

Hoppy Halloween and a merry Mayan apocalypse! In honor of our 10th anniversary of writing this universe, we've done something different. We introduced the beginning at Halloween, per tradition, and posted the ending on the exact day that it takes place: December 21, 2012. (Well, it was still December 21 in *some* time zones anyway. *g*)

The Sacred Cholq'it

by Susan and Dana

Trixie Belden eagerly looked out of the tiny window and down at the lush green jungles below. "We're almost here," she crowed excitedly.

Jim Frayne, who sat next to her, smiled at her exuberance. He, too, leaned over. "It's pretty darn green down there," he commented.

"It looks so peaceful. It's hard to believe that an earthquake did so much damage."

Honey overheard Trixie's remark and said, "Poor Dolores and Lupe. It wasn't bad enough that an earthquake practically destroyed their village a few years ago. It had to happen again!"

Before Mart could launch into a many-syllabic discussion of fault lines, Brian squeezed Honey's hand and said, "At least we get to come here and help this time around."

Honey turned from gazing out the window to smile at her seat companion. "I'm so glad of that!"

After Trixie and Honey had received e-mails from their old penpals, Dolores and Lupe Perez, about another devastating earthquake, they had pondered how to best help their friends and their village recover from the disaster. It was Matthew Wheeler who had volunteered to send the Bob-Whites to Mexico in his private plane after local and international disaster relief agencies had authorized outside volunteers. Although the parents of the close-knit club were worried about their children entering a disaster zone, they knew that legally they couldn't stop them from traveling to the site. With Miss Trask and Matthew Wheeler chaperoning, at least they felt that they had some measure of control.

Although the earthquake had happened nearly two months before, there was still a lot to be done. Although relief agencies had finally restored most of the power to the area, there was still a great deal of cleanup and rebuilding to be done. The Bob-Whites were eager to get on the ground and make a difference.

"Are Dolores and Lupe meeting us at the airport?" Di asked.

"We gave them our approximate arrival time," Honey explained, "but we told them that they didn't need to meet us at the airport since we weren't sure exactly how long it would take us to clear customs. Bob will have a lot of paperwork to show the Mexican officials about the plane in addition to all of us getting our passports checked. Trixie gave them our hotel information, and we said that we would meet up there."

Twenty minutes later, Bob had expertly landed the plane at the small regional airport. Once the group had cleared customs, which didn't turn out to be as bad as everyone had feared, they made their way through the small airport. The group headed through the main lobby of the small building and looked around to determine where the car rental agencies were. Despite the fact that this was a small regional airport, there was a blur of activities. Strange smells, a loud cacophony, and bright colors assaulted their senses. Even Trixie, who normally embraced new experiences and new places, was slightly taken aback.

The Bob-Whites slowed their pace as they tried to acclimate themselves to the unfamiliar and very foreign surroundings. Miss Trask helpfully translated the few signs that did not already have English

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translations, and for a moment, Trixie was transported back to New York City when the beloved governess had used her Spanish prowess to translate the prophecy surrounding the Incan idol with the "blinking eye."

Suddenly, familiar words were heard above the din. "Trixie! Honey!" a voice called out, and the Bob-Whites and their chaperones turned to see two lovely dark-haired, dark-skinned girls rushing toward them.

"*Bienvenido!*" The two approaching girls shouted gleefully as they reached the group and gave Trixie and Honey enthusiastic hugs. "We are so happy to have you here!"

Trixie and Honey laughed delightedly and returned the hugs. "It's so fantastic to finally meet you," Trixie gushed.

"So wonderful!" Honey echoed, looking a little bemused but thrilled at the same time. "Let us introduce you to our friends."

After Honey and Trixie introduced their friends and family, Dolores said, "I feel like I already know you all already from all of Trixie and Honey's stories!"

"Well, I hope you won't hold that against me!" Mart joked.

Lupe laughed a twinkling laugh. "Mart, always the...how do you say?...jokester? Always the jokester!"

After the laughter subsided, Honey said, "You didn't need to meet us here. We would have been happy to meet you at the hotel."

Dolores shook her head vehemently. "No, we needed to give you a proper greeting right from the *aeropuerto*."

"That's so sweet of you," Di said with a friendly smile, already liking the two sisters immensely.

"Anything for our American friends who have done so much for us!" Lupe said, her smile a testament to her words. Her sister stood next to her, beaming and nodding her agreement.

