

RAIN PLAYER

STORY AND PICTURES BY DAVID WISNIEWSKI

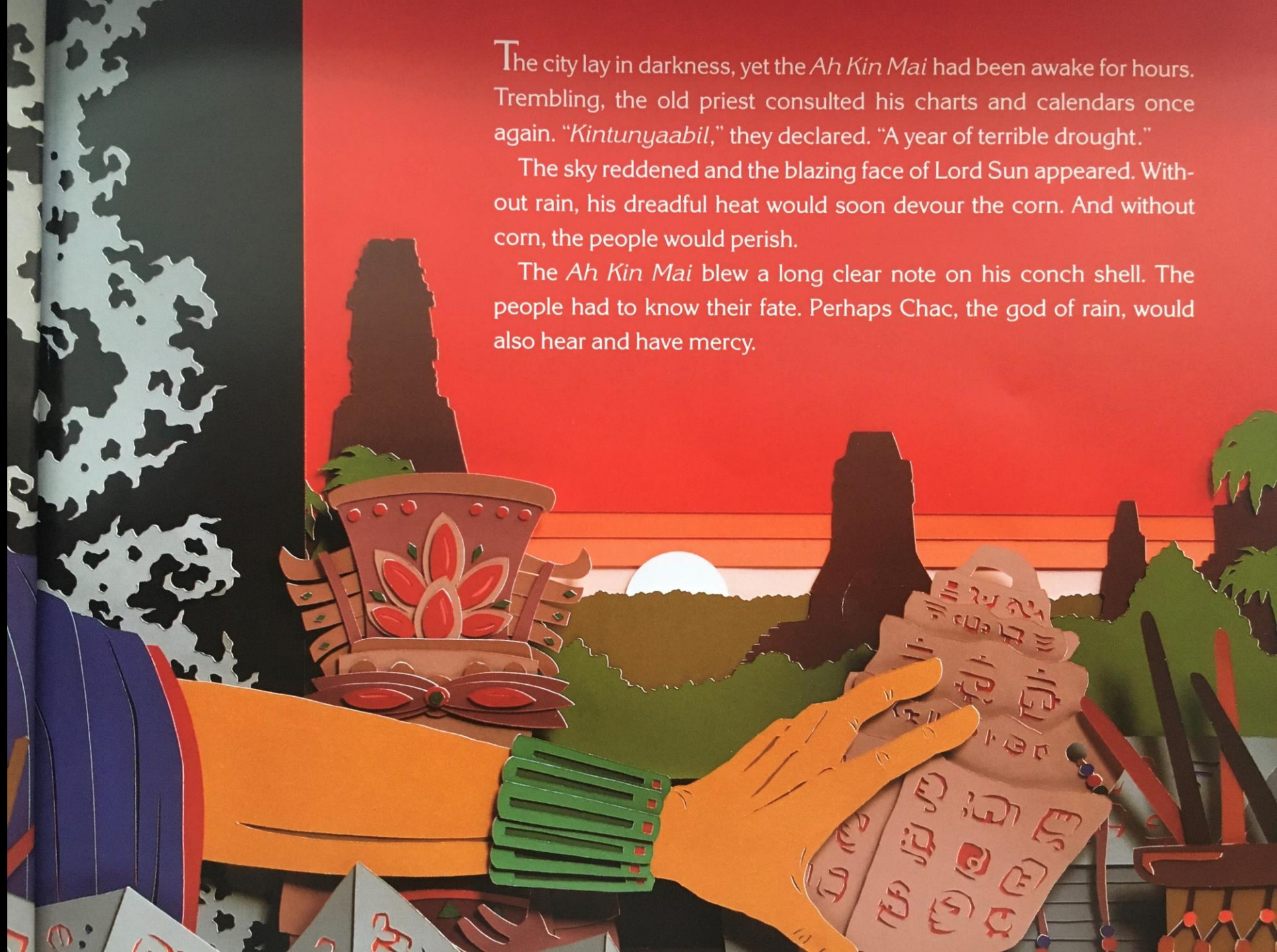




The city lay in darkness, yet the *Ah Kin Mai* had been awake for hours. Trembling, the old priest consulted his charts and calendars once again. “*Kintunyaabil*,” they declared. “A year of terrible drought.”

