

Dzek, a young hostage in Chichen Itza in 900 AD, must win The Sacred Ball Game to be freed; if not, he'll be beheaded. Chuen, an unusual young girl, helps him face sacrifice and deadly betrayal. Their bond deepening, they attempt a daring escape.

THE SACRED BALL GAME

By Barbara Morris

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The Sacred Ball Game



Barbara Morris

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CHARACTERS

Dzek.....	Young noblemen who are sons of
Zacuul.....	rulers of cities that rival Chichen Itza.
Poco.....	They have been kidnapped and are being held hostage in Chichen Itza
Poot-Xul.....	Chichen Itza's renowned Medicine Priest
Chuen.....	Poot-Xul's daughter who befriends Dzek
Tonina.....	Orphaned slave girl who has been taken in and cared for by Poot-Xul and Chuen
Great Ahau.....	Supreme Ruler of Chichen Itza
Chief Counsel.....	Second-in-command to Great Ahau
Ah-Kin.....	High Priest of Temple of Kukulcan
Quim.....	Dzek's first warrior-guard
Otaan.....	Dzek's second warrior-guard
Etz'nab.....	Zacuul's warrior-guard
Aake.....	Poco's warrior-guard

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

DZEK.....	ZECK
ZACUUL.....	ZAH-COOL
POCO.....	POH-COH
CHUEN.....	CHEW-EN
POOT-XUL.....	POOT-SHOOL
TONINA.....	TOE-KNEE-NAH
GREAT AHAU.....	GREAT AH-HOW
AH KIN.....	AH-KEEN
QUIM.....	KOO-IM
OTAAN.....	OH-TAHN
ETZ'NAB.....	ETS-NAHB
AAKE.....	AH-KAY

GLOSSARY

Balache—fermented drink of honey, maize, water and the bark of *balache* tree. Sometimes called the *Holy Intoxicant*
Copal—a cream-colored, sacred resin of the *pom* tree which is shaped into small cakes and used as incense in religious ceremonies

Huipil—a simple, loose-fitting dress

Kin—a Mayan day

Kirtle—a man's tunic or a woman's short skirt

Mastil—a loincloth

Milpa—a cornfield that is planted in a small patch of forested land that is first prepared by cutting and burning the bushes and trees on it

Pati—a cape-like garment

Tortilla—a pancake made of cornmeal dough that is cooked on a flat pottery griddle or flat stone

Tun—a Mayan year made of 18 periods or "months" of 20 days plus five "unlucky" days

Uinal—a period of 20 days

Xul—a pointed planting stick

CHAPTER 1

“Caravan!”

The word raced through the stalls of Chichen Itza’s open marketplace. This was the first caravan to reach the city since the end of the long rains.

Dzek’s eyes gleamed. Finally! A caravan!

His reaction instantly alerted Quim, the warrior at his side. Like Dzek, Quim was erect and muscular. The youths looked like best friends, but, in fact, Dzek was a hostage, Quim was his guard.

When Quim saw Dzek’s eyes flash, he tensed. He was ready to grab his prisoner if he made one wrong move. Dzek’s attempts at escape were legendary, and Quim knew that the excitement and hustle-bustle of a caravan were the perfect cover for a getaway.

But, to his surprise Dzek did not try to flee. Instead, he turned toward the east gate of the city. It was where the caravan would unload the wares it had collected in its journey across the Yucatan Peninsula.

“I’m going to talk to the overseers of the caravan,” he informed Quim in a cold voice. Then, head high, he strode off, through the bustling marketplace, heading east. Quim spat in disgust and charged after him. As he barged through the shoppers, Quim cursed the Great Ahau, the king and supreme ruler of Chichen Itza, who had ordered Quim to be Dzek’s guard, day and night. Quim knew he should be honored by the assignment for Dzek was a young prince and was the city’s most important hostage. But the job was hard. Dzek was smart. He was crafty, and he was a speed demon. He could run with the speed of lightning. Many people believed he had been touched by the gods, for a silver-white stripe, like a flash of lightning, streaked back

from his brow through his dark hair. They whispered that he was “Dzek of the Lightning.” Quim spat into the dust, enraged at the thought of his duty to guard a hostage who was not confined to a prison. I don’t care if he is a nobleman, it’s insane to let him move freely around the city, he thought, and his anger deepened as he recalled how curtly Dzek had spoken to him, as if he, Quim, were the prisoner and Dzek was his guard. He had to fight the urge to strike Dzek’s noble face, to knock him down, to bloody his pure white cape-like pati. He would especially like to grind dirt into Dzek’s streak of silver-white hair, the streak that, along with his renowned speed, had earned him his nickname, Dzek of the Lightning.

