

SHORT STORY PREQUELS TO THE 8TH MAYAN PROPHECY

DREAMCATCHER



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by R.G. Peterson



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A Short Story Prequel to
The 8th Mayan Prophecy



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Despite hardships and against overwhelming odds, John Windwalker rose above the impoverished conditions to become an American success story – more accurately, a Native American success story.

He grew up on the Menomonee Indian Reservation – not the typical route to outstanding academic success. Only twenty-six percent of the males on the reservation received any type of formal education. Few graduated from high school. Fewer still went on to higher education and graduated, much less in four years while majoring in engineering.

The reservation where John grew up is located in north-central Wisconsin, where the Menominee Nation, prior to the middle of the 17th century, had a lengthy and rich history of self-sufficiency, friendship, and peace.

The first white man they encountered was Jean Nicolet, who, like many before and after, was searching for a Northwest Passage to China in 1634. As he and his guides approached land near the present site of Green Bay, Wisconsin, he mistakenly assumed they'd discovered the route to China. To ingratiate himself to the Chinese, Nicolet donned traditional Chinese silk-embroidered, ceremonial robes, stood up in his canoe, and fired off his two single-shot pistols.

For centuries the story was told by the French how the Menominee Indians immediately fell to their knees in fear of the white man who could command thunder. But the tribe to this day tells a much different tale, saying they feared for the light-skinned man who lacked the common sense to not stand in a canoe on the choppy waters of Green Bay.

As with all indigenous people, the Menomonee eventually succumbed to the white settlers' massive westward expansion and were forced to move numerous times until their final treaty with the Federal government granted them the land in the upper Wisconsin region, near what is now the town of Keshena.

Over the years, the Menominee nation grew and prospered, so much so, that due to their thriving timber industry they became completely self-sufficient and were therefore scheduled for termination – not termination in the sense of extinction, but in the legal definition of no longer having to be under federal government oversight. The Menominee ended their official tribal status in 1961. Their tribal property was converted to a new county within the state.

The move, however, proved to be a dismal failure. Their standard of living plummeted. Among other things, Menominee County was forced to close many schools as well as the lone hospital in the region. Menominee County, and thus the Menominee Nation, became the poorest and least populated in all of Wisconsin. Menominee Enterprises, Inc. (MEI), which oversaw the finances of the community, saw most of their assets evaporate. Funds that once totaled over \$10 million dwindled to \$300,000 by 1964.

In 1967 a plan was proposed by MEI to sell many of the former tribal lands in an attempt to replenish their treasury. The backlash by members of the Nation was immediate and swift. Headed by Ada Deer, the tribal community rallied and eventually earned back their right to be recognized as a Native American sovereign tribe.

John Windwalker was born into that Menominee Nation in 1964 – the lowest point in the tribe's storied history. From an early age, it was evident John was destined for a much different life than most in his community.

When he was seven, John was sent to the local store for milk and bread. As he pulled the milk from the cooler and closed the door, he turned and bumped into an old blind lady.

“I'm so sorry, ma'am.”

He jumped when, with a quickness that belied her years, she grabbed hold of his forearm. Despite her age and her perceived frailty, he was unable to pry himself loose from her grip. His struggle to free himself ended when he became spellbound by the old woman as she appeared to go into a deep trance. Her clouded, milk-colored eyes rolled back into her head, she moaned, and a voice arose from the old woman that was coarse and gravelly as if it belonged to another.

“You are destined to journey from this place and live in another land among the rice people. You will marry one from another nation. For many seasons, your desire for children will be denied. One day you will be blessed with a daughter. You will venture forth with your family and live near the Great Water. The water will be your lifeblood.

Your daughter will grow strong and tall and beautiful. She will soar high over the earth and be allied with The One of the ancient Mayan prophecies. Together, if they succeed, they will change the way of life for all nations.”

John stared at her open-mouthed. Great Water? Married? Children? These were not things a seven-year-old boy thought of or cared about.

As she finished speaking, she released her grip and wandered out of the store.

John, unaware he had dropped the milk and bread, bent down to pick them up and made his way to the counter. His eyes never left the old woman until she'd disappeared.

The store clerk, slouched behind the counter while leaning on his forearms, smiled as John shuffled toward the front of the store.

“Who was that crazy, old woman?” John asked as he placed the items on the counter.

“Her? That's Blind Sal. Most people call her Crazy Sal. She's always going off about one thing or another. Most of it's nonsense. Don't pay any attention to whatever she said. She's harmless.”

Picking up the milk and bread, the clerk added, “Just these two things?”

John nodded absently as he continued to stare toward the doorway, thinking the old woman might come back and accost him again.

As the years passed and John moved on to other things, the encounter became a vague, faded memory.

John's closest and richest relationship was with his grandfather. He taught John to fish and hunt and helped him build his first canoe. John could be found most days from late spring to early fall, paddling that canoe on Legend Lake or up and down the Fox River.

Though he cherished that canoe, it would be only the first of many watercraft John felt compelled to build. His grandfather's help, John constructed four more boats, each one bigger and grander than the last, starting with a rowboat while he was still in grade school and ending with a small sailboat his senior year.

However, John's parents made sure that he always balanced his love of the outdoors with his schoolwork. Despite their poverty and the notion that education was primarily for girls, John's family saw it as a way to a better life. He excelled in every class, earning straight A's, showing remarkable expertise in math and sciences in particular. John was always a level or two above the rest of the children his age and challenged his teachers to keep up with his insatiable love of learning. By his senior year of high school, he had completed several college-level advanced placement courses for calculus and physics, receiving A's in all of them.

His scholastic achievements led to a full academic scholarship to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he double-majored in Mechanical Engineering, and

Limnology and Marine Science. His dream never wavered. He combined his love of engineering with his love of the water in pursuit of his dream to build boats.

Upon graduation – and making the dean’s list with high honors – he accepted a job at the Bluewater Yacht Company, located in Mora, Minnesota, situated between the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers.

While working there, John met Mary Stone, an accountant in the company’s billing department. Mary was also of Native American descent, growing up in the Ojibwe Tribe in northeastern Minnesota. Like John, she’d been encouraged to do well in school and was the valedictorian of her class of twenty-six. Her love of music took her to Gustavus Adolphus College, where she majored in music theory and minored in accounting.

Her love of music wasn’t going to pay her bills, so she took a job at the yacht company in a low-level accounting position. One day when John came in to check on a deduction taken out of his paycheck, he locked eyes with Mary and was unable to speak, much less remember why he’d ventured into the office.

A few days, and numerous trips to the accounting office later, he worked up the courage to ask her out – dinner and a movie. On their second date, also dinner and a movie, John suggested they stop at a little coffee shop on their way home. After buying a hot chocolate for her and a decaf coffee for himself, he sat across from her and cleared his throat.

Mary watched him expectantly, waiting for what she assumed would be an important announcement. She wasn’t disappointed when John reached over and gently took hold of her hand.

“I know we’ve only gone out twice. But, I believe in following my heart. My instincts have always led me to do the right thing. And I believe with all my heart ... ”

John glanced around the nearly deserted restaurant while Mary held her gaze steadily on him.

“Yes, John?”

“Um... um...”

“What is it, John? You can tell me.”

“I think we should get married,” he blurted out.

He thought for sure she would think him crazy for suggesting something so radical after two dates. He struggled to look at her.

“Yes!” she cried.

“You do? Wow! That’s great! When?”

“Now!” Mary answered, expecting John to come to his senses and change his mind.

John smiled and said, “I love you...and that idea.”

That weekend John and Mary drove to the Ojibwe reservation and were married. Their honeymoon consisted of sleeping in an old rickety bed with a mattress that smelled faintly of mildew. Neither seemed to notice or care.

They settled into John's small house on the outskirts of town and talked nightly about having a large family. But as year after year rolled by, their attempts to have a child went unfulfilled. After they'd been married for eighteen years, they were blessed with a daughter.

They named her Grace Elizabeth Windwalker.

Like all parents, they thought her to be the most beautiful baby God ever created. She was a healthy, chubby-faced baby with thick raven hair. Her most remarkable feature, however, and the one everyone noticed and made mention of upon seeing her, were her eyes. They were the essence of a bright, light-blue, early-morning, cloudless sky.



When Grace was six months old, John and Mary went on an extended trip to show her off to their relatives. They visited Mary's family first. Everyone fawned over her, remarking how beautiful she was, but in particular, how taken they were with her gorgeous eyes.

Upon seeing her, the local shaman announced, "This beautiful young girl will one day surpass her parents. People will marvel at her skills. She will rise above many and be honored by some, envied by others. One day she will form an alliance that will be essential to our way of life."

John and Mary, as educated people, didn't believe in the nonsense of prophecies. John enjoyed hearing and retelling them, but solely as a form of entertainment. He believed them to be strictly folklore – tall tales – not something that might ever occur.

So when a similar encounter happened two weeks later at the Windwalker family get together on the Menominee reservation, Mary and John were stunned and mystified. John's entire family was sitting in his parent's backyard when Blind Sal wandered into the middle of their gathering. Upon laying her hands on Grace, her eyes rolled back in her head. Once again, John heard the deep gravelly voice that he'd relegated to the recesses of his memory as a boy.

The family members fell as silent as midnight on the prairie. A moment later, Blind Sal announced, "This young lady has the spirit of a great bird. I see her floating above a frozen pond. There is another, the Light Man, and they will join together as partners. If

they triumph, they will be responsible for putting great things into motion and fulfill the final ancient Mayan prophecy whose sign is the number eight.”

John and Mary looked at one another in astonishment. What they’d so easily dismissed just two weeks earlier was now being eerily repeated to everyone.

Blind Sal wasn’t through. Her next prediction came with a great warning, “People will be jealous of her and attempt to do her great harm. Others will mock her out of jealousy, and even those she once loved and trusted will turn against her. In her new life, evil will stalk her in an attempt to thwart her relationship and alliance with the Light Man.”

When Blind Sal finished speaking, she broke contact with young Grace and left just as stealthily as she’d entered.



Like most children who are raised in Minnesota, Grace grew up on skates. By the age of four, she was able to skate unaided on single blades. As a reward for her accomplishment, John and Mary took Grace to the Mall of America, where a temporary ice rink had been erected in the mall concert area.

Grace skated the entire morning, never stopping to rest. Her ease and poise drew the attention of the skaters and passers-by alike. John and Mary beamed as people smiled and pointed at their little one moving so fluidly and unselfconsciously around the rink. At lunchtime, when the rink was shut down for resurfacing, the Windwalkers took Grace to eat at one of the restaurants located on the upper level in the mall.

When they’d finished eating, John checked his watch and said, “The afternoon session is about to start. Let’s head back.”

Mary held one of Grace’s hands while John grasped the other as they headed through the maze of escalators and kiosks that lined the walkways. Strolling along one of the corridors, John and Mary’s attention was drawn to a kiosk that featured paintings and photographs by local artists.

A painting of sailboats set on Lake Vermillion drew John’s attention. At the same time, Mary drifted to the other side and became riveted by a landscape photograph of the Aurora Borealis.

After marveling at its exacting detail and brilliant colors of the painting, John moved to rejoin Mary and Grace but found only Mary.

“Mary, where’s Grace?”

“Oh, my God, I thought she was with you!” Mary cried.

After a quick scan of the area, John said to Mary, “Stay here, in case she comes back. I’m going to get help. It’ll be okay. Try to stay calm.”

John rushed to find the nearest mall security guard.

Mary attempted to stifle her panic by circling the kiosk and frantically scouring the nearby shops for any sign of their precious daughter.

Moments later, John returned with a security guard in tow.

“This is where we last saw her. I was standing here, while my wife was on the other side, both of us looking at the artwork when we realized that our daughter, Grace, wasn’t with either one of us.”

“Can you tell me what she was wearing?”

Mary’s words came out in a rush, “She had on a little red dress with white tights. She had a matching red and white bow in her black hair. She’s three and a half feet tall, black hair and light blue eyes.”

“Shoes?” the security guard asked.

“Shoes?” John asked, perplexed.

“What kind of shoes did she have on? Everything else can be covered or discarded. The shoes remain a constant.”

“You think someone might have taken her?” Mary asked, even more troubled.

“Ma’am, I’m just making sure we cover all our bases.”

The security guard clicked the talk button on his walkie-talkie and relayed the description the Windwalkers had given him.

For the next five minutes – an eternity to John and Mary - they waited near the kiosk, anxiously looking up and down the walkway, their world drifting farther away the longer they waited.

The security guards walkie-talkie chirped to life. They reflexively looked at the handheld device.

“A small girl fitting the description of the lost child has been found in All Things Native,” came the metallic, garbled voice.