The sky reddened and the blazing face of Lord Sun appeared. Without rain, his dreadful heat would soon devour the corn. And without corn, the people would perish.

The *Ah Kin Mai* blew a long clear note on his conch shell. The people had to know their fate. Perhaps Chac, the god of rain, would also hear and have mercy.



On the ball court, Pik played *pok-a-tok* with his friends. Like his father, who competed before the supreme ruler in full costume, Pik had great skill. He blocked a pass with his shoulder and sent the ball flying through the stone ring above his head. "Game!" he cried.

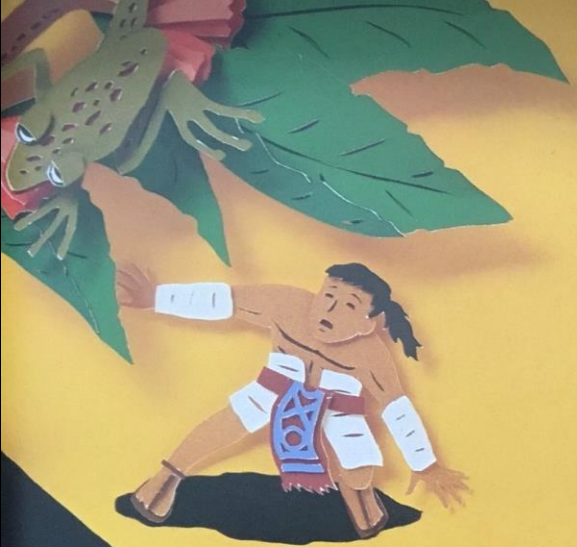
"Hush!" warned the others. "Listen!"

The call of the *Ah Kin Mai* floated in the dusty air. The boys ran to hear what fate the new year would bring.







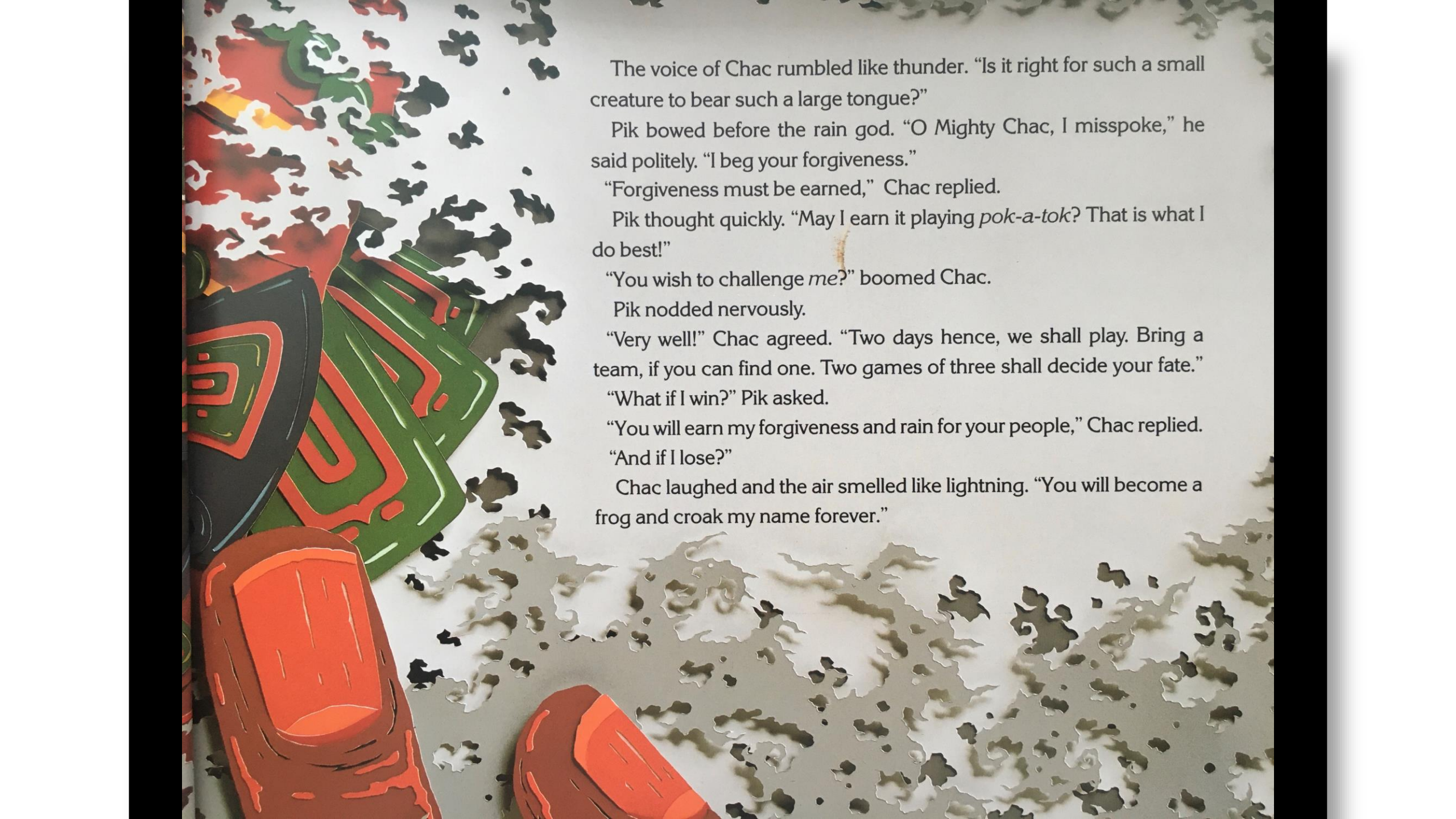
An illustration of a young boy with dark hair, wearing a white loincloth with a blue and red patterned sash and white armbands. He is falling from a cliff edge, with his arms outstretched and a look of panic on his face. The background is a bright yellow sky. To the right, there is a large green tree with red flowers and several large green frogs perched on its branches.