As he doggedly pursued the fleet-footed young hostage, once again Quim thought bitterly of the unusual situation that bonded the two, mutually hateful youths. The story of Dzek and two other youths, Poco and Zacuul, was well-known across the Yucatan. Sons of the rulers of rival cities of Chichen Itza, the three youths had been kidnapped and brought to Chichen Itza to be held as political hostages. Because of their lordly rank, they were not locked inside their housing compound, but could roam where they wished *as long as their warrior-guards were close on their heels*. Quim’s lips twisted into a smirk for he knew how this humiliated Dzek.

Yet, Quim had to admit that there were times when even his leathery heart pitied the young hostages, for they had all been children—Dzek was only in his ninth tun—when they were taken from their fathers’ palaces. Six tun had passed. During that time, only Dzek had tried to escape. He made so many attempts that he became notorious, and many of the common people cheered him on, for his escapades provided entertainment and exciting gossip. But they also cheered his captures, for they understood the unique

importance of all three of the youths to the safety of the city. When Chichen Itza's Chief Counsel had chosen Quim to guard the restless young Dzek, he had emphasized the youth's significance.

"Dzek is a captive, but you must never forget that he is also of royal birth. Treat him with the same respect as our own nobility," the Chief Counsel ordered.

Quim's eyes had glittered with anger, but he nodded.

"Remember," the Chief Counsel continued, "largely because of the three youths, Chichen Itza lives in peace and safety. As long as those lads are well treated their fathers will not dare to attack us, for to do so would bring instant death to their sons."

The Chief Counsel had eyed Quim sharply. "You have been given the most difficult hostage—Dzek. Your duty is to prevent him from escaping. Nothing more. Is that clear?" he snapped.

That was fine for the Chief Counsel to say Quim thought. He didn't have to tread the fine line of being half-guard and half-servant to an angry and frustrated prisoner. It didn't surprise Quim that Dzek's father, as well as the fathers of Poco and Zacuul, were eager to conquer Chichen Itza. The city was rich beyond imagination because of the tens of thousands of pilgrims who came from all over the Yucatan to bring precious offerings and to worship at Chichen Itza's fabulous temples and its famous Tzenote or Well of Sacrifice.

Quim's thoughts were interrupted, for at that moment, the two youths finally broke free of the market crowds. Before them stretched the sparsely forested plain of the Yucatan, greengold in the low afternoon sun.

Lumbering heavily toward them on the hard-packed trail was the caravan—hundreds of sweating, half-naked bearers, their backs bent under bulging baskets and sacks.

Dzek sniffed the air. The sweat of the bearers mingled with the rich, pungent scents of copal incense, cocoa beans, dried fish and salted deer meat.

At the rear Dzek spotted more valuable goods—slaves. Slaves to build the city’s splendid pyramids, then to be sacrificed to the Mayan’s many demanding gods.

“Ho! Stop! Unload!” The shouts of the overseers rang out. Dzek knew that within hours Chichen Itza’s market would overflow with exotic foods and luxuries—ocelot pelts, gleaming jades, turquoises, and bright, rare feathers of the quetzal bird, destined for Chichen Itza’s royalty.

But Dzek wasn’t interested in any of it. His search was for someone, anyone—an overseer or a porter—who could give him word of his father and mother in Xelha. The bits of gossip from traders were his only ties to that far-off city of his birth.

Dzek had not seen his parents since the night when he had been abducted from his bedchamber. The quiet of that night had been broken by his mother’s wailing cry when, too late, she discovered her son being carried off. Her cry still haunted Dzek’s dreams.

Just then a conch shell trumpet blasted the air as four runners, bearing a lavishly decorated palanquin, charged into the throng.

“Clear the way for the merchant prince!” the runners yelled, scattering the crowd.

Inside the palanquin Dzek glimpsed the lordly merchant prince who owned the caravan, bedecked in a gleaming white tunic and bejeweled with a breastplate of jade, turquoise and gold.

At another trumpet blast, three more palanquins flashed into view, bearing the sons of the merchant prince. As the last one neared Dzek, suddenly a child darted out of the crowds, directly into the runners’ path! Dzek heard shouts,

saw the palanquin swerve and lurch, saw it hang, suspended in the air for several long seconds before tipping crazily—toward him!