“This way,” the security guard commanded as he ushered John and Mary to a store one hundred feet down the walkway. John stifled his plea to encourage the guard to walk faster when he saw Mary was already moving at a race-walking clip.

As they turned the corner and entered the store specializing in Native American artifacts, they saw Grace standing in the center of the room transfixed, staring longingly at a mobile hanging from the ceiling. Grace seemed unfazed about being in the store alone. Her sole focus was on a hoop, adorned with feathers, four feet above her head.

Mary rushed over and picked up Grace, swinging her around in circles.

“Grace, oh my baby, are you alright? You shouldn’t have walked away from us. We were so scared.”

John hurried over and hugged the two of them, adding, “You had us so worried. Don’t ever do that again.” The tone of his voice was more of relief than of reprimand.

Grace’s eyes never wavered from the object hanging from the ceiling.

The shopkeeper approached and said, “She just wandered in and hasn’t taken her eyes off the dreamcatcher since she entered the store.”

“The what?” John asked, not having noticed the mobile up until then.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Grace said. “It’s so pretty.”

John and Mary looked to where Grace was pointing. There, among the hundreds of Native American artifacts, was a hoop two feet in diameter. In its center was another, much smaller hoop, suspended by a series of overlapping latticework webbing in the shape of leaves, the tip of each anchored to the base of the larger ring. Attached to the lower third of the larger, outer ring were three groups of three bright blue feathers with flecks of white running down their spines. The rings, as well as the feathers, were the same color as Grace’s eyes.

They continued to stare at the object still locked in their family embrace, before John said, “That’s the most unusual dreamcatcher I’ve ever seen.”

“There are several interpretations for its meaning,” the owner said. “The one I like best is that it symbolizes how we are all interconnected, as one people, regardless of our ethnic background.”

“I was always told they’re supposed to be hung over the beds of the young,” John said, “so the webbing can catch all harm that might be in the air – including bad dreams – much like a spider web catches everything in its path.”

“It certainly is beautiful,” Mary added.

They stood in silence, admiring it.

“How much does it cost?” John asked.

“That one is twenty-four inches in diameter, so let me see. That is \$36 plus tax.”

“We’ll take it,” John said without hesitation.

When they got home, John got out his tools and hung the dreamcatcher directly over the section of the bed where their beautiful daughter laid her head each night.

From then on, on every holiday and Grace’s birthday, John and Mary gave her another Native American artifact, one more beautiful and stunning than the last. But in all those years, the dreamcatcher was, and always would be Grace’s favorite.



As Grace’s passion for figure skating grew, the Windwalkers decided to enroll her in group lessons. Grace flourished. Each lesson added a new element to her skating, whether it was subtle nuances of how to use her hands to accentuate a maneuver or land an incredibly tricky jump.

By the time she was seven, she’d competed in regional competitions, always finishing in one of the top three spots. After a while, her bedroom more closely resembled a trophy room than a place to sleep.

Her lessons and the various competitions brought her closer to Ashley Howard, a girl in her class. The two became best of friends.

Ashley, an only child like Grace, had her mother’s straight white-blonde hair and dark blue eyes and was also an accomplished skater. She and Grace often swapped the top spot on the winner’s podium from one tournament to the next.

Grace and Ashley were in the same grade, sharing the same classroom year after year, allowing them to spend every free second with one another. They studied together, sat next to each other at every opportunity in and out of the classroom, and slept over at one another’s house alternating Saturdays. Of even greater significance, they confided in each other their deepest secrets and darkest fears, as only best friends can.

Ashley’s mother, Karen Howard, lived vicariously through her daughter. Mr. Howard was seldom around as he traveled extensively for his job and was gone for weeks. This left plenty of time for Mrs. Howard to do what she most desired – to dote on Ashley. She welcomed the chance to perform chaperone duties on those rare weekends when the Windwalkers were tied up at work, ferrying both girls to practices and competitions. She took fierce pride at *always* being present for every one of Ashley’s events.

Mrs. Howard had a hand in every detail of Ashley’s skating. She chose what she wore – “We must have a different costume to wear for every competition.” She helped determine her skating routine – “I think a Lutze would fit better there than a toe loop.” Mrs. Howard was most firm about how Ashley conducted herself on and off the ice – “Make sure you look the judges in the eye before you bow and wave to everyone as you leave the ice. They must see that you were raised properly.”

Her overwhelming, overbearing demeanor became an ongoing joke between the girls. Ashley said that if it weren’t for Grace, she’d find the whole experience intolerable due to her mother’s smothering, controlling nature.

In particular, they found it amusing how fiercely Mrs. Howard took the judges' scores so personally as if every low mark was somehow an affront to her parenting skills.



As they moved on to middle school, things changed, especially for Grace. Her Native American heritage, which had never been a source of concern for any of her previous classmates, had become the focal point for mockery and derision from many of her new ones. They called her derogatory names, at first behind her back, but over time they grew bolder and mocked her to her face. They made overt racist gestures with someone breaking into a “war dance” or repeatedly patting the palm of their hand over their open mouth as if imitating some ancient tribal war cry.

At first, Ashley was Grace’s staunchest defender, but after several months and numerous personal verbal attacks whenever she tried to protect Grace, she became discouraged and told Grace she should just ignore it.

To compensate, Grace focused the anger and resentment she felt toward her narrow-minded classmates into her figure skating. As her drive and commitment increased, she excelled beyond expectations. Moving from competition to competition, her reputation grew as the finest skater in her age bracket.

When Grace won four competitions in a row, Ashley seemed truly happy for her. Mrs. Howard’s congratulations were far less heartfelt. When Grace won the fifth and sixth tournament as well, even Ashley’s enthusiasm for Grace’s success waned. Mrs. Howard stopped pretending to show any joy for Grace, often offering cursory and cold comments like, “How nice for you.”

The State winter-sectionals were at the end of March, on a weekend John and Mary were required to work. The boat shows from around the country were in full swing, necessitating every employee at the Bluewater plant to work extra hours to ensure everything went smoothly. A good showing at any one of the boat shows, especially in the middle and southern states, meant much to the financial welfare of the company.

Mrs. Howard offered to drive Grace to the Saturday competition held in St. Paul. As always, John and Mary were grateful. Mrs. Howard, who was usually as punctual as an atomic clock, ran late, and the two girls arrived at the arena with only minutes to spare.

Mrs. Howard pulled up to the entrance. “Why don’t you two run ahead and get your registration info and change,” Mrs. Howard said. “I’ll park, grab your skates and follow you in as quickly as I can.”

The girls sprinted to the registration booth, picked up their packets, and headed to the girls' locker room to change. Mrs. Howard raced in and placed the skates at the base of each girl's locker.

Grace and Ashley hurried out to the ice to get in some last-second work and warm up before they'd be called to do their routines. As Grace removed her skate guards, she noticed they appeared to have been put away improperly – very much unlike her usual meticulous nature when it came to taking care of her skates. Being in a hurry, she gave it little thought.

During her warm-up, Grace stumbled a couple of times and was unable to land any jumps. She chalked it up to nerves, positive that when the time came to perform, she would be fine and execute the routine that had become second nature over the past few months.

Ashley, one of the better skaters, was ceded a position near the end of the competition. Her performance was nearly flawless – a shaky landing and a less than perfect line were the only things downgraded. She ended with a 4.8, which put her in first place.

Grace followed. Her usual performance was marred time and again as she fell twice, and nearly a third, on moves she always performed without showing a hint of their true difficulty. As she skated off the ice, she knew it was the first time in over three months, she would not be receiving the first place trophy. She convinced herself it was because she'd wanted it too much, that she'd tried too hard. She was crestfallen.

Despite her overwhelming disappointment, she was happy for Ashley. If she didn't win, she was grateful that her best friend had.

Mrs. Howard was so happy, she started jumping up and down as if she'd won the lottery, which brought stares and laughter from the people in the immediate area of the arena. Ashley was mortified with her mother's antics, but even more so when she noticed the attention they drew.

“Mom, settle down. You're embarrassing me.”

“But dear, don't you know what this means? A trip to the state finals. You won't have to go through qualifying like most people. Isn't that great?” As she said this, Mrs. Howard glanced in Grace's direction.

“Yes, but people are staring. Get a hold of yourself.”

“I'm just so happy for you. You've worked so hard to get to this point. Why shouldn't I be excited?”

“Ugh!” Ashley threw up her hands and walked away, heading to the locker room.

Once inside, she turned to Grace and offered her condolences.

“I'm so sorry.”

“Thanks,” Grace said, so dejected that she had trouble looking Ashley in the eye.

“What happened out there?”

“I’m not sure. Everything seemed right. Maybe I was trying too hard. I’m not sure.”

“Well, you can still get to the state finals this summer. You’ll have to compete in the preliminaries. But...”

“Yeah, you’re right. I am happy for you. You were great out there. That may have been the best I’ve ever seen you skate.”

“Thanks. Coming from you, that means a lot. Let’s get going. My mom wants to take us out to celebrate, if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure. I’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

At dinner, Mrs. Howard went on and on about how awesome Ashley had skated, showing little regard for Grace’s feelings. Ashley tried to get her mother to change the subject but without success. The girls were relieved when the meal was over, and they could leave. They climbed into the back of Mrs. Howard’s car and talked about things that were truly important to seventh-grade girls – school and the cute boys they knew there.



Like most middle schools, Grace’s school was a place where kids were fast approaching their teenage years where insecurities flare, and cliques are formed. The “beautiful kids” discover one another while the geeks and nerds form a second group. Very few kids can bridge that gap, nor attempt to do so.

Grace was part of the group that included neither. She was part of the outcasts – the untouchables – those children that were seen as unworthy for any number of reasons. Her ancestral background precluded her from being a part of the beautiful group, while at the same time, she wasn’t seen as bookish enough to be a part of the other. Ironically, she was the most beautiful and accomplished twelve-year-old in the school – her grade point average ranked her number one in the class, and she demonstrated the athletic ability of someone twice her age.

Anthony Robinson, another outcast, was in many respects in the same situation as Grace. Anthony was a special needs student, being wheelchair-bound due to transverse myelitis – an inflammation of the spinal cord. The disease struck him when he was ten and relegated him to a wheelchair ever since. He’d been an accomplished student and athlete, which made his disease all the more demoralizing. After suffering through the usual stages of anger and depression, Anthony made steady progress. His grades improved, and his sense of humor, which had always been one of the strong points, returned.

Few students wanted anything to do with him, often calling him names behind his back – “freak” being the most common. But Anthony, mature beyond his years, realized that most of what was said about him was due to fear and ignorance. He knew his fellow students believed that if something like transverse myelitis could happen to someone like Anthony, it could certainly happen to them.

As a thirteen-year-old seventh grader – losing a year in school to the disease – Anthony anointed himself the school’s unofficial anti-bullying enforcer. When he saw a situation or heard one student bullying another who was weaker, or not one of the beautiful people, or who might exhibit an odd or unusual manner, Anthony came to their defense. If a verbal put down or a hard penetrating stare of reproach didn’t work, he’d play up his condition to scare the would-be-bully away.

“The doctors aren’t sure if what I have is contagious,” he’d say. “They think it might be an airborne disease. Or that it might be passed by bodily fluids, like saliva. Nobody knows for sure. If I were you, I think I’d move on. You certainly don’t want to get too close.”

He knew what he had couldn’t be spread by any of those means, but he loved the look on the bully’s face when he suggested to them that it might.

As the would-be-bully hurried away, Anthony would turn to the person he’d just befriended and give a knowing wink.



After sectionals, Ashley’s newfound fame spread throughout the school. One afternoon, she was approached by the school’s power clique of beautiful and wealthy girls.

“Hi, aren’t you Ashley Howard?” the ringleader, Becky Thomas, asked.

“Yes,” Ashley answered with a voice, shaking with uncertainty.

“Well, you probably know who we are.”

Ashley offered a tentative nod.

“We heard what you did last weekend, winning the sectionals and all.”

Becky looked at the other three girls who were a part of the clique, who nodded.

“We thought we’d do you the favor of letting you hang out with us. After all, we are the coolest girls in the school.”

Ashley was stunned. She’d just been asked to be a part of the elite clique. Her mind went blank as she smiled and nodded in agreement.

“We’ll let you know where we are going to get together later. See ya’,” Becky sang, and they turned and walked away as one.

“Excuse me,” Ashley said as she found her voice, “what about my friend, Grace? Can I bring her, too?”

The girls glanced at one another and laughed.

“We don’t hang with those kind of people. Are you in or not?”

“Ah, yeah, sure.”

“TTYL,” Becky said and strolled away.

That night Ashley discussed what had happened with her mom.

“You know the girls’ group with Becky, Abbey, Charlize, and Bethany? They asked me to join their group.”

“That’s marvelous, dear.”