Pik listened impatiently to the prophecy. “Do the gods have nothing better to do than torment us?” he whispered to his companions. “Things would be different if I were the Ah Kin Mai. I would just tell Chac to get to work!”

The boys’ laughter was cut short by a chorus of croaking. The little frogs of the forest, the *uo*, filled the trees about them. Knowing *uo* to be the heralds of Chac, the boys fled. But before Pik could take a step, he was whisked into the swirling clouds above.







The voice of Chac rumbled like thunder. "Is it right for such a small creature to bear such a large tongue?"

Pik bowed before the rain god. "O Mighty Chac, I misspoke," he said politely. "I beg your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness must be earned," Chac replied.

Pik thought quickly. "May I earn it playing *pok-a-tok*? That is what I do best!"

"You wish to challenge *me*?" boomed Chac.

Pik nodded nervously.

"Very well!" Chac agreed. "Two days hence, we shall play. Bring a team, if you can find one. Two games of three shall decide your fate."

"What if I win?" Pik asked.

"You will earn my forgiveness and rain for your people," Chac replied.

"And if I lose?"

Chac laughed and the air smelled like lightning. "You will become a frog and croak my name forever."





“But I don’t want to be a frog!” wailed Pik.

“You should have thought of that before insulting Chac,” said his father sternly. “Challenging a god to *pok-a-tok*! No wonder your friends refuse to join your team.”


“Won’t you?” Pik asked hopefully.

“No, I will not,” his father replied. “Much more than skill is required.” He emptied the contents of a leather pouch onto a table. “At your *hetzmek*, these things were placed in your baby hands: a planting stick, to make the hole for the corn seed, and a ball—”

“To make me a great player!” Pik interrupted. “It has done so!”

“But there is more,” his father chided. “Here is a jaguar tooth, that you might share Jaguar’s fierce strength. And here is a quetzal feather, that you might receive Quetzal’s silent speed. And, most precious of all, the water of the sacred *cenote*, that you might make its deep wisdom your own. Seek their counsel. Perhaps they will know how to help you.”





Rising early, Pik came upon Jaguar by first light. "*Otzilen*," he said respectfully. "I have need."

"Indeed," replied Jaguar, inspecting his claws. "All the forest knows of your plight. Fate is against you, but a victory over Chac would give us rain, and that is something we sorely need. I will help you if I can."

"But how?"

