom thought. But since when did the sprinkler system include thunder? Something very strange was going on.

"Help me cover the artefacts," Tom shouted. "We have to protect them!"

"You *sound* like a master," Zuma grumbled. She put down the dog and dashed about after Tom, putting the ancient objects in glass display cases.

They only managed to rescue a few items before another rumble of thunder shook the room. A second stranger appeared before Tom. This one had blue skin and fancy feathers. Only *he* was enormous!

Zuma and the dog looked nervous. Tom could only stare.

"Please tell me this is your much larger,

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but extremely *friendly*, twin brother," Tom whispered.

Zuma shook her head. "He's Tlaloc, the rain god," she whispered. "I was supposed to be sacrificed to him, but I escaped." She rolled her eyes. "I can't believe he's still angry about that."

"Take it from me," Tom muttered, thinking of the Egyptian god Anubis. "These gods like to hold a grudge."

Tlaloc picked up the wooden drum and the rain stopped.

"Zuma! You have escaped your prison after five hundred years!" Tlaloc roared. The clay bowls clattered on their glass shelves. "But you are not free yet!"

The rain god pointed one huge finger at the treasure chest. The lid lifted with a loud creak. Even though he was scared, Tom was

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impressed by the god's magic. The chest was filled with gold coins, each bearing the image of an Aztec sun. Tlaloc waved his hand and six shiny coins rose out of the chest and sailed across the room. They landed with a jangle in his palm.

"You must find these six sun coins in order to earn your freedom," Tlaloc announced. "When you have collected all six, you can return to your time as a free person."

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The god banged the drum and thunder rumbled. He waved his hand and a powerful wind gusted through the room, bringing with it a thick, white mist. Tlaloc tossed the coins into the mist. For a moment they spun, shining in the air. Then the wind howled again and they vanished.

"What's happening?" Zuma cried, her feathered headdress flapping wildly.

Tom was pretty sure he knew what was coming next. Heart pounding, he reached down and scooped up the little dog as the mist surrounded them. "Grab my hand," he shouted, "and hold on tight!"

"Where are we going?" Zuma cried.

The edges of the museum began to fade as the mist swirled into a whirlwind. "I'm not sure where… or when… we'll land," Tom shouted above the howl of the cyclone. "But

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one thing I do know – it's going to be an adventure!"

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