He leaped sideways. Off-balance, he fell to his knees. Quim and a dozen others also tumbled in a heap, entangled in the palanquin's draperies. Dzek heard Quim cursing loudly as he struggled to rise.

In that chaotic instant, without thinking, Dzek leaped to his feet and plunged back into the crowds.

I've escaped, he realized with a start. *What next? Where to?*

Think! Think! he ordered himself as he knifed through the throng. Moments later, he stopped, his eyes darting, searching for Quim's feathered headdress.

It was nowhere in sight. Quim had probably raced into the forest assuming that's where Dzek would run to hide. For the moment Dzek seemed safe. The bearers, unloading their backpacks, paid no attention to him.

Suddenly an idea struck him. Why not hide out amid the caravaners until morning, then escape by shouldering a pack and joining the long line of bearers?

But then he remembered his clothing, and he cursed. Hide among the bearers in a white cotton mastil or loincloth and an embroidered cape-like pati—clothes that clearly marked him as a nobleman? Hide out among the bearers with his hair shining with expensive, scented palm oil and tied in a nobleman's topknot? Among the dirt-encrusted bearers he would gleam like a star in the night sky. Desperately he looked around for camouflage

"Here, Dzek of the Lightning. Quick, put this on," a gruff voice said. A dirty, rough-woven hemp cloth landed at Dzek's feet.

He spun around. Who had tossed it? Who had called him by name? By his nickname?

It was an overseer, a large, hard-looking man.

“Loosen your topknot. Rub dirt in it and on your arms and legs,” the man ordered in a low voice. “You’ll never escape lookin’ like shiny copper.”

Swiftly Dzek knelt to smear himself with dirt. He eyed the overseer warily. “Who are you?” he asked, his voice tight with caution. “And what makes you think I’m Dzek of the Lightning?”

The overseer gave a short laugh. “When a young nobleman is runnin’ and lookin’ for a place to hide, and he’s runnin’ from this particular city, anyone can guess right enough that he’s one of the three captive lords.” He cocked his eyebrow toward Dzek. “Right?”

“Maybe,” Dzek replied cautiously.

“Well,” the overseer continued, “even the lowliest bearer can tell that you’re not Poco of Chakan. That poor lad’s lame.”

“And by the gods, you’re sure not Zacuul of Labna. Everyone knows that good for nothin’ wouldn’t go home if the Chief Counsel himself was to give him a hundred jaguar pelts—not when he can live in luxury here and play the Ball Game kin after kin.”

The overseer gave Dzek a knowing smile. “So that leaves you, m’lord—Dzek of the Lightning.” The man’s shrewd eyes narrowed on the silver-white slash that streaked through Dzek’s hair. “Even without that lightning streak in your hair you couldn’t fool me,” he smirked. “You’re Dzek all right.”

Involuntarily Dzek’s hand went to his head. He cursed silently. He had forgotten the dashing streak of silver-white hair with which the gods had marked him. Quickly he weighed his position. The overseer seemed to know everything about all the captives. Surely the man must also know that he would be rewarded for turning Dzek in. Yet, he seemed to be helping him escape. Dzek held his tongue.

The man hunched down beside him. He spoke in a gravelly whisper. "You're wonderin' why I'm not givin' you over to the guards and gettin' a good reward."

Still Dzek said nothing. He eyed the overseer suspiciously.

The man hunched closer. "What would I get? A sack of cocoa beans?" He scoffed. "They're precious enough, but your father'll be more thankful than that, right?" he asked with a crafty smile. "A jaguar pelt, maybe. Or even one of them breastplates with gold and fancy stones."

So that was it! Dzek could hardly believe his luck. Thanks to this greedy overseer he might actually escape!

"Get me safely to Xelha and my father will reward you handsomely." He extended his palm. "You have my word on it."

The overseer grinned. Dzek's self-confidence was a sure mark of his noble birth. Greedily the man clasped Dzek's palm. "The caravan leaves in the morning soon after the sun god ends his journey to the underworld. You'll carry a pack and be under my eyes. Don't speak to no one, 'specially not to me. We'll be in Xelha in about ten kin."

Dzek nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak for fear that excitement would make his voice tremble. Never had he shown weakness to his captors; certainly he would not show any to this low ranking man.

With a sly smile, the overseer slipped away.