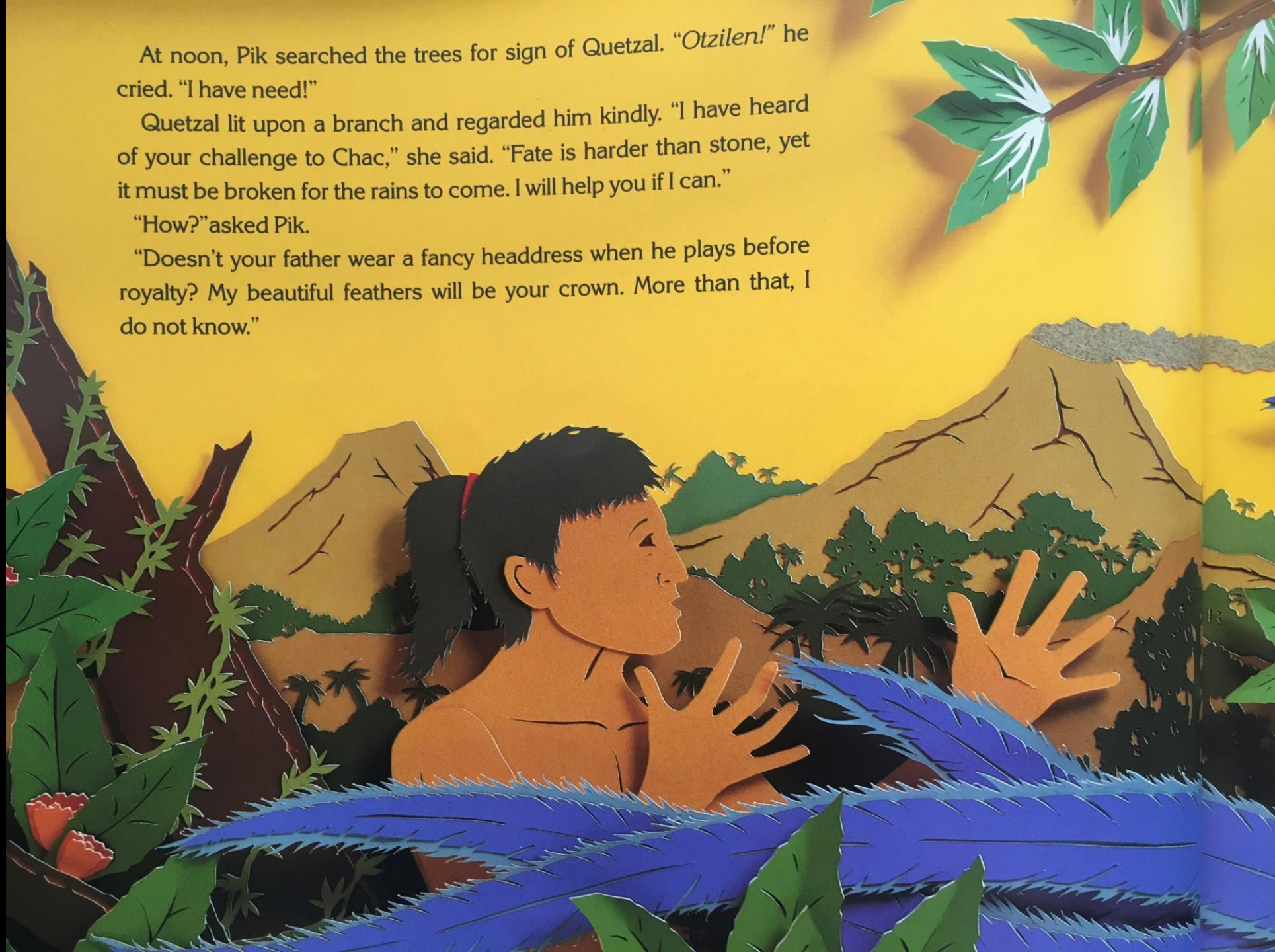
"Doesn't your father wear a jaguar cloak when he plays before royalty? Tomorrow, I will be your cloak. More than that, I do not know."

At noon, Pik searched the trees for sign of Quetzal. "Otzilen!" he cried. "I have need!"

Quetzal lit upon a branch and regarded him kindly. "I have heard of your challenge to Chac," she said. "Fate is harder than stone, yet it must be broken for the rains to come. I will help you if I can."