“I asked if they would include Grace, and they just laughed.”

“That’s too bad,” said Mrs. Howard without a bit of sincerity. “You know, dear, getting ahead in this life is about making the right kind of friends. Your dad always refers to it as networking. You could do very well for yourself if you hung around with a better breed of people. If you know what I mean.”

Ashley stared at her mom, bewildered, trying to determine if her mom held the same prejudices that some of her newer classmates exhibited.

“What do you mean by that?”

“We all know that there is an advantage to be with the right group of people, is all I’m saying. You would be wise to align yourself with those that might do you the most good down the road.”

“And what about Grace?”

“What about her?”

“It just doesn’t seem right to dump her as a friend.”

“You don’t have to ‘dump’ her. You can still be friends. You’re merely broadening your group of friends. That’s all. Besides, with recent events, you have moved way beyond her anyway. You’re the district champion. You need to be around people who can help you get where you want to go.”

Ashley was conflicted. She knew what her mother said made sense. But she also knew how much her friendship with Grace had meant to the two of them over the years. Maybe she could pull this off – be friends with the new girls and still have time for Grace.

Over the next few months, Grace felt Ashley pull away from her more and more as she spent every free second in school with her new friends.

Adding to her feeling of loneliness and isolation were the times Grace was bullied or made fun of and had no one to turn to and help her deal with the situation. What hurt

Grace the most was when Ashley's new friends joined in the name-calling while Ashley stood idly by, refusing to defend Grace, or worse when Ashley joined in the laughter at Grace's expense.

At night, Grace often cried herself to sleep, and at school, she felt alienated and alone. Although she felt she could talk to her parents about most things, this didn't seem to be one of those. After school, she'd run home, announce that she had a lot of homework, and close her door.

On those days she had figure skating lessons, she made her way to the rink alone and was physically and emotionally isolated from the rest of the skaters now that Ashley had surpassed her in the state rankings.

How could this all have happened seemingly overnight? And who can I turn to work my way through what I'm feeling?

Late in the school year, Grace, standing at her locker, exchanging her science for her math book, was approached by Ashley and her four new friends laughing and gesturing towards Grace. Ashley, who had always remained in the background, especially when they were around Grace, was near the front.

"Hey, Squaw, what's up?" asked Becky.

The girls, including Ashley, howled with laughter.

Grace ignored the taunts and continued to rearrange the books in her locker.

"Hey, there's going to be a pow-wow later, are you scheduled to dance at it?" Bethany said with a laugh.

Grace continued to act as if she was the sole person in the hallway, focused instead on the imaginary mess she was straightening up in front of her.

"Hey, Chief, leave your tongue in your wigwam?" Abbey chided.

Grace slammed her locker and took a menacing step toward the pack.

They moved back as one, as if they were a part of a chorus line.

Becky found her voice and chuckled uncomfortably. "Careful ladies, it looks like she might scalp us," waving her hands in mock terror.

Anthony, who was motoring down the hall in his wheelchair, appeared to lose control of the joystick when he was about five feet from the pack.

Swearing, he yelled, "Look out, I think this thing is broken!" He wheelchair turned and headed straight for the middle of the girls, scattering them. Bethany stumbled and fell into an open locker, while Ashley tripped over her and landed hard on her tailbone.

"Sorry, girls," Anthony said unapologetically. "Sometimes, this thing has a mind of its own."

Becky looked down at Anthony and mumbled, "Freak."

As she moved to get around the wheelchair, she stepped near Grace only to find a well-placed elbow in her solar plexus knocking all the wind out of her. As Abbey and Charlize rushed to her aid, Grace moved her foot into their path, catching Abbey's foot, causing her to trip, crashing headfirst into Becky. Charlize, unable to stop, landed on top of the other two.

Grace leaned in and whispered, "Hope you sleep well tonight. My people are known for their stealth. Just so you know, we don't scalp people anymore, but in the morning, the first thing you should do is check your mirrors. You may not like your new haircuts."

Becky, Charlize, and Abbey shrunk in terror, their eyes as wide as water ski tubes.

Grace turned to Anthony and smiled. She mouthed, "Thank you," touched his arm gently and walked on to her next class.

For the rest of the school year, she and Anthony found time to spend with one another and commiserate.

"You know, things are going to get better for both of us," Anthony assured her.

He said this repeatedly, and each time he had a look about him that told her he knew something that she didn't.

Being comforted by someone who'd been relegated to a wheelchair for the rest of his life snapped her out of her depression. She laughed and enjoyed life once more.



During the early summer months, as Grace prepared for the State Figure Skating Championship competition, she and Anthony spent hours talking with one another. He was encouraging, upbeat, and funny. As the championship grew closer, he became her greatest strength, encouraging her, assuring her, and filling her with the most positive feelings of confidence.

When the day of the State Finals arrived, Grace came face to face with Ashley. They'd been assigned lockers adjacent to each another. Grace acted as if Ashley wasn't there, while Ashley surreptitiously watched Grace the entire time, afraid, as if Grace might attack.

Ashley sheepishly said, "I'm sorry. I really am."

Grace kept her attention focused on the competition sheet.

"I know I was wrong. I got caught up in the so-called fame and all the attention. I'd like to be friends again."

Grace did a slow turn and looked at her. Her expression, one of pity more than anger. “What? Your new friends aren’t exactly *friends*?”

Ashley shook her head and cried.

Grace’s anger softened. She reached out to take Ashley’s hand.

“Most of all, I’m sorry about my mom.”

Grace pulled her hand back as if she’d just touched a red-hot furnace.

“Your mom?” Grace asked, confused.

“I found out on the way over here that my mom had tampered with your skates before the sectionals.”

“What?” Grace said.

“When we ran in to register, she took your skates and dulled the edges on the concrete.”

“But... how did you find that out?”

“We got into a fight on the way here when she started telling me all the things she’d done and sacrificed to help advance my so-called career. When she got to the part where she intentionally got us to the competition late so that she could have an excuse to send us ahead, I lost it. I’ve been screaming my lungs out for the past twenty minutes.

“She threatened to take me back home and skip the contest today. I told her to go ahead because I knew me missing this would bother her far more than it would me.”

Ashley paused and looked away when Grace continued to stare at her open-mouthed.

Grace grabbed her skates and calmly said, “We’ll – and when I say we’ll, I mean you, me, your mom, and my parents – will talk about this after the competition. Good luck,” Grace added half-heartedly said as she got up to leave.

“Hang on,” Ashley whispered.

Grace stopped but refused to turn and face her.

“What?” Grace asked, annoyed.

“You’d better check your skates again,” Ashley said, shame coloring her every word. “My mom was in here earlier when we were meeting with the judges and the competition committee.”

Grace examined her skates. There was a hairline crack in the housing just above the blade where it connects to the boot. She tested it with her hand and was able to wiggle the blade a few centimeters side to side.

Ashley dropped her head, started to cry once more, and hurried out of the locker room, leaving her skates sitting on the floor in front of her stall.

Grace rushed out to the arena and desperately looked for her parents. Catching sight of her mom, she waved frantically, motioning her to the floor from her place in the stands. Seeing the look on Grace's face, John trailed two steps behind.

When they reached the floor, Grace burst into tears. Mary reached over the boards and embraced her daughter. John stood behind Mary, waiting for the tears to subside or at least recede.

As Grace settled down, John asked her, "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

In answer, Grace held up her skate.

Bewildered, Mary and John shook their heads uncomprehending.

"Loo...loo...look," she got out, pointing at the place where the skate was cracked.

"How did that happen?" John asked.

"Mrs. How...How...Howard."

"Mrs. Howard?" they asked as one.

John sought clarification. "Mrs. Howard? She broke your skate?"

Tears flowed again as Grace nodded.

"Okay. Try to calm down. We'll fix this somehow."

John took the skate from Grace and ran to the atrium to an official. When he explained what happened, the man went behind the counter and pulled out a pair of skates in Grace's size.

"These have just been sharpened. It's the best I can do."

"Thanks," John said gratefully, turned, and sprinted back to the arena.

He handed the skates to Grace, who moved to a nearby bench and laced them up, tugging violently on the strings to force them to conform to her feet. She flexed her legs, then shook out her arms to leach the tension from her body. She heard her name called to perform and moved out onto the ice.

She loosened up some more by skating around, desperate to adjust to the skates. They didn't feel or fit quite right. They'd been broken in but in the wrong places. She felt defeated. *What's the use?* Despair gripped her very core.

A face flashed into her mind – Anthony. She remembered his encouraging words, his positive attitude. She pictured him sitting in his wheelchair and knew what she was experiencing was insignificant compared to what he went through on a daily basis.

She moved to center ice and posed. The first strains of her music started. She glided and spun and jumped, and landed smoothly, never missing a step while staying perfectly in sync with her music. As her routine ended, she spun in place, whirling faster and faster as she raised her arms, becoming a blur as her music crescendoed. At the music's caesura, she stopped as still as a statue, signaling the end of her performance.

As one, the crowd jumped to its feet, roaring its approval. The boisterous cheers, clapping, and loud whistling lasted for over five minutes.

She skated to the contestants' area and waited for her scores.

5.2, exceptionally high grades for anyone in her age bracket.

She had to wait through six more contestants, but from the minute she'd ended her performance, there was little doubt who the winner would be.

Ashley refused to skate, but she also refused to leave the arena, forcing her mother to wait for the inevitable confrontation.

When the ceremonies ended, the judges and officials met with the Windwalkers and Mrs. Howard, who denied tampering with Grace's skates.

Grace continued to stare at Ashley, willing her to come forward and share what she'd told her in the locker room. Ashley never spoke.

The administrators turned to the Windwalkers and announced, "Although the skate looks like it *has* been tampered with, there is no proof that Mrs. Howard had anything to do with this. It's your daughter's word against hers. We're sorry. But we're also ecstatic that Grace is our new State Champion and look forward to seeing her in the years to come, and hopefully, one day in the Olympics."

The officials and judges headed back into the arena.

Mrs. Howard offered the Windwalkers a smug look, grabbed Ashley by the forearm, and pulled her toward the exit. Ashley yanked her arm free, turned to the Windwalkers, and then made eye contact with Grace.

"I truly am sorry, but I couldn't do that to my mother in front of the judges, no matter how much of a witch she has become."

She turned her attention to John and Mary.

"Everything Grace said is true. But what is even worse is the way we've treated her at school. I'll always be sorry for that and will ask her and your forgiveness every day."

Tears flowed as Mrs. Howard grabbed her arm once more, and dragged her now relenting toward the car.

On the way home, Grace poured out her heart to her parents and explained everything that'd happened since she started junior high, going into great detail about what had transpired since the sectional championships.

John and Mary spent that evening talking about their future and what was best for Grace.

The next day, John searched for a new job on-line. A month later, an opening for an engineer occurred at a yacht builder in eastern Wisconsin. He also petitioned the courts to officially change their family name to Walker, hoping that in whatever new community they moved, Grace would not be subjected to the bullying she'd endured the last few years.

In early December 2012, the Walker family moved to a new home and a new job in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, on the shores of Lake Michigan.

Little did they know that things were about to get even more interesting.

AJ



**A Short Story Prequel to
The 8th Mayan Prophecy**

AJ

Andrea Janikowski – Andy to her friends – was forty-two years old when AJ – Arthur J. Janikowski Jr. – was born. She and her husband, Arthur Sr., had two other children. Annie, the oldest, was twenty-one-years old when AJ was born with two kids of her own, Ariel and Aaron. They lived in Milwaukee with her husband, Adam. So AJ was already an uncle the moment his head popped out of the womb. The Janikowski's second child, Alvin, was eighteen years AJ's senior. He'd left home as soon as he turned eighteen to join the Marines, never graduating high school.

At family get-togethers, whenever someone would mention how cute their little towhead, AJ, was, Andy would refer to him as, "our miracle baby," at which point AJ's siblings would snicker and refer to him as their parents' "mistake baby."

Arthur, Sr., forty-five when AJ was born, moved his family out of Milwaukee when its manufacturing base dried up faster than a puddle in the Mojave Desert. They moved to Manitowoc, where he found work at a small manufacturing plant as a tool and diemaker. That was the summer AJ turned eight and about to enter the third grade.

AJ, though technically not an only child, exhibited all of those traits. He was able to communicate easily with adults, yet was often pampered as if he were the baby of the family, which, of course, he was.

Because of his out-going, spirited personality, he was quickly accepted by his classmates and soon became *the* kid to be around. He was an exceptional athlete, excelling at every sport he tried, especially baseball and hockey. Once the baseball season ended, AJ prayed for the weather to turn cold enough to freeze the lakes and ponds so he could get back on the ice. Whether it was pick-up games of hockey or broomball, AJ often competed against kids two or three years older than he, yet proved capable of holding his own.