As Dzek rubbed more dirt into his hair, he recalled dim memories of home. Only ten more kin! Ten journeys of the sun god across the heavens, and he would see his parents!

He was too deep in thought to notice an elderly bearer a short distance away who had watched everything from behind a stack of baskets. He, too, had figured out who Dzek was. Dzek's lightning streak in his hair was a dead giveaway, but he was puzzled. Why wasn't the overseer

turning the lad in for the reward—most likely a sack of valuable cocoa beans?

Vaguely the old bearer realized that Dzek's father might give a bigger reward. But Xelha was ten kin away. Anything could happen on the trail before then, he reasoned.

He pondered the question at length, turning it over and over in his mind. Finally, he nodded to himself. Surely a reward of cocoa beans this night was better than an unsure reward of gold later on. He grinned slyly, pleased with his decision.

Slipping from his hiding spot, he hurried toward the marketplace. He needed to find a warrior-guard.

CHAPTER 2

As Dzek was led back to the compound that he shared with Zacuul and Poco and their guards, he held his head high though Quim had a tight grip on his arm. From the corner of his eye he could see the old bearer scurrying away to collect his reward of cocoa beans.

“Look, a warrior-guard has got Dzek of the Lightning!” a gnarled peasant woman exclaimed to her husband. “How dirty he is! Poor lad. Probably tried to run away again.”

The couple was squatting in the marketplace hawking their runty yams and squashes.

“Poor lad!” her husband snorted. “He lives the life of a lord! I wager he eats more tortillas in one meal than we eat in a whole kin. The god of the underworld take you!” he shouted with a fiery look at Dzek.

“Why curse the unlucky lad?” a nearby farmer called. “He’s got courage. By the gods, he’ll make his escape good one of these times.”

“That he will. He’s not got the nickname Dzek of the Lightning for nothin’,” another declared.

“Well, when he does, woe to us,” the peasant replied. “His father’s army’ll be here soon after.”

Several other farmers and laborers nodded. Watching Dzek’s proud figure, their listless eyes gleamed briefly with a mix of respect and pity for the young captive. But their admiration was short-lived for they knew that the old peasant was right.

“That may be, but the poor lad can’t take a step without that warrior-guard snappin’ like a dog at his heels,” the peasant woman muttered.

“Mind your place, wife,” her husband barked. “It’s not for a woman to speak out so.”

His wife shrugged and craned her neck for a last look at Dzek. She gazed with envy at his healthy body and smoothly muscled legs. Her own spindly, undernourished son had been taken by the gods during a drought in his ninth tun—the same age that Dzek was when he was taken from his mother.

A few feet away, a slight child holding a pet deer on a leash watched Dzek with big, wondering eyes. She tugged at the cotton shift of the tall, slim girl at her side.

“Chuen,” she whispered excitedly, “is that truly Dzek of the Lightning? Is it?”

Chuen nodded. She smiled at the child’s excitement, but she, too, was curious about the young captive lord. So this was the famous Dzek who had captured so many imaginations! And no wonder, she thought, for even covered with dirt and closely guarded, Dzek looked as proud and spirited as a conqueror. With his fierce dark eyes and bold walk, he, not the angry guard, seemed to be in command.

Chuen was startled by the sudden, soaring feelings that the sight of Dzek stirred in her. Her breath quickened, and she felt a rush of warmth to her face. And though her grave, black eyes remained as secret looking as always, butterflies fluttered around her heart.

“Chuen, everybody says Dzek’s a hero. But he’s so dirty!” the child, Tonina, exclaimed.

Chuen chuckled and knelt to answer her. “He probably rubbed dirt on himself to make it easier to escape. But remember,” she whispered, “not everyone thinks he’s a hero. It’s mostly the peasants and laborers and slaves who think that. They wish they could escape from their hardships the way Dzek escapes from his guards.”

"I like his name," Tonina said. "Dzek of the Lightning. Don't you like it, too?" she asked.

Chuen felt the warm blush again. To her relief, before she could answer, they were distracted by Simi, the deer. Prancing impatiently, he stretched his exploring nose toward the peasant woman's vegetables. With a sullen look at the two girls, the woman snatched it away.

"Come, Tonina. Let's go," Chuen ordered abruptly. "Hold Simi very tight."

"Those people don't like us, do they?" Tonina said as they left the crowded market. "It's because I'm a slave. And because you're good to me. You and Poot-Xul. You're the only ones who are." Her voice was sad.

