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Mohican Brave

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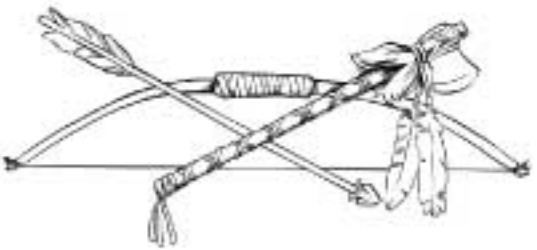
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CHAPTER 1
HARVEST TIME

"How many apples do we need to make a crumble?" asked Tom. He was perched on a branch of the apple tree that grew in their back garden.

His mother, who was busy raking brown and gold leaves into a pile, looked in the basket at the base of the tree. "That's plenty!" she said.

"Good. Then this one is mine!" said Tom, picking a ripe apple from the tree and

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sinking his teeth into it with a loud crunch.

"I guess harvesting is hungry work," his mum said with a smile.

"Tell me about it!" Zuma sighed. She was stretched out on her stomach in the grass, watching Tom pick the fruit. "When I was a slave my master had acres of crops. And guess whose job it was to pick everything? Mine! But I wasn't allowed to eat anything."

Tom's mother couldn't hear Zuma – or see her, either. Nobody except Tom could hear or see Zuma when they weren't on an adventure.

It was still hard for Tom to believe that his friend had lived hundreds of years earlier in ancient Mexico. He had accidentally freed the Aztec slave girl and her feisty dog, Chilli, from their imprisonment in a drum that he'd found in his father's museum. Since

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then, they had been travelling through time together in search of six golden sun coins that would buy Zuma her freedom. So far they had found four of them.

Zuma reached over to the compost heap and plucked a steak bone from the pile. Chilli sat up on his haunches, panting happily. Zuma tossed him the bone. The Chihuahua caught it in his teeth, chewed it a bit, then began digging a hole to bury it in. Clumps of grass and dirt flew up everywhere. He nearly choked on his apple when Mum's rake brushed dangerously close to Chilli's bottom. She couldn't see the little dog, either.

Mum stopped raking and frowned at the dirt on her otherwise tidy lawn. "Where are all these holes coming from?" she wondered aloud.

"Er, rabbits?" said Tom, gulping down

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his last bite of apple with an innocent shrug. "Moles, maybe?"

"Maybe we should call in an exterminator," Mum said.



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Chilli stopped digging and let out a nervous yelp.

Tom gave Chilli a stern look. "I'll fill in the holes and I'm sure there won't be any more," he assured his mother.

"Let's hope not," Mum said, wandering back to the house.

Tom picked the biggest apple he could find, then swung down from the tree and tossed it to Zuma with a grin. "Try one of these!" he said.

Zuma bit into the apple and closed her eyes. "Mmmmm," she said, sighing happily. "Eating fruit is a lot more fun than harvesting it. Now that I'm free, I just want to relax."

"*Almost* free," Tom corrected, making his way towards Mum's vegetable patch. "We still have two more coins to find before you

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can go back to Aztec times."

Zuma finished her apple and tossed the core on to the compost pile.

"Have you ever seen one of these before?" Tom asked, pointing to a pumpkin.

Zuma nodded. "We grew them in my master's garden. The seeds are tasty when they're roasted. Sometimes we'd carve out the shells and use them for containers."

"We make jack-o'-lanterns with them," Tom said, grinning.

"What are they?" said Zuma.

"First you carve out a scary face," said Tom. "Then you put a candle inside, and they glow. We use them as decorations for Halloween. That's the last day in October. It's a special night when kids go from door to door asking for sweets!"

"In Aztec times we called that begging,"

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said Zuma.

"This is different," Tom explained. "It's called trick-or-treating. Part of the fun is that we get dressed up in silly, scary costumes." Zuma looked at her blue painted skin, feathery headdress and distinctive black stone pendant. "I bet nobody has a costume as good as mine."

Tom laughed. "Yes, you'd have the best Halloween costume ever."

"I can think of an even better costume," said Zuma. "You could go trick-or-treating as someone *really* scary – Tlaloc!" Zuma picked up Mum's rake and thumped the handle against the pumpkin like it was a drum. "I am the god of thunder!" she boomed in a deep voice. "I'm a great big bully who sacrifices little kids!"

Tom and Zuma burst out laughing. But



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their laughter was suddenly drowned out by the sound of thunder rumbling through the sky. Suddenly the Aztec god appeared in front of them. His eyes were practically goggling out of his blue face in rage.

"How dare you mock me, slave girl!" Tlaloc bellowed, stomping his enormous feet and scattering leaves all over the grass. "You forget that you have not purchased your freedom yet!" He crossed the garden, squashing flowers and vegetables as he went. "You must find two more coins first." He bared his sharp fangs as he let out a nasty chuckle. "Though I doubt you will be brave enough to succeed!"

A shining mist swirled up from the ground. Zuma dropped the rake and grabbed Tom's hand. The wind howled, spinning the mist faster and faster around them.

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"Here we go!" said Tom.

"Chilli!" cried Zuma.

The little dog leaped into her arms just as Tlaloc's magic whisked them into the hazy darkness of space and time.

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