His most endearing trait, however, was a teller of tall tales in which he often ended up mixing his metaphors. He could spin any one of his experiences into an epic fable that had everyone within earshot doubled-up with laughter. With each subsequent retelling, the stories were further embellished until they reached mythic proportions. A home run he'd hit that morning, which had cleared the fence by a couple of feet, had landed twenty feet beyond the wall that same afternoon, and forty feet beyond it the next morning. Give him a week, and it would've cleared the fence at Miller Park, the home of his favorite team, the Milwaukee Brewers.

The thing that made people laugh the hardest, however, was his self-deprecating humor. He repeatedly made himself the brunt of his own jokes and, thus, more loveable and endearing.

School, however, was AJ's Achilles' heel. He was certainly bright enough, just not motivated. His lone incentive to do well in school was the condition his parents imposed before he could participate in sports – decent grades.

This predicament led him to seek out the smartest kid in his class, Nick Jensen. Nick was the opposite side of the AJ coin. Nick sailed through every subject but struggled at sports. A sacred alliance was formed.

AJ first recognized the advantages of a potential partnership with Nick when AJ was in the midst of a heated discussion with a group of boys concerning the current NHL season. A debate arose regarding the current leading scorer in the league. AJ, as usual, in the heart of the action. Nick was sitting idly by listening to the discussion when AJ spun on him, and asked, "Hey, Brainiac, who's leading the NHL in goal scoring?"

"It's Alexander Ovechkin of the Capitals with fifty-two goals. Ovechkin picked up two more last night. But the points leader is Evgeni Malkin of the Penguins. After Malkin, there's Ovechkin, Crosby, Datsyuk, the Devil's Zach Parise, Kovalchuk, Getzlaf, Iginla, Savard, and Backstrom."

The group gawked at Nick with newfound admiration and respect, but none more than AJ.

"See, I told you guys it's Ovechkin," AJ said triumphantly. When a couple of his buddies started to protest, he put up his hand as if he were stopping traffic. "The argument was, 'who's the leading *goal* scorer right now,' not who's leading in points. As my new good friend here just told us, it's Ovechkin."

He turned once more to look at Nick, who nodded. From that moment, any time there needed to be a definitive answer concerning any sports topic, all eyes focused on Nick.

That same afternoon, as school was letting out, AJ waited for Nick and pulled him aside. "Hey, Brainiac, I could use your help in school," AJ said to Nick after making sure no one else could hear them talking. "You know, I'm not the brightest bulb in the drawer."

"Or the sharpest knife on the tree," Nick fired back, good-naturedly.

As part of their new alliance, AJ made sure Nick was included in every game that AJ played in, often picking him as the last member of his team.

Nick tutored AJ, which most times meant doing AJ's homework for him. As scheduled test days approached, Nick would drum into AJ the essential facts and

figures that were sure to be on the exam. Thus, they both received what they craved most – Nick was included in every game and sporting event, while AJ did well enough in school to satisfy his parents' academic demands.

As the years and grade levels rolled on, the two became inseparable. They enjoyed the same movies and sports and, as diehard Packer fans, spent many Sunday afternoons watching football games at AJ's house with his dad, Arthur, Sr.

They also loved video games and went at one another like the fiercest of rivals instead of best friends as if their lives depended on it while playing the most up-to-date hockey, football, baseball, and basketball versions available. Nick, although not much of an athlete on the field, excelled as one in computer games.

In fifth grade, their already solid friendship was cemented even stronger. AJ, who loved practical jokes, even if he was on the receiving end of them, near the end of the winter, decided to play one on Nick. The children placed their coats, gym shoes, boots, and backpacks in a coatroom that ran the length of the back wall and was sealed off by accordion style doors. Nick's designated hanger and shelf area were in the very center of the closet. AJ recruited another classmate, Mike Snyder, to keep Nick engaged in a conversation about the New Jersey Devils' playoff run, while AJ went about his dirty work.

AJ unzipped the large compartment of Nick's backpack and unscrewed the top of his water bottle that contained apple juice. He placed the backpack on the shelf and strung the end of a small piece of string from its uppermost, curved handle to the door he'd closed. When he finished securing the line, he slipped out of the closet, closed the other door, and walked casually back to his seat.

Their first subject each day was Math. As part of the joke, AJ had slipped Nick's math book out from inside his desk and put it in his own. AJ knew when Nick couldn't find it, he'd assume he'd left it in his backpack and go in search of it. When Nick pulled open both doors, the string would yank the pack off the shelf, and the contents, including the opened juice, would spill on Nick.

The plan was flawless. At least it was until Nick realized he couldn't find his book and raised his hand to catch Ms. Anders' attention. "Yes, Nicholas," she asked, noting Nick waving his hand frantically.

"I think I left my math book in my backpack. May I go get it, please?"

This was the place where AJ's plan went sideways. He hadn't been paying attention the day before when Ms. Anders had complained there was way too much wandering about in her classroom.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas. Remember what I said yesterday? No one will leave his or her desk once we've started a lesson. You'll have to sit there and make it up later."

Ms. Anders may as well have told Nick he had a date with a guillotine. Tears welled in his eyes. He wiped them away as fast as he could as he stared at his desk.

Seeing the hurt and not wishing to subject her favorite student to taunts from the other kids, she relented. "I'll tell you what, Nicholas, I'll get it for you. Center spot in the closet, yes?"

A much-relieved Nick nodded. "It's the New Jersey Devils one. It's black and red."

AJ's head snapped up. He watched in horror as Ms. Anders made her way through the aisle toward the coatroom. Realizing his joke was about to take on more ominous consequence than making a fool of Nick, he wondered what he could do. His mind went blank. He turned to Nick and shook his head vigorously. His desperate attempt to convey the message to stop Ms. Anders from retrieving Nick's book only brought a baffled look from his friend.

"No, no, no, don't let her get your book," AJ whispered to Nick. At the same time, AJ opened his desk and pulled out Nick's math book.

When he saw his math book in AJ's hand, Nick was even more puzzled.

His bafflement ended when he heard Ms. Anders scream as she opened the coatroom door, and Nick's bag spilled, dousing her with pencils, a fruit snack, and the bottle of juice. The contents splashed over Ms. Anders's skirt, she turned a deep shade of scarlet, spun, and fixed her angry gaze on Nick.

"Is this your backpack, young man?"

"Yes, Ms. Anders," Nick said, his head bowed, and his eyes fixed on the toes of his shoes.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, Ms. Anders."

"Did you rig this to fall when the door was opened?"

Nick remained silent and glanced at AJ. Nick knew punishment was sure to follow. Complicating the situation, the recreation league broomball championship game was being held after school. If AJ had to serve detention, he'd miss the game, and their team had no chance to win. On the other hand, Nick knew he could be replaced as the team's goalie, and they could still win the championship. Every game this year had been a shootout, high scoring affairs. Nick was aware that he was one of the poorer goalies in the league. But it made little difference because AJ often outscored the other team single-handedly.

"Sorry, Ms. Anders, I was tryin' to play a joke on AJ. I know he's always the first to get his stuff out of the closet for gym class. He played a joke on me a couple days ago, and I was tryin' to get even. But, when I couldn't find my Math book, my mind

kind of froze and forgot that I'd set it up 'til I heard you scream. I'm really, really sorry."

"That will cost you detention tonight. You will stay after school and write an essay on the consequences of your actions and practical jokes in particular."

"Yes, Ms. Anders."

Relief flooded AJ's face. When Ms. Anders left to clean the juice from her skirt, he turned to Nick. "Thanks, buddy. I owe you big time. I'm sorry, but ya know, the game and all."

"Yeah, well you'd better win, that's all I gotta say."

"For sure," AJ assured him. "It'll be like stealin' cake from a baby."

"Or candy from a cookie jar," Nick replied, shaking his head.

Later that night, AJ called Nick and gave him the good news. Their team had won the championship, 18-16. Nick was thrilled, but the cherry on top of the sundae was the knowledge that he'd never given up more than ten goals in a game, which meant – at least in his mind – he wasn't the worst goalie in the league.



In late April, during their seventh-grade year, AJ took part in an Easter egg hunt run by the city and held at Washington Park near downtown Manitowoc. Unlike most Easter egg hunts, however, the big prize wasn't the amount of candy or eggs the kids could accumulate. Every year the Rotary Club donated the grand prize, a certificate to Hathaway's bike shop where a new bike would be fitted to the winner.

Any child ten to fifteen years old who elected to participate was corralled behind the park's starting line until it seemed like every elected city official gave a speech. Finally, an air horn would sound, releasing the kids, who sprinted in search of a special plastic egg that held the key to finding the bike. Each child was allowed to take one egg and one egg only. Inside of the plastic shell were a series of clues that led to the whereabouts of the grand prize.

For the last two years, AJ was always one of the first to find an egg but the last to figure out what the clues meant. This year he had a plan to make sure there was a much different outcome. Nick, whose grandparents – more specifically, his grandfather – wouldn't allow him to participate, was recruited to take part in AJ's grand scheme. The plan was: AJ would find the egg, call Nick at home from his mom's cell phone, and have Nick decipher the clues. Once the certificate for the bike was in

AJ's hands, it was agreed that they'd share the bike with AJ keeping it one week and Nick the next.

As he bounced up and down on his toes, waiting for the air horn to sound, AJ scoured the grounds for one of the plastic eggs. As the last of the local politicians droned on about the history of the event and such nonsense, AJ spied one of the eggs and focused his attention on that spot. When the horn sounded, AJ was the first one to find an egg. He pulled apart the plastic, pulled out the paper with the clues, and dialed Nick's home number.

"You ready, buddy?" AJ asked, foregoing any greeting when Nick picked up the phone.

"Sure. What is it?"

"It says: 'Look to our Founding Fathers on your quest.

As for all the other ways, ignore the rest.

On the Father of our Country, it will not be found.

Nor Poor Richard, although his wisdom's sound.

Do not look to ancient members of our Supreme Court,

But our Constitution's document's main support,

Also, a generous baker you might want to be like.

So good luck, find the store and unlock your bike.'

"That's all there is," AJ said as he finished reading

Nick said, "Read it one more time, please."

When AJ finished rereading it, there was a brief pause on the other end of the phone. "Okay, it's at a store that makes keys, like a locksmith shop, on 13th and Hamilton."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Trust me. Now hurry," Nick's voice carried a note of urgency.

AJ took off flying, passing two other kids who were wandering in that same general direction. When he reached the corner of 13th street, he hung a sharp left and headed toward Hamilton St. As he sprinted down the street, he glanced around looking for a store with a sign advertising "keys made." As he neared the corner, he saw a locksmith shop across the street and dashed for it, heading between two parked cars. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a vehicle heading north on Hamilton, directly into his path. The driver hit his brakes and horn simultaneously while skidding toward AJ. There was no way the driver could avoid hitting him. Without a break in his stride, AJ jumped and slid across the hood of the car as if he were sliding into second base, then continued on a dead run the moment his feet hit the ground again.

As he approached the store, he noticed a man smiling at him.

“Hi,” AJ said between breaths. “I’m here for the bike.”

“Good work, son. What’s your name?”

“AJ, Arthur Janikowski.”

“Well, AJ, Arthur Janikowski, you are this year’s winner of a brand new bike. Congratulations. Here’s all the pertinent information and forms for your parents to sign.”

“Thanks,” AJ said. “When can I pick it up?”

“It’s in the packet, but we would like you there at 6:00 P.M. Bring one of your parents or a guardian with you to make it all legal.”

As soon as the man walked away, AJ called Nick.

“We won, buddy. Nice job.” He was as excited as Nick had ever heard him.

“Wow! That’s great. And thanks.”

“How’d you figure it out so fast?” AJ asked with a touch of awe.

“It was simple, actually. The first clue said Founding Fathers. The streets downtown and within walking or running distance of the park are, Franklin, Washington, Marshall, Hamilton, Jay, and Madison. Washington was the father of our country, Franklin wrote “Poor Richards Almanac,” Marshall and Jay were Supreme Court Justices and Madison wrote the Constitution. That left Hamilton. Madison, Hamilton, and Jay wrote the “Federalist Papers” in support of the constitution. We’ve already ruled out Jay. Madison was the Constitution’s main architect, but its chief defender writing about 65% of the articles defending the Constitution, was Hamilton.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever. How ‘bout the locksmith part?” AJ said, cutting off Nick’s explanation of what AJ thought was ancient U.S. history.

“A generous baker refers to a baker’s dozen, which is thirteen. So I figured the store that unlocks your bike probably meant a key maker or locksmith. Thus, 13th and Hamilton and the locksmith’s.”

“That’s brilliant.”

“So when can you pick it up?”