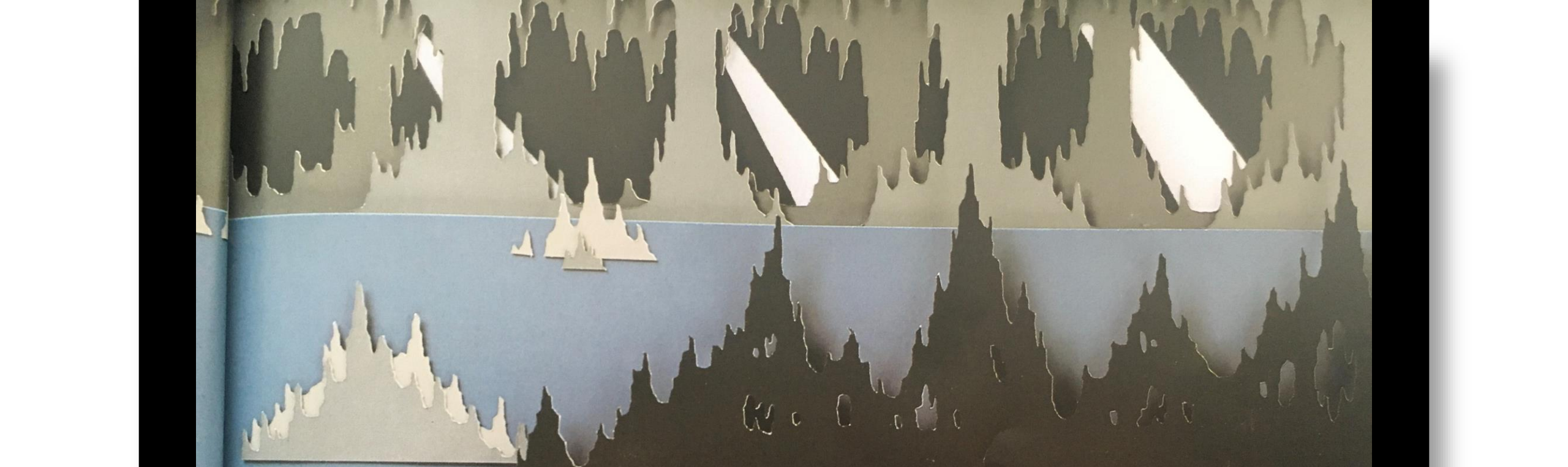
"How?" asked Pik.

"Doesn't your father wear a fancy headdress when he plays before royalty? My beautiful feathers will be your crown. More than that, I do not know."









As the sun set, Pik lowered himself into the darkness of the sacred *cenote*. Far below, dark water swirled through the great caves it had carved below the earth. "*Otzilen*," Pik whispered, and his plea echoed in the vastness.

With the faintest breath of air, the words of the *cenote* entered his ear. "I know your step," the *cenote* sighed, "for I flow beneath the ball court. Though fate says otherwise, Chac's rains must continue, for they are my constancy and strength. Go now. Tomorrow, I will be with you."

"But how?" asked Pik.

"Tomorrow," came the echo, and all was still.