Chuen looked tenderly at the tiny figure trudging next to her, but she couldn't bring herself to answer. For it was true, she thought bitterly; the peasants resented the child because she was an orphan, the child of slave laborers who had been crushed to death under a falling boulder. In the peasants' minds Tonina was as low and worthless as a dog. It angered them that she was cared for and treated as an equal.

Three tun earlier, Poot-Xul, Chuen's father, the highest-ranking medicine priest in Chichen Itza, had come upon the waif, dressed in filthy scraps, begging in the alleys. Overcome by pity, he had taken her home, and though he had been widowed for many years, he vowed to care for the child himself until the gods called her.

When the people heard about Poot-Xul's actions, there were angry mutterings from high-born and low-born alike. For, by tradition, orphan slaves were left in the streets until the gods demanded a human sacrifice. Then they were rounded up, laden with heavy jewels and hurled into the black waters of the Sacred Tzenote—the Well of Sacrifice.

Chuen was proud of her father for standing up to those who cursed him for caring for the little outcast. Now, at the thought of the Sacred Tzenote, Chuen shivered. It was a terrifying way to enter the presence of the divine spirits. Yet, those who were sacrificed were honored by the gods. They did not truly die, but, instead, they flew up to eternal life in paradise.

All of them—Poot-Xul, Chuen and Tonina—knew that at any time the orphan might be called to serve the gods in this way.

At the edge of the marketplace the two girls turned into the Great Plaza of Chichen Itza. The sun god was about to sink into the underworld. His pink-gold light glowed like fire on the huge, brilliantly painted temples and pyramids that bordered the plaza.

Only a few people were about—some priests in feathered headdresses and a few white-robed noblewomen borne on palanquins, their maids trudging behind with overflowing market baskets.

In the vastness of the nearly empty plaza Tonina's shyness left her. Quickly she undid Simi's leash. The young deer bounded free and ran in wide circles around the girls. Tonina scampered ahead of Chuen. "Race?" she playfully dared her.

Chuen grinned and took the challenge. Away from the sullen eyes of the crowd her slender body relaxed. Her dark eyes gleamed with the joy of running free, and in a moment, long hair flying, she passed Tonina like the wind.

Laughing, Tonina churned her thin legs after Chuen. She always lost. Chuen could beat anyone, Tonina thought proudly. Only Simi could outrun her.

As she ran, as lightly as a fawn, Chuen sent a prayer of thanks to the gods for her gift of being born to run. "Our

souls are mated, Simi," she sang wordlessly to the graceful animal.

Now, with her spirit free, thoughts of Dzek which had been waiting to be explored slipped easily to the front of Chuen's mind. And once again she felt the butterfly stirrings of her heart. These were different feelings, but very pleasant, she decided.

Dzek of the Lightning. She turned the name over on her tongue. Tonina was right. It was a heroic name—and perfect for Dzek's notorious quickness.

To her surprise Chuen found herself imagining Dzek racing across the plain beside her. But then her vision clouded as she remembered that his running was confined to the Great Ball Court, always under the eyes of his warrior-guard. The Ball Court was huge—about 550 by 230 feet—but with its high walls, it was no better than a prison yard.

At the northern end of the plaza where the scrub forest began, Chuen pulled up short to wait for Tonina who still scampered in the distance. Breathless, but exhilarated, she leaned over and took big, gulping breaths. Her lustrous black hair fell forward, curtaining her face.

Moments later, at the sound of footsteps she tossed back her hair and looked up to see two girls of her own age, daughters of noblemen, with their maid-chaperones trailing behind. Instinctively Chuen raised her hand to wave, then dropped it quickly when the girls turned their heads and hurried on.

Angry tears sprang up behind Chuen's lids. She blinked them back and unconsciously straightened her shoulders. She was embarrassed and furious with herself for having waved. She had known she'd be ignored. She always was. "You should be used to it by now," she told herself.

But she wasn't. She wondered if she ever would be. And once again she was puzzled by the jumble of feelings that

filled her whenever she met the daughters of other noblemen. Seeing their oiled, scented hair, entwined with bright feathers and their patis decorated with jade beads, she was always aware of her own plain white cotton shift and loose, windblown hair.

Not that she wanted to dress as they did. Never! Bejeweled, bound with ribbons, and accompanied by maid-chaperones! Never to feel the joy of running free! But also, never to share in their friendship. To be always alone, except for Tonina.