“Tomorrow. I’m supposed to bring one of my parents along. You wanna go, too?”

“Sure. I’ll ask grandma if that’d be okay.”

The next day at school, and at every free chance, AJ and Nick talked about the kind of bike they hoped to get. They agreed it should be one that they could use at the skateboard and bike park. They were eager for the school day to end (something highly unusual for Nick) and willed the clock to move faster.

At 5:40, AJ and his dad picked up Nick, drove downtown, and arrived at the store a half-hour before the designated time. The Mayor, three city council members, the owners of the store, and two TV crews from Green Bay greeted them.

The Mayor stood front and center and put his arm around AJ as he talked. "This is Arthur Janikowski, this year's winner in our annual Easter bike give-away," the Mayor said to the twenty or so people who had arrived for the bike presentation.

"Tell me, Arthur, how did you figure it out so quickly? That was the fastest we've ever had anybody retrieve the envelope. In fact, I'm told it beat the old record by over five minutes."

AJ was amazed that the Mayor could talk so clearly with his magazine smile plastered to his face. AJ, as usual, didn't have any trouble grabbing the spotlight. He smiled angelically directly into the cameras and, in a clear, distinct voice, said, "When we were lined up before the horn sounded, I looked 'round the area to see the best place to hide an egg." He added a gesture of holding his hand above his eyes as if to shield them from the sun as he moved his head from side to side, surveying the crowd.

"I saw somethin' bright 'n' shiny colored hidden deep in one of the bushes 'bout twenty feet away. But I kept remindin' myself, all that glitters isn't all it's cracked up to be." He stopped moving his head as if he'd spotted an object in the distance and pointed at it with his free hand. His other hand never left its perch atop his forehead.

"I stared at that spot, so I wouldn't lose it while someone kept talkin', goin' on and on and on. I didn't think he was ever gonna stop."

The Mayor laughed, "That someone who was talking was me." This brought a chuckle from everyone in attendance.

When everyone stopped laughing, AJ resumed his story. "As soon as the horn sounded, I was off." He mimicked running.

"Sure enough, it was one of those plastic eggs." He reached down and snatched up an imaginary egg and held it high above his head. Everyone cheered.

"How did you decipher the clues so fast? Are you a history buff?" the Mayor asked as the cheers subsided.

"Me? Nah."

The mayor looked taken aback. "Well then, how did you know where to go?"

"I called my friend Nick there." He pointed at Nick standing in the crowd. "He's good at puzzles and riddles and stuff, a real Steinway. So, I read him the clues and inna few seconds he told me where the envelope would be hidden. I sprinted down the street. Jumped over a car comin' down the road and ran over to that guy there, and he handed me the envelope with the stuff in it." AJ finished, still pointing at the council member who'd congratulated him and handed him the packet.

It took a few seconds for AJ to notice that the Mayor and all the council members looked shocked. He, along with people in the crowd, took in the committee members expressions and knew something was wrong.

“Excuse me, son, but did you say you had help solving the riddle?”

“Yeah, my buddy Nick. He’s standin’ right there,” he answered a little less enthusiastically while pointing his finger at Nick.

“Did you not listen at all to any of what I said before the egg hunt?”

“No, sir. I just stared at that egg in the bush and blocked out everythin’ else. I’m good at that.”

“So, you didn’t hear me say that there was no help asked or given to any of the contestants?”

“No, I was just... ‘scuse me? Did you say no help?” It had finally dawned on AJ that he’d admitted to breaking one of the rules of the contest and did so on local TV.

The Mayor called a quick conference with the council members and the store’s owner. The discussion became very animated. The Mayor looked up every once in a while to see that the TV cameras were locked on their session and sensed they were most likely taking a close up of him.

After five minutes, which seemed much longer than that to AJ, the Mayor stepped in front of the cameras and announced, “We truly appreciate this boy’s honesty. It’s a trait we in public office prize highly. So, we’re going to award him a gift certificate to the store for \$100. But, because the rules are very specific about a contestant receiving no help in solving the riddle, we will not be awarding a bike this year. Instead, we will be offering two next year.” The Mayor’s last remark sounded like he’d just declared that no one would pay property taxes for the upcoming year.

“Thank you all for coming.”

The council members and the Mayor left faster than a sneeze.

“But ... but ... oh, darn!” AJ said to the Mayor and council members’ backs.

A slight smile tugged at the corner of Nick’s mouth. “Only you, AJ. Only you.”

AJ’s dad laughed. “AJ, you have to start learning how to pay better attention.”

“Sorry, Dad, but I was too busy keepin’ an eye on that egg. I wanted to be the first to get it.”

AJ stared at the ground for a minute before he was struck by another thought.

“Oh, man, Nick. I’m sorry. It was gonna be half yours.”

“That’s okay. Maybe my grandfather will let me have one for my birthday this year.”

“That’s in December. I was hopin’ we could ride around this summer. One of us on the new bike and the other on my old one. I feel like garbage. Oh, man!”

AJ sat down heavily on the sidewalk in front of the store.

Arthur, Sr. studied his son, trying to determine if this was one of AJ's famous scams. But AJ seemed genuinely concerned about letting down his friend Nick.

"I'll tell you what, AJ, give me the \$100 certificate, and I will use it to help pay for a newer bike. Not brand new, one of the used bikes they have for sale. You and Nick can then figure out who gets what. A deal?"

"Really, Dad? Thanks, you're the best!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've heard that before." Mr. Janikowski smiled and patted AJ on the back.

"Let's go in and see what they have. Okay, boys?"

AJ and Nick agreed on a slightly newer version of the bike AJ already owned. Nick insisted that AJ keep the newer bike. He was more than happy to take AJ's old one. The best friends bounced out of the store as if they'd just won the Stanley Cup.



In the middle of May, AJ, along with the rest of his classmates, was escorted to the school's library. Their assignment: read a biography of a famous American from the 20th century and write a three-page report on him or her.

AJ and Nick gravitated to the sports section in the library. They heard Mrs. Thomas, the librarian, berating one of their classmates for talking and misbehaving.

"David Meyers, why can't you behave? Every time you come in here I have to reprimand you for something. How many times do I have to call your parents and ask them to come in for a conference with Assistant-Principal Warner?"

"I don't know?" David said dismissively.

"Don't take that tone with me, or you'll be headed for the office and detention."

"What tone?" David asked, attempting to sound confused.

"That tone that tells me to shut up and leave you alone."

"Oh, that tone."

"There you go again!"

Mrs. Thomas lost her patience and raised her voice. "What is the matter with you? Do you think I'm deaf, dumb, and blind?"

AJ turned to Nick and whispered, "Stupid?"

Mrs. Thomas whirled on AJ, raised her hand as if she was going to slap him, then stopped. She sputtered. Her face turned crimson as her body shook from head to

toe. She stamped her foot and shot her arm in the direction of the door and the assistant principal's office down the hall.

When AJ froze, not sure what to do, she stamped her foot one more time and pointed even more emphatically.

"GO!" she bellowed, ripping the silence that had fallen over the library, causing all the students to take a giant step back. AJ trudged toward the assistant principal's office as if he was on his way to meet Darth Vader. He lowered himself into one of the chairs fronting Assistant Principal Warner's office and waited as if once he entered Mr. Warner's office, he'd never be seen or heard from again.

The office door flew open, and Mr. Warner's head poked out the opening. He caught AJ's attention and motioned with his index finger for him to come inside.

Mr. Warner gestured for AJ to sit in one of the chairs across from his desk. AJ lowered himself slowly, half expecting to receive an electric shock when his bottom made contact with the seat. Mr. Warner leaned back in his black leather chair. He eyed AJ up and down, attempting to determine how much of a troublemaker he was. Mr. Warner finally let his eyes settle on AJ's, who couldn't bear to hold the Assistant Principal's gaze and dropped his head to look at the floor.

"I'm up here, young man."

With his head still bowed, AJ slowly let his eyes drift upward until he looked through the downward slope of his eyebrows.

"Mrs. Thomas called me and said you called her 'stupid' in front of the whole class. Is this true?"

AJ, usually quite good at making things up on the spot, found his mind wasn't up to the task. He sat there.

"Well?" Mr. Warner asked again, "Is that true?"

AJ shook his head.

"So, Mrs. Thomas is lying?"

AJ shook his head once more.

"So, Mrs. Thomas isn't lying?"

AJ grew more confused. Dumbfounded, he didn't know how to respond. His lone thought, *Man, my mom and dad are going to be pissed.*

"Did you say that or not?" Mr. Warner sounded like he was questioning a hostile witness on one of the "Law and Order" TV shows.

"I...I...well kinda."

"What do you mean, *kinda*?"

"Um...I was talkin' to Nick Jensen."

"So, did you or did not you call Mrs. Thomas stupid?"

“Um...no. I was talkin’ to Nick Jensen, and he said somethin’ ‘bout the biography we were lookin’ at doin’ for our class project, and he made a dumb remark, so I called him stupid.”

“And what, exactly, did Nick Jensen say that was so stupid?”

“Um...he said...he said Marty Brodeur was the greatest hockey player ever.”

Mr. Warner steepled his fingers, resting his index finger on his mouth and eyed AJ.

“We’ll see if Nick can back up your story,” he said, sending a sense of dread down AJ’s spine.

Mr. Warner called Mrs. Thomas and asked her to send Nick to the office.

As Nick approached Mr. Warner’s office, he saw AJ sitting in one of the chairs while Mr. Warner stood in his open doorway. When AJ saw Nick coming, he half-turned his head, raised four fingers to his forehead, gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, and mouthed “Brodeur,” praying that Mr. Warner didn’t see him.

“Nick Jensen?” Mr. Warner asked as Nick approached his office. Nick nodded. “Come in, son.”

Nick took one more quick glance at AJ before he was ushered into the office. Mr. Warner motioned for him to sit in the same seat AJ had occupied moments before.

“Can you tell me what happened in the library, Nick?”

Nick paused as he tried to put the pieces together. He figured AJ had lied to get out of being punished but wasn’t quite sure the nature of his lie. He searched his mind for an answer, willing himself to think the way AJ would. He tried to make sense of the subtle exchange he and AJ had just shared as he moved down the hall.

“Well?” Mr. Warner prodded.

“Our class was in the library. We were assigned to do a report on 20th century great Americans.” Nick rambled as he tried to buy some much needed time. He paused.

“Continue,” Mr. Warner encouraged.

“Well, David Meyers was actin’ up, and Mrs. Thomas was scoldin’ him and becoming more and more upset with David.”

“Yes, go on.”

“AJ and I were ‘bout ten feet away talkin’ ‘bout who we were gonna choose for our projects.”

“And?”

Nick hesitated. His thoughts about getting in trouble for lying and trying to get AJ out of trouble competed in his mind. He wasn’t good at making things up on the

spot, but years of being around AJ had taught him a thing or two on how he might pull it off.

“And?” Mr. Warner repeated. “What happened next?”

Nick recalled AJ’s gesture, the four fingers to the forehead. It was their way of acknowledging a good play during broomball. But what did broomball have to do with it? Then he thought of AJ mouthing something, something that looked like Brodeur. It all came together.

“Um...I said I’d like to do my report on Martin Brodeur, without thinking that he’s not an American, but a Canadian, and AJ called me stupid.”

“So, AJ was calling you stupid and not Mrs. Thomas?”

“Oh, was that why she was so mad? She thought he was talkin’ to her? No, no, he was callin’ me stupid.”

For a moment, Nick thought he might have oversold it. *Like my lying, my acting needs a lot of work*, Nick thought when he saw the expression on Mr. Warner’s face.

Whether he’d sold it or because he had the reputation of being one of the decent students in their school, Mr. Warner nodded his head. Nick felt relief, knowing he’d guessed right. Mr. Warner rose, opened the door, and called AJ into his office.

“Mr. Jensen confirms what you told me. I will call Mrs. Thomas and explain. But from here on out, I would strongly caution you to not go calling anybody names. You understand?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Both of you can move on to your next class. Go on.”

When they were far removed from Mr. Warner’s office, AJ turned to Nick. “Man, I was worried. I thought for sure I’d be in big trouble. I’m glad you figured it out when I signaled you coming down the hall. I gotta hand it to you, you’re as sharp as an arrow in a pile of glass.”

“Yeah, ah, thanks,” Nick glanced sideways at AJ but knew he’d actually meant it as a compliment. “It wasn’t all that clear, but I’m glad I guessed right, or both of us would’ve been in big trouble – me, I guess, more than you. My grandfather would’ve grounded me for the rest of the year, if not longer.”

“Thanks. I owe you big time...again. One more thing like that, and my parents probably wouldn’t let me play Little League this year.”