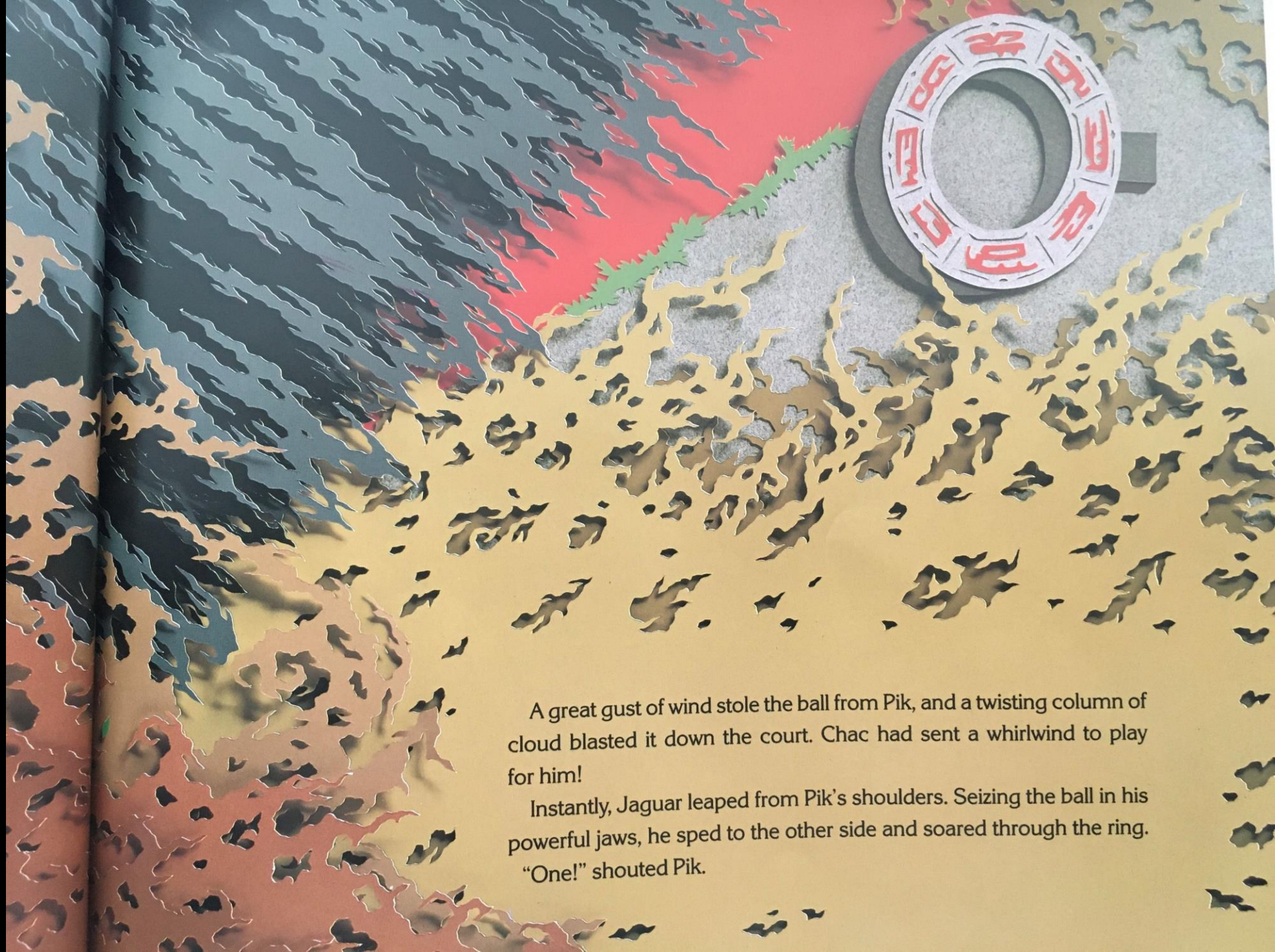
The next day, all marveled as Pik strode toward the ball court. A magnificent jaguar cloak hung from his shoulders, and brilliant quetzal feathers streamed from his headdress. Then the people grew silent as the *uo* announced the arrival of Chac in the sky above.

The rain god nodded his readiness to the *Ah Kin Mai*. With shaking hands, the priest held the ball aloft. "Begin!" he cried, and cast it into the court.









A great gust of wind stole the ball from Pik, and a twisting column of cloud blasted it down the court. Chac had sent a whirlwind to play for him!

Instantly, Jaguar leaped from Pik's shoulders. Seizing the ball in his powerful jaws, he sped to the other side and soared through the ring. "One!" shouted Pik.





Again the old priest tossed the ball into play. At that moment, Chac loosed a score of lightning bolts. They fell with blinding fury, tearing the earth and spinning the ball toward the goal.

Quetzal flew from Pik's head and snatched the ball with her talons. Yet the lightning was stronger than she. Still clutching the ball, Quetzal was driven through the ring.

"One for me!" thundered Chac. He came down from the clouds, and his colossal form dwarfed the tallest temples. "Now I will break this tie!"