But Chuen knew that it wasn't only her running and her clothing that set her apart. It was Tonina and her father's defiance of tradition. She felt anger flare in her—and was immediately ashamed. As proud as she was of Poot-Xul, how could she be angry with him? Everything was so confusing.

Mindlessly, she picked up a pebble and hurled it into the bushes. "So, don't speak to me!" She tossed the words across the plaza. "Who needs you?"

At that moment Tonina raced up and grabbed Chuen's hand. "I saw them," she declared. "They never talk to you—and it's because of me. I hate them!"

Chuen grasped Tonina's shoulders. "No, it's not because of you," she said firmly. "It's me. All me."

"Because you run?"

Chuen smiled crookedly. "Partly. And because I don't always bind up my hair. And because Poot-Xul teaches me about medicine herbs. They think I should learn to cook and weave and order servants around."

"You can't," Tonina cried. "You don't have a mother to teach you."

Once again Chuen's eyes softened with quick tears. The thought of her mother, whom the gods had taken when Chuen was in her third tun, stirred up another jumble of

feelings. Whenever she saw mothers and daughters together in the marketplace, she felt tiny barbs of envy.

Yet, if she had a mother, even one as pretty and kind as Poot-Xul said her mother had been, she probably would have been bound in hair ribbons, high-laced sandals, embroidered shawl and massive ropes of jade and gold jewelry. She, too, would be escorted everywhere by a maid-chaperone.

Chuen grimaced. Why was it, she thought, that after females reached their fourth or fifth tun they could no longer run free or learn the things their brothers learned? A glint of mischief lit her eyes remembering how she had begged her father to let her tag along when he gathered medicinal herbs and made his rounds of the sick. That was many tun ago. Against tradition, she had followed Poot-Xul ever since. Having no son, he was pleased with her company and with her quickness to learn. "The gods have blessed you with the gift of healing," he told her. "Pay no heed when the other girls turn away from you because you are not like them."

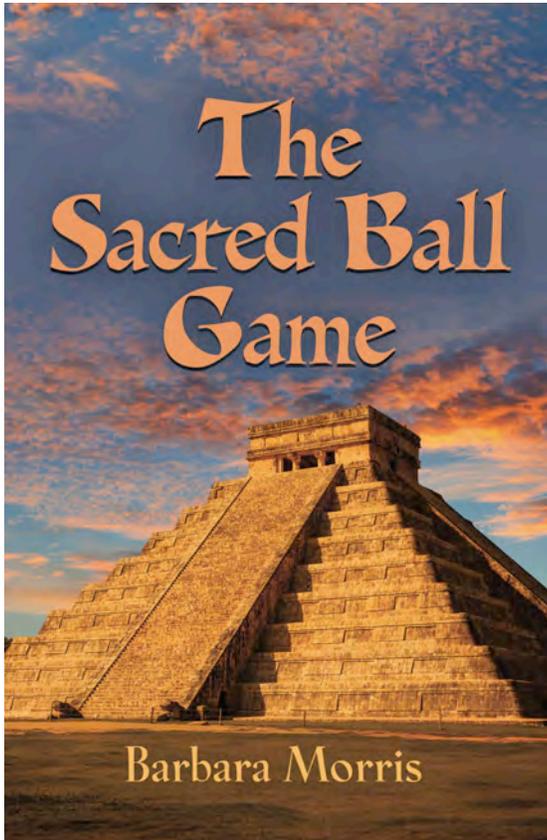
Left unspoken was the matter of Chuen's running. When Poot-Xul's fellow priests commented on Chuen's "wild ways," Poot-Xul turned a deaf ear. He seemed to understand her need to run, and for this Chuen loved him dearly.

"Come," she now said to Tonina. "Let's tell Poot-Xul about the caravan. And tomorrow we'll see if it has brought any new medicine plants."

"Maybe we'll see Dzek of the Lightning again," Tonina replied.

Once more the captive's name brought a quick flush to Chuen's cheeks. "He'll be well-guarded in his own courtyard," she replied. "I don't think anyone will see him again for a long time." To her surprise the thought of not seeing Dzek was disappointing.

She would have been even more surprised if she had known that before many more kin passed, she would not only see Dzek again, but he would enter her life—and change it forever.”



Dzek, a young hostage in Chichen Itza in 900 AD, must win The Sacred Ball Game to be freed; if not, he'll be beheaded. Chuen, an unusual young girl, helps him face sacrifice and deadly betrayal. Their bond deepening, they attempt a daring escape.

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