Nick gave him a skeptical look. AJ’s mom and dad were probably the most lenient parents in the whole city, maybe in all of Wisconsin. They passed off almost everything he did as boys just being boys.



That same summer, tryouts were held for the Little League Select Team. AJ's heart was set on being a pro athlete in whatever sport happened to be in season. He'd always wanted to make the Select Team and had barely missed the cut the year before as an eleven-year-old. That summer, he worked extra hard to ensure he would not only be chosen but also one of the best on that team.

The tryouts were made up of Little League All-Stars from around Wisconsin's eastern region. Earlier that summer, AJ had been voted the MVP of the Little League from the Manitowoc area.

During the tryouts, he performed admirably at both shortstop – where he exhibited his powerful arm on throws from deep in the hole – and as a pitcher – where he recorded the fastest speed of any player on the radar gun.

He batted close to .500, with three extra-base hits, including a home run – which he later claimed to have cleared the fence by fifty feet, although it was closer to fifteen. He also clocked the second-fastest time in the home to second sprints.

He had two obstacles to overcome. First, he was about to turn twelve, and the committee members preferred to take thirteen-year-olds. Second, he had little political pull with anyone on the selection committee.

When the names were finally released, AJ was devastated that he'd failed to make the team once again. Plenty of people tried to console him, reminding him that was he a sure bet to make next year's team, and, also more than likely, be the best player.

Upon examining the list, AJ noticed that all but one of the players on the roster had recently turned thirteen. The lone exception was a kid named Terry Warrington. Terry stuck out in AJ's mind because he was a fine athlete, but more so because of his eyes. They were unsettling amber color.

After the area's Little League team had lost in the state finals to a team from the Mequon/Milwaukee area, AJ, buying linseed oil for his baseball glove, ran into a member of the selection committee at the Ace hardware store.

"Hi, AJ," Ben Turley said as he passed AJ walking down one of the aisles. "Still oiling the glove even though the season is over?"

"Oh, hi, Mr. Turley. Yeah, I like to give it one last coat 'fore I store it for the winter."

"Good idea. You'll be ready to go next spring." Mr. Turley turned the conversation to that year's select team and their loss in the State Championship. "It's

too bad what happened in the state finals. I think we could have used you. Ran out of quality pitchers, you know. Johnny Fuller used up all his eligible innings, and Terry Warrington struggled to find the strike zone. After that, the Mequon kids teed off on everyone else we used as a pitcher.”

“Yeah, I heard it got a bit rough the last few innings. I hadn’t heard ‘bout Terry, though. What happened?”

“Nerves, I guess. Just couldn’t get the ball over the plate. Mr. Warrington claimed the umpires were squeezing him. ... And maybe they were. The trouble is you can’t buy your kid a call no matter how much money you have.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

Mr. Turley became uneasy and looked around. In a low, conspiratorial voice, he said, “As you know, Warrington is filthy rich, and whenever he wants things to go a certain way, he donates money to make sure it does. But don’t tell anybody I told you that. Okay?”

“Ah...sure, Mr. Turley,” AJ mumbled.

“Good luck in school this year. We’ll see you next year for the select team tryouts.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

As Mr. Turley walked away, AJ stopped him. “Mr. Turley? Can I ask you somethin’?”

“Sure, AJ. What is it?”

“I noticed that everyone on the roster was thirteen, except Terry. Did everyone think he was better than me?”

Ben Turley looked around the store once more as if to make sure what he was about to say wouldn’t be overheard. He turned his attention back to AJ and stepped in closer than AJ felt comfortable with.

“Listen, what I’m about to tell you goes no further than this aisle. If you say anything, I’ll tell everyone you’re lying. This didn’t come from me, and you’re better off chalking up what I’m about to say as the way of the world. A life lesson, so to speak.”

AJ was intrigued and nodded his head in acceptance. The only thing he could have done more convincingly was cross his heart and swear on his mother’s grave.

After another quick look around, Mr. Turley bent over, and in a voice so low AJ found himself turning his ear to hear what was being said. “The majority of the committee members wanted to put you on the team. But Mr. Warrington...” Mr. Turley glanced around the store once more. “Mr. Warrington told everyone that if we put you

on the team, he was pulling his financial support, which we were counting on. He also made it conditional on Terry making the roster and playing substantial innings.”

When he paused and looked around once more, AJ found himself joining in and swept the store with his eyes.

Turning back to Mr. Turley, he asked, “You’re sayin’ Warrington intentionally kept me off the team?” AJ couldn’t believe, much less understand what he was hearing.

“Sorry, AJ, but yeah.”

“And the only reason Terry made it was because his dad is rich and was gonna pay for everything?”

“Actually, there were quite a few members who thought Terry was good enough without his dad’s backing, but when it came down to the point where it was between you or him... Well, let’s just say everyone knew we needed his money. Sorry. I really am. But, in this economic climate, our hands were tied.”

“But why me? Why not someone else? I was better than most of those guys.”

Ben Turley looked at AJ as if he was trying to explain the law of relativity to a kindergartener. “AJ, Mr. Warrington wanted his son to be the only one under thirteen to make the team. Bragging rights, you know.”

AJ’s shoulders slumped. The unfairness of it all was demoralizing. In some ways, he wished he’d never known.

“Sorry...again, AJ. There’s always next year, though. Like I told you at the tryouts, you’ll easily be the best player on the team next year.”

“Not if Mr. Warrington is still calling the shots,” AJ said.

Ben Turley shrugged his shoulders as a “maybe” gesture, pivoted, and walked away.

AJ made a vow that somehow, someday, he was going to get even. Little did he know his chance to do so was less than a year away.

THE TEPAL



A Short Story Prequel to
The 8th Mayan Prophecy

The Tepal

The town of Villa el Triunfo is located in the Tabasco region of Mexico, just north of Guatemala. For close to 2,000 years, it was part of the vast Mayan empire, a day's journey from the heart of the great Mayan city of Tikal.

Jorge Kawiil claimed he was descended from a long line of Mayan kings who once ruled that vast area. However, his life was far from majestic. He worked a small parcel of land near el Triunfo that barely kept his small family fed.

The Kawiil family was one of the last in the region able to retain their traditional Mayan family name. The rest of its inhabitants had been assimilated into the Hispanic culture and had taken on the Spanish surnames. But generation after generation, the Kawiil's had passed on their Mayan name as well as many of the traditions that had been established almost 4,000 years earlier. They also passed on the belief that the Mayan nation would rise again and that their family would once more ascend to the throne, becoming powerful and influential rulers, not just in the Yucatan peninsula, but throughout Mexico and the world.

Jorge's wife, Maria, a very devote Catholic, named her second and third children after her favorite saints, Jose and Theresa. For her eldest son, she yielded to her husband's wishes and named him Cortez – not for the Spaniard who conquered the Incas, but the Mexican folk hero and outlaw, Gregorio Cortez.

From the age of five, Cortez helped his father work the land, milked the goats, and received an education far removed from any formal classroom setting. While Jorge and Cortez worked the fields together, Jorge would share with his son the oral history of their famous, noble ancestors. Every night, as they walked home from work, he emphasized the point, "It is very important that what I tell you be passed from one generation to the next, so that when that day finally arrives, our family will be ready to reclaim their rightful place as rulers of this land."

Each evening, after dinner, Jorge would take Cortez aside and teach him how to read the ancient Mayan glyphs. He also taught him many ancient prophecies connected to their family, which proved the Kawiil family would one day reclaim their seat on the throne.

During these talks, Jorge would punctuate his stories with how evil the white race has been. "Spawns of the devil," was how he referred to them. He cautioned his son that none of those white devils could be trusted, yet at the same time, how easily they could be

manipulated. He would end these lessons the same way, “One day the white race will fall and the Mayan people, led by their true king, will rise in the world.”

Cortez listened with rapt attention, taking every word his father said as gospel. With each passing day and story, Cortez became more and more certain that day was close at hand, and he would be the one to make it all come to pass.

As Jorge taught his eldest, he'd nurse a glass of tequila, it was his way to ease the stress of working the fields and to soothe his weary body. Whenever Maria would question this habit, he claimed the local medicine man had prescribed it as a way to ensure a good night's sleep. As the years passed, Jorge came to realize he would not be the one who'd be the king, that single glass of tequila turned into a second, then a third and, before too long, it was a half a bottle or more.

Jorge Kawiil was not a happy drunk. He turned surly and argumentative, complaining of his situation and the downfall of their empire 1,200 years ago. When anyone tried to calm Jorge down, he resorted to violence, striking anyone within arm's reach. On too many occasions, that person was Maria. The children would cower and beg for their dad to stop beating her, which only inflamed him more.

One night, as Cortez neared his twelfth birthday and had grown to nearly the size of his father, he stepped in to prevent his mother from getting abused. Jorge focused his fury on his son, backhanding him and knocking him into their small adobe fireplace. As Cortez sprang to his feet, he grabbed a small log and struck his father on the head.

Jorge died before he slumped to the dirt floor.

Maria dropped to her knees, screaming and crying, cradling her husband's lifeless body as she repeated a prayer, begging God to return her husband to her.

When Cortez tried to comfort his mother, she turned her grief and anger on him. She regarded him as if he were a stranger, someone she'd never seen clearly before. Her glare turned to revulsion.

Cortez ran to the room where he and his brother Jose slept, packed his few meager belongings, wrapped them in an old, tattered towel, crawled through the tiny window in their room, and left. Hours later, he could still hear his mother's wailing in his head and picture the soul-shriveling, disdainful look she'd given him.

His escape took him to the seaside resort of Cancun, where he became one of many poor, homeless child refugees who walked the streets, selling cheap souvenirs and begging the wealthy American tourists for money. He learned how to prey on their sympathy, most days taking in more money than his father had earned in a week. He slept where he could, often under the starry Mexican sky or in a discarded cardboard box with other street children when it rained.

One day, after profusely thanking an American couple who had just handed him \$5, he found himself surrounded by a rabble of threatening teenagers. The cruelest stood in the center of the horde. Cortez held his ground, to any show of fear would only make his situation worse.

The leader smiled malevolently at Cortez. “So, you are the one I hear all the other children talking about.”

Cortez studied the group, calculating his chances of outrunning the gang. He concluded it’d be futile.

“I’m El Jefe,” the leader said, “and you should know that these streets are mine. I own them. See that tourist over there? She’s mine. See that store over there? That’s mine. Everything you can see from wherever you are standing and from this day on is mine. That means anything collected or stolen here is mine. But I am generous. I will let you keep part of what you collect. Do you understand?”

Cortez had learned from the other children of El Jefe. He knew that despite being a teenager, he was as ruthless as any crime lord in any major city.

Cortez nodded.

El Jefe snapped his fingers and held out his hand palm up. Cortez dug into his pockets and placed their entire contents in El Jefe’s hand. El Jefe jerked his head toward one of his gang and gave a quick sideways nod towards Cortez. The youth move swiftly behind Cortez, grabbed him by his upper arms, and pulled them uncomfortably back. A second gang member rifled through Cortez’s pockets, turning them inside out. When one single peso dropped to the ground, El Jefe shook his head as if it was a most unpardonable sin.

“As I told you, I am a generous street lord. I take and share equally with my people who do what you do. But, when they hold out on me, as you have just done, I cannot let it go unpunished, because then everyone will try to hold something back from what is rightfully mine.”

He stepped away from Cortez. The boy who’d turned out Cortez’s pockets beat him, first with a blow to his stomach, causing him to lose his breath and his meager breakfast, then with repeated blows to his face and head, and finally, one last blow to his ribs, breaking two.

The boy who had been holding Cortez, let him drop then placed a well-aimed kick to where his ribs had been broken.

“Do not hold out on me. Do you understand?” El Jefe said, bending low and whispering into Cortez’s ear.

Cortez offered a quick nod.

“Good, because after seeing what you have taken in today, you may prove to add greatly to my wealth,” El Jefe said with a mirthless laugh while placing everything Cortez had handed to him in his own pocket.

“That you can keep,” he said as he kicked the peso from Cortez’s pocket back at him.

For the next few months, Cortez dutifully gave half of what he made each day to El Jefe. Every evening he was forced to turn out his pockets and take off his shoes to prove he was giving El Jefe his fair share.

Because Cortez handed him more money than any of El Jefe’s other street children combined, El Jefe never suspected that Cortez had discovered numerous places where he could secret away a portion of what he’d panhandled each day.

Cortez became bolder, running a small gang of his own. He handpicked each child, training them in the art of manipulating the tourists. Cortez taught one waifish girl how to cry on command and through her tears lament, “Mi Madre esta enferma. Ayuda me, por favor.” If the tourists didn’t understand, the little girl would say, “Mi Madre, very sick!”

He trained a second child, who was extremely flexible, to contort his arms and legs in unnatural angles and beg for money while propping himself on a pair of splintered, wooden crutches.