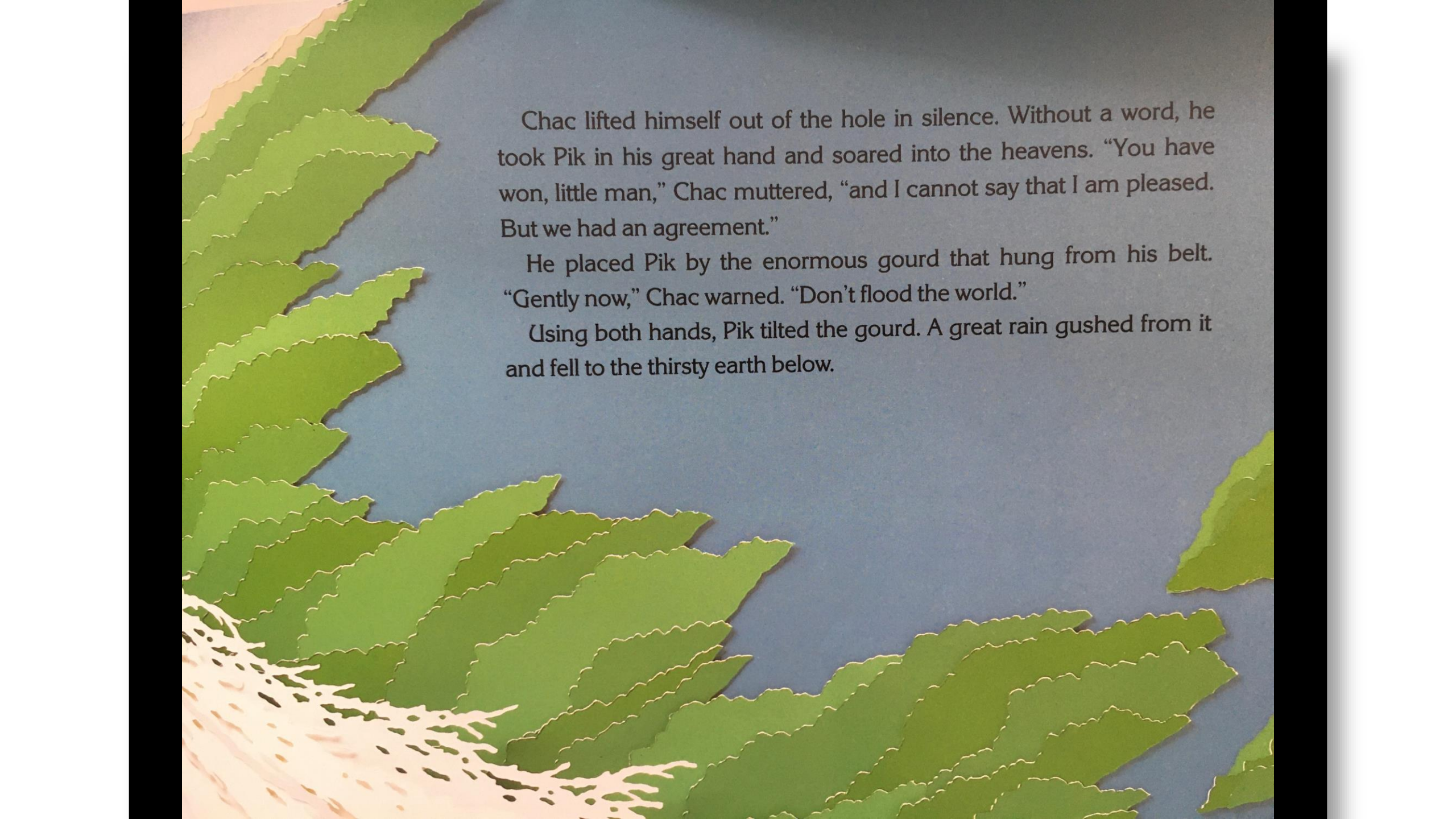


The ball fell to the court again. Pik scrambled backward as Chac lifted his huge foot. Then, with a terrific crack, the ground gave way, and Chac plunged into the *cenote* below.

Racing skillfully over the broken ground, Pik sent the final goal flying through the center of the ring. "Mine!" he whooped.







Chac lifted himself out of the hole in silence. Without a word, he took Pik in his great hand and soared into the heavens. “You have won, little man,” Chac muttered, “and I cannot say that I am pleased. But we had an agreement.”

He placed Pik by the enormous gourd that hung from his belt. “Gently now,” Chac warned. “Don’t flood the world.”

Using both hands, Pik tilted the gourd. A great rain gushed from it and fell to the thirsty earth below.

Chac kept his word to Pik that season and for many seasons thereafter.

In time, the fine young ball player with the strength of a jaguar and the speed of a quetzal gained great renown. He became known as Rain Player, for distant thunder greeted his entrance on the court, and gentle showers followed each victory.





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