Within weeks, money was rolling in, and Cortez, to promote loyalty, was more generous than any other street boss. For his share, he took only twenty-five percent instead of half or more as the others did. In return, he taught his little gang every trick he knew to better play on the tourists’ compassions.

Four months before Cortez’s thirteenth birthday, his operation was discovered by one of El Jefe’s most loyal lieutenants. That night, when El Jefe came to collect, he gave another quick jerk of his head in Cortez’s direction. They taught Cortez a second, more forceful lesson.

They left Cortez bleeding in the gutter, lying among the raw sewage, where the hungry rats eyed him. He would have died if it hadn’t been for one of the Catholic sisters from the nearby convent happening upon him.

She brought him back to the convent, where a team of sisters nursed him back to health. In return, all he was required to do was to listen to them talk about the healing love of Jesus and the Bible.

“We are worried about your soul,” one of the nuns told him when he asked why they were so kind to him.

“But how else am I going to take care of my body without doing what I am doing?” he asked.

“You must trust in God. He has a plan for you.”

Three weeks later, he was back on the streets. El Jefe had absorbed Cortez's gang, each forced to give half of their day's take to their new boss.

Cortez, with no place else to go, begged for forgiveness and promised never to withhold money from El Jefe again, which meant being extra cautious about when and where he hid his extra stash. In return for allowing Cortez back in the fold, El Jefe demanded seventy-five percent of each day's take. "Be thankful I don't take it all," El Jefe said when Cortez half protested.

Later that summer, a few days after Cortez had turned thirteen, he came upon a wealthy American. He approached him with a few of the souvenirs he'd stolen from one of the street vendors. The man waved him away. Cortez persisted, telling the man about his sick and dying mother. This did nothing to move the man. Cortez kept after him for twenty minutes, but still, he was unable to pry one peso from the American.

The man put aside his morning paper and studied Cortez as he ran one sad story after another at him in broken English. The man's eyes never wavered and seemed to penetrate Cortez's very core. It made Cortez uncomfortable. He'd heard many stories, told by the other street children, of men who came to Mexico and preyed on young boys.

"Do you speak any English other than 'money, please' 'you like, you buy'?" the man asked.

"Si, little," Cortez said.

He'd become relevantly fluent in English over the years but found that poor, broken English worked better when trying to play on the sympathies of the tourists.

"What is your name, son?"

"Jose," he lied.

The man sensed this and viewed Cortez dubiously. After a brief pause, he asked, "Do you know the Riviera hotel?"

"Si," Cortez answered guardedly.

"Meet me there tonight at 7:00. I have a proposition for you that I think you may like."

"They no let me in."

"Come around to the back. I'll have one of the bellmen waiting for you. He can sneak you up to my room through the service elevator."

"Si, 7:00. I look at bank time."

"Bank clock, not bank time. I have so much to teach you. That is, if what I have to offer you tonight satisfies you."

"Money, please, to help to then?"

"No. But if you come tonight, I'll make it worth your while."

Cortez nodded, and the man went on his way.

He dwelled on the conversation for the rest of the day. Cortez was certain he knew what the man wanted and decided no matter how bad things got out on the streets, he wouldn't go down that road. But he also thought there just might be a way he could take advantage of the man and con, if not steal, enough money to allow him to stay out of sight for a while, perhaps even move on to one of the other resort towns where he could start his own street organization and make much more money.

A few minutes before 7:00, Cortez snuck around to the back of the hotel and climbed over the wrought iron fence surrounding the grounds. He kept one eye out for security and the other on the service entrance. Promptly at 7:00, the door opened, a bellman stepped out, held the door open, and glanced around the delivery area.

Cortez moved from his hiding place to the door. The bellman nodded and put his finger to his lips. He ushered Cortez to the service elevator and pressed the call button.

As they waited, the bellman looked around the hallway nervously, refusing to make eye contact with Cortez. He shoved Cortez inside as the elevator opened and pressed him forcefully into the corner opposite the control panel, away from the security camera.

He pressed the button for the Penthouse. The doors labored to close, and the elevator sluggishly ascended to the top floor.

“What is the name of the man I am seeing tonight?” Cortez asked in Spanish.

The bellman ignored his question.

“Why do you do this?” he asked next.

The corner of the bellman's mouth curled slightly as he patted his breast pocket.

“How much did he have to give you?”

The bellman offered Cortez the briefest of glances and shook his head.

When the door opened on the Penthouse level, the bellman motioned for Cortez to stay where he was while he took a step out of the elevator and scanned the hallway. Seeing no one, he waved Cortez forward and rang the room's doorbell.

The wealthy American opened the door.

“Thank you, Pepe. You may go.”

“Thank you, Mr. Warrington,” Pepe said with a small bow.

Mr. Warrington handed Pepe a hundred dollar bill, opened the door wider, and walked back to the sitting room area.

“Close the door behind you when you come in...Jose.”

Cortez closed the door and edged through the room. He'd never seen such opulence. The paintings on the walls were worth more than he made in a year. The furniture was luxurious and plush. The complementary fruit basket resting next to the TV was more food than most poor Mexican families saw in a month. The large projection TV that dominated

the room made him feel like he was at the movie theater he'd snuck into when he was on the mend from his last beating.

He felt poorer than he'd ever felt in his life.

"Sit, sit," the man encouraged Cortez.

Tentatively Cortez walked over to a chair as far removed from Mr. Warrington as he could and sat down.

"Are you from around here, my boy?"

Cortez looked bewildered. *Why is he asking me this?*

"Curiosity is one of my bad habits, I'm afraid," he said while smiling at Cortez. "Why don't you help yourself to some of the fruit?" Mr. Warrington offered. "Something to drink? Water? Tea? Soda?"

Cortez, overcome with his current situation, never moved or acknowledged Mr. Warrington's offers. Instead, his eyes continued to sweep the room.

"Come, come now, son. Relax. I assure you it's nothing lewd."

Cortez gave him a quizzical look.

"Bad, immoral, sinful. Your soul is in no jeopardy here. I need to ask you a few questions. If what I believe to be true is correct, I will then explain a few things to you. Okay? Either way, you will leave here wealthier."

Cortez nodded, "Si."

"Okay, first, how old are you?"

"Trece, ah, thirteen."

"Good, good. How about a family?"

Cortez answered by shaking his head.

"Do you live on the streets?"

Cortez nodded.

"Have you ever noticed any abilities to do things out of the ordinary?"

Cortez grew more perplexed and was sure he must have misunderstood Mr. Warrington's question.

"Lo siento, um, sorry."

"Do you feel different somehow? Strange? Weird?"

Cortez shook his head, his look of confusion growing deeper every second. Mr. Warrington stood up and walked over to Cortez. He shrank deeper into the chair as he approached. Warrington bent over and inspected Cortez's eyes and nodded. "You have it. I'm sure of it," he said and returned to his chair. "Let me try and explain something to you, but first, one more question. What is your real name? I know it is not Jose."

Cortez thought *This is the strangest man I have ever known. But what harm can it do?*

“My name is Cortez.”

“Interesting name. Spanish conqueror or the famous bandit?” Mr. Warrington asked.

“Bandito.”

“And your last name?”

“Kawiil.”

Mr. Warrington’s face lit up.

“The Kawiil royal family, from the ancient city of Tikal?”

Cortez gawked at him. How does he know that?

“Si,” Cortez eventually answered.

“Now, I’m positive,” Mr. Warrington exclaimed, excited.

“Listen to me. I believe you are one of us. I’m not sure which one it is, but if I had to guess from your eyes, it’s Earth.”

The crazy American was making even less sense now. One of us? Eyes? Earth? Cortez shook his head vigorously from side to side and started to get up out of his chair.

“No, wait. Let me explain something.”

Cortez eased himself back into the chair.

For over an hour, Mr. Warrington told Cortez of wonderful, strange people, places, and things. The Spanish-English barrier only added to the mindboggling things Mr. Warrington took great pains to explain and asked him to believe.

“When you leave,” Mr. Warrington said, “try to do what I’ve told you, the way I’ve told you to do it. If you are successful and want to be a part of something bigger – much, much bigger – something that will change your life and possibly the world we live in, I will be at the Café Triste tomorrow at noon. If you’re interested, you must be ready to travel.”

Cortez started to nod but was stopped by Mr. Warrington.

“If you decide to go with me, I will not make it easy for you. You will have to study a great deal, learn to speak English with a neutral accent, and the ways of the Americans and the rest of the Western World.”

Mr. Warrington paused to see if Cortez understood what he was demanding of him. Seeing comprehension in his eyes, he continued. “If you go with me and agree to do everything I’ve just asked, I will make you rich and powerful. You will be a leader of men and women. And you will be instrumental in moving us back to our rightful place in this world. But if you don’t do everything I instruct over the coming years, you will find yourself back here on the streets. Do you understand?”

Cortez, overwhelmed by everything he'd heard for the past few hours, nodded absentmindedly. Mr. Warrington handed Cortez a hundred-dollar bill and opened the door. Cortez staggered out of the room, staring at the money in his hand.

As Mr. Warrington was closing the door, he reminded Cortez, "Tomorrow, noon, Café Triste."

The next day at noon, Cortez met Mr. Warrington at Café Triste and sat opposite him as he read the paper.

"I heard there was a gang war near here last night," Mr. Warrington said through the newspaper. "Several members of a gang, led by a teenage boy who called himself El Jefe, were found slashed to death in one of the poorer sections of town. Would you happen to know anything about that, Cortez?"

As Mr. Warrington put the paper aside, Cortez crumpled up his face and shrugged his shoulders in a noncommittal gesture.

Mr. Warrington gave a wry, knowing smile.

"Then we're off. Let's go." Mr. Warrington stood, and a limousine promptly came from down the street and halted in front of them. They rode in silence most of the way out of town and made their way to a small regional airport. They drove directly out onto the tarmac and stopped beside a brand new Lear Jet 28. Cortez followed Mr. Warrington out of the back of the limo, up the stairway, and into the interior of a plane that rivaled the opulence of Warrington's hotel room.

Once they'd taken off, Mr. Warrington gave Cortez a bundle of new clothes. "The restroom is in the back of the plane. You may shower and change in there."

When Cortez returned, Mr. Warrington looked at him approvingly and motioned for him to sit across from him. He explained a few more things to Cortez. "Now to our first item of business. We have to change your name. You need something more Anglicized. Something like Stephen or Howard."

He looked at Cortez in expectation. Cortez shrugged his shoulders. "How about something like Triste?" Cortez asked meekly.

"Ah, to signal the start of your new life and leaving your old one behind? Yes, I like that thought."

Cortez eagerly nodded.

"Let's see," Mr. Warrington mused. "I have it. How about Tristan? A fine English name."

"Si," Cortez responded.

"Second rule. No more Spanish until you have learned to speak English fluently." Tristan, formerly known as Cortez, nodded. "Now, now. Let me hear you say it in English and with the proper salutation."

“Yes...”

“Sir.” Mr. Warrington added. He nodded at Tristan to repeat it.

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good. On to my third point. When we land...” Warrington paused before asking, “Have you ever heard of a state in the U.S. called Wisconsin?”

Tristan shook his head, but Mr. Warrington gave him a look that expressed his desire to be answered verbally.

“No, sir.”

“I’m afraid it will take a little getting used to for you. Right now, the temperature is similar to what you have in spring or fall. But, when the seasons change, you may long for the heat of Mexico.” With a wave of his hand, Warrington added, “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. When we land in Wisconsin, my lawyer will meet us at my plane. He will have papers showing that you are my legally adopted son. In private you may call me Sir, Father, or Mr. Warrington. In public, to keep up appearances, I think it is best if you call me Father. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good! Fourth, starting tonight, I have arranged for a tutor for you. She will concentrate on teaching you to speak proper English. She will also test you on every subject. And then, she will spend the rest of the summer, making sure you are more proficient in any, and all subject matters so that you are better prepared for the coming school year. Agreed?”

Tristan nodded and added, “Yes, sir,” although he understood very little of what had just been said to him.

“Good. Oh, and one last thing. There are going to be things here that are quite different, especially TV, movies, and music. These you will be allowed to watch or listen to after I approve what you have chosen. To start and help with your education, I suggest shows that are educational, none of that nonsense from those programs that are aimed at teenagers. Foolishness, that’s what that is.”

When the wheels touched down, Mr. Nowell Warrington had a son, Tristan Warrington.

T

Tristan spent the rest of the summer, ten hours a day, six days each week, with his tutor. By the time he was set to go to school, he’d improved dramatically in most subjects. Mr. Warrington had him placed in the seventh grade, changing his birth year to so he was twelve instead of thirteen. His English had only a slight trace of an accent by the time he

walked through the junior high doors. His math skills were exceptional, having mastered the basics of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division when he ran his gang.

Although he never liked reading – his mother had taught him to read Spanish and his father, the Mayan glyphs – he found it the best tool to help him assimilate into his new culture. He devoured books on American History and its culture.

The few shows and movies he was allowed to watch had a historical or an economic theme. While watching, he was encouraged to mimic the narrator’s diction and style. For this reason, documentaries were always allowed.

As he grew, physically and intellectually, he was brought into the family business operations, venture capitalism. He was shown how to determine the wealth of a company down to its last nut and bolt, and how to dismantle it to drain every bit of profit from it by selling it off piece by piece.

The residual effect was that many of these businesses were then forced into bankruptcy, and hundreds of people lost their jobs. This, Mr. Warrington explained, was part of doing business. It was nothing personal.

Tristan was also taught how to secret much of the profit away through shell corporations and offshore bank accounts, free from the prying eyes and corporate taxes of the US government. This, too, he was assured, was a good business practice.

By the time he graduated from high school, he’d received an education that most people pay tens of thousands of dollars to get at the best universities in the nation. Despite this, his father made sure he got into Harvard to have the prestige of listing it on his resume. His undergraduate degree was in business, while his post-graduate degree was an MBA from Northwestern and the Kellogg School of Business.

Upon graduation, he was brought home and slotted into an entry-level position in the family business.

“All the better to learn the inner workings of the business,” his father told him.

Within a few years, he headed up the acquisition arm of the company – one small step below his father.

At the same time, Mr. Warrington, whose ancestry was English by way of the Norse people, made sure Tristan understood the history of their common ancestors, which went back to the Minoan Crete civilization of 3,000 BCE. He studied the few surviving texts from that civilization, noting their advances in the sciences, math, and seamanship. He came to accept the strong influence of that ancient culture on the Mayan civilization.

Tristan took it upon himself to study his more immediate heritage, the Mayan culture, as well. He learned the intricacies of the Mayan codex. Eventually, he was able to read the glyphs of their ancient writings as if he had picked up the Sunday newspaper.

In particular, he was drawn to the teachings and prophecies of the Plumed Serpent, Chilam Balam. Despite the fact most of the prophecies were vague, he believed because of his royal blood and background, he had a better ability to interpret them than anyone.

T

When Tristan was on the verge of his twenty-eighth birthday, he came across another ancient prophecy. This one was considered to be the long-lost, famous 8th Mayan Prophecy. He was familiar with the first seven, having studied them time and again and seeing signs that they had come to pass. After spending months deciphering the 8th prophecy, he was convinced more than ever that his biological father had been right. The Kawiil family was destined to regain its rightful place of power, and the time was fast approaching, December 21, 2012.

It struck Tristan that fate had intervened. He appreciated how everything that had happened in his life had been necessary for him to be in position to fulfill the prophecy: the killing of his father which forced him to leave his home, his life on the streets of Cancun, which taught him how to be cunning and adapt, his meeting Mr. Warrington and his recognition of Tristan's special gift, how Mr. Warrington taught him to use that gift, and finally, their living here in this particular place of the world. If he'd stayed in Triunfo, he'd still be weeding the garden and milking the goats, unaware of his true destiny.

With the unfolding of the last prophecy, everything fit. This is where he needed to be for the prophecy to come to pass. He reflected on his boyhood ideas of grandeur and thought they were not so far-fetched after all. Tristan knew that it was he who would set the events in motion to bring about the rise of the ancient civilization to prominence once more.

There was one problem. He wasn't in a position to do what needed to be done. One person stood in his way. He also knew that was a problem that was easily rectifiable.

Mr. Warrington loved to spend time on the lake and often requested that Tristan join him. Tristan, on the other hand, had hydrophobia, an overriding fear of water. He'd never learned to swim – every time he was forced to take a lesson, he came home shaking and traumatized. After repeated attempts to get him more comfortable in the water, Mr. Warrington gave up on the idea.

So, when Mr. Warrington asked what Tristan would like to do to celebrate the anniversary of his pseudo-adoption, he was surprised and delighted when Tristan suggested they take the boat for a short ride on Lake Michigan.

Though the yacht wasn't much smaller than a cruise ship, Tristan was still terrified of being anywhere near it, much less aboard it in the middle of a miniature ocean, Lake

Michigan. They motored about 10 miles offshore before Mr. Warrington cut the engines and let the boat drift.

Before they left their dock, Tristan slipped into a life jacket and sat in the one place he felt somewhat safer, the sportfishing chair, which was bolted to the deck. He'd considered strapping himself in but knew this would only lead to ridicule and condemnation.

He planned to ply his father with enough alcohol to toss him overboard, where he'd die of hypothermia in the frigid waters of Lake Michigan.

Tristan had not thought much past that point. Out on the lake, he realized that once he'd disposed of Nowell Warrington, he'd then be alone, and he'd have to pilot the yacht – something he'd always seen as a death trap. Knowing what was at stake, however, he convinced himself that, when the time came, he'd be able to execute the scheme.

While on his third bottle of wine, Nowell Warrington launched into the subject Tristan knew would eventually be broached. Why Tristan had never learned to swim.

"I can't believe a son of mine doesn't know how to swim. Hell, I was the State Champion when I was in high school in the 1500-yard freestyle. I would swim three to four thousand yards every day. And you can't even swim across a bathtub."

Tristan had heard this before and found it best to let the old man blow off steam.

"Why," Mr. Warrington slurred, "we used to go to Florida and swim three miles out into the ocean and back. And that was just for fun. I don't understand? How can anyone be afraid of water? That's crazy."

Tristan grew more anxious and apprehensive about being on the Great Lake, and now he had to listen to his father berate him for not wanting to swim the English Channel.

Mr. Warrington staggered to his feet. "Come on, son. I'll teach you. That's the problem, you just haven't had a decent teacher, yet."

Tristan grabbed hold of the armrests and wrapped his fingers around the handrails.

"Come on," Nowell Warrington chided. "Get up. It's easy. I'll show you."

"No, Father," Tristan shot back. "I'm not leaving this chair."

"I can't believe you're such a baby about this," Nowell Warrington said as he grabbed Tristan by the forearm and tried to pry him loose from the armrest.

Tristan jerked his arm away and glared at his father. Now that they were out on the open water, his fear of leaving the safety of the bolted-down chair immobilized him. "Leave me alone, you old goat!" he screamed.

"Don't talk to me that way," Warrington shouted. "You'd still be in that god-forsaken place if it wasn't for me."

Tristan looked away from his father and stared out at the wide-open expanse of deep-blue water. His head spun, and his stomach rolled.

Mr. Warrington tried again to pull him out of the chair, but this time he had a hold of his upper arm and the back of his shirt.

Tristan's fear turned into white-hot rage. He jumped out of the chair and pushed his father with both hands. Old man Warrington stumbled backward and tripped over a cooler resting on the deck. He tumbled head over heels and struck his head hard on the polished teak edge of the transom.

Tristan ran to his side.

His father wasn't moving or making a sound. He put his ear next to his nose – he wasn't breathing. He felt his neck – no pulse. Tristan looked to the open water and was once more seized with overwhelming fear. He crawled away from the rail and over to the pilot's room on the lower level. Still on his hand and knees, he reached up and tuned the VFH radio to channel 16, the distress channel the Coast Guard monitored.

He keyed the microphone and cried out, "Help me, help me. There's been an accident. Please, someone, help me."

His call was immediately answered. "Sir, what is your situation?"

"My father tripped on a cooler and hit his head. I don't think he's breathing. Help us!"

"Do you know your current location, sir?"

"I'm not sure. We left from our dock, at the Warrington mansion, and drove what I thought was about ten miles straight out. But I'm not sure."

"Okay, sir. Leave your radio on. We have a bead on your location. We're sending a Coast Guard boat now."

"Thank you," he gasped in relief.

Fifteen minutes later, the Coast Guard cruiser pulled up alongside the Warrington yacht, and two members of the Coast Guard came aboard. They found Mr. Warrington on the aft portion of the deck, and Tristan in the lower control station huddled on the floor in the fetal position.

T

People came from every corner of the globe for the memorial service. There were people from Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Russia, China, Japan, South America, and every Western European country. The church overflowed.

When it came Tristan's turn to eulogize his father, he rose from his place in the first pew and, on uncertain legs, climbed the four steps to the lectern. He paused for a moment as he looked out over the sea of wealthy and influential people.

His voice cracked as he spoke. “My father was the most generous man most people have ever known. Who else would take an orphan off the streets and welcome him into his home, much less adopt him? He was a great man. I will think of him every day of my life. Father...”

Tristan sobbed. “I will miss...” But the final words never came as Tristan broke down and fell to his knees beside the podium. The funeral director and several honored guests ran up and helped Tristan back to his seat, where he wept for the rest of the service.

When the ceremony was over, he was driven to the mausoleum where his father was interred in the family crypt. As people passed by Nowell Warrington’s final resting place, they shared their condolences with his loving son, Tristan.

Afterward, there was a large gathering at the Chamber of Commerce banquet hall. More people approached Tristan to share with him how tragic it was, and that they wished him the best. He accepted each one with heartfelt thanks and expressed his appreciation for them coming to the service.

When the day ended, he was driven back to the mansion. He went to his father’s study and removed every last reminder of Nowell Warrington. Every photo, every memento, every small item his father had used regularly was thrown away. By the time he was through, there were four huge boxes of artifacts. Tristan asked James, his father’s valet, to dispose of it all.

When Thomas looked at him questioningly, Tristan said, “It is much too painful having anything around that reminds me of him. I think this is for the best. By the way, James, I will give you a large severance package, an amount equivalent to a year’s salary, but after today, I will no longer require your services.”

After forty years of faithfully serving the Warrington household, James found himself unemployed and out on the street.

T

Nowell Warrington had told Tristan of a loose confederation of people, possessing similar “powers” as them. It was called the World Council. His father insisted he learn as much about that organization as anything else he studied.

With Nowell Warrington’s demise, Tristan formulated a plan to bring together a group of these people who would be his chief advisors, but who would be subject to his every impulse and command.

But first, he needed to transform the mansion. He hired a construction company from the east coast, one he knew specialized in the excavation of dolomite, a type of rock

left over from the ice age and found in vast quantities in Northeastern Wisconsin. He had them build an underground meeting room with precise dimensions. Everything in the room was built on the ancient Minoan Crete measurement of the megalithic yard. He insisted that the walls be left rough and curved so that the room possessed a domed ceiling. There was no electricity and no heating system. Instead, he had a wood craftsman from Minnesota make enormous candleholders – again, using the megalithic yard – with each having its own unique Mayan symbol carved into its body. There were thirteen of these placed around the room.

The room's heat was furnished by an enormous fireplace carved out of the far end of the room, which could only be accessed through the mansion upstairs by way of a secret entrance.

He hired another craftsman, one from Michigan, to make a large black and trapezoidal conference table. The long end, the place of honor, was placed nearest the vast fireplace and away from the stairway.

Once he was satisfied with the room, he searched for others like him. His father had insisted, "If you look close enough, you can see it in their eyes. There is something there that lets you know what skill and power they possess."

Tristan roamed both near and far and was able to find twelve people from around the world who agreed to join him in his special mission. There were three people from each of the four special areas of water, earth, wind, and fire, and at least one representative from each of the ancient lands the First Civilization had visited, bringing their knowledge and unique talents from those respective lands.

Tristan enticed those he found with promises of wealth and a world vision in which the members would benefit. He called his group of twelve his Inner Sanctum. In return, he required three things: their loyalty, the need for them to be accessible at all times, and that they refer to him as Tepal, the Mayan word for King.

It took several years and hundreds of thousands of miles and dollars, but eventually, the Inner Sanctum was completed. Once assembled, Tristan shared his knowledge with them weekly. He explained about the First Civilization. He informed them as to how they had acquired their unique abilities and what triggered their transformations. More importantly, he shared his vision for a new world order with them, one in which they would have their unique place of power and wealth.

Furthermore, he taught them the ancient prophecies and why it was vital for them to be in this particular region of the world. Tristan believed he had deciphered the ancient text and concluded that the person spoken of in the prophecies would be from this location on the planet.

As he continued his research, he came to believe that all the signs pointed to a woman from the area who would give birth to twin boys near the end of December 1999, and that one of those boys would be the supreme leader of their new world, and in the process, elevate his loyal followers above all others.

Everyone within the Inner Sanctum acknowledged and marveled at the Tepal's depth of wisdom and insight. They believed in his vision, that his word was sacrosanct.

But, as with any interpretation based on a person's biases, beliefs, wants, and desires, they would discover how all things vague, especially prophecies, could be so wrong.

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