"You must be tired. We should let you go to your hotel," Dolores said, still holding both of Honey's hands in her own as if she were loathe to let them go and break an important connection. "We only have the car we borrowed from our boss, but we can lead you to your lodgings."

"Oh, please don't trouble yourselves," Honey cried. "If you need to return the car, we can manage."

Both girls shook their heads fervently. "*Dios mios!* No! We must help you settle! It is the least we can do!"

Matthew Wheeler smiled at the young Mexican women. "We'll just go pick up the van that I arranged, and we'd love for you to show us the way to our hotel. It's very kind of you." He looked around vaguely. "Can you tell us where we can pick up the van?"

Lupe giggled. "Of course. Please follow us."

As they followed the girls, Trixie's eyes lit on a vendor selling brightly colored straw bags that reminded her of the one that the Mexican woman had given her, the strange prophecy tucked inside. Meanwhile, Honey and Di were eyeing another vendor selling hand-woven traditional dresses with their lace tiers and brightly colored waist ties. Mart was busy inhaling the spicy and delicious smells wafting over from a food cart. Jim smiled at a boisterous group of young children surrounding two harried-looking parents struggling with trip paperwork and luggage while trying to keep their kids under control.

With the help of the Perez sisters, soon the Bob-Whites, Mr. Wheeler, and Miss Trask were ensconced in

their rented van and following the small hatchback that the sisters drove to a hotel at the edge of the small town of San Isidro. "Hotel" was more of an American description of the small but clean accommodations that the sisters had recommended to their American friends. It reminded Honey more of the bed-and-breakfast properties she had stayed at with her parents. The proprietors of the small property were friendly, particularly once Dolores and Lupe spoke to them.

After all of the luggage had been stowed in the four clean, but spartan, rooms that the New Yorkers were to occupy, everyone met in the small lobby of the hotel so that Dolores and Lupe could tell their story. There were not enough seats to go around, but those Bob-Whites who did not find a chair happily sprawled on the floor. Although Jim was insistent that Trixie take a seat, she stuck her tongue sassily out at him, pulled him into a chair and then sank to the floor in front of him, leaning contentedly back on his legs. He laughed and let her get away with it, but only after tugging on her favorite curl and giving her *the look*.

After everyone was settled, Dolores began. "As you know, San Isidro was hit hard by the latest earthquake. We were lucky that many of the buildings were spared. After the last earthquake that was so...devastating, I think is the word...the buildings were built much stronger. Still, the damage was great."

Lupe nodded her agreement and took her sister's hand as a gesture of support. Dolores continued, "We are so lucky that we received aid so very quickly after the earthquake. The rescuers have said that the buildings that did not fall are strong and safe, and now the cleanup and rebuilding can begin."

"And we're very happy to be a part of that rebuilding," Honey said with a smile, her hazel eyes lit with compassion.

The Perez sisters returned Honey's smile, and Lupe continued. "My sister and I have been working on a nearby...dig. An *arqueología* dig. We look for the past."

Mart nodded. "It's what we call an archaeological dig," he explained. "Given the history of this area, I can only imagine how fascinating the dig must be."

"Fas..." Dolores stumbled over the word, trying to repeat it, and Mart immediately looked contrite once he saw the confused looks on the Mexican girls' faces. He liked confusing his sister with his big words, but he didn't mean to confuse two girls who did not speak native English!

"I'm sorry. It's very...interesting," he said using a word he thought that they might know.

Both girls immediately rewarded the blond young man with radiant smiles. "Yes! Interesting!"

Trixie shot her brother a look and then turned back to the dark-haired young women. "Mart loves words," she said. "I'm just sorry you got caught in the cross-fire." Both girls' smiles turned to confusion at Trixie's unfamiliar turn of phrase, but Trixie plowed on. "It's great you get to work at a dig. Was the site okay after the earthquake?"

Dolores nodded. "We were lucky. There was not much damage."

"We started back to work a few days ago," Lupe added. "We are saving much Mayan...things? I believe 'things' is the word. We work to save the things of the Maya so that museums can show them and their history."

"That's wonderful," Di, who loved museums and all of the treasures that they contained, gushed. "I'm sure you're finding many Maya treasures."

Once again, both of the girls nodded ecstatically. "We are!" Lupe's dark eyes shone as she described the many items that they had found and the history that was being preserved. As she told about the various

treasures that the archeologists and their team had found, her face was alight with a passion that indicated that she had found her true calling. Dolores was clearly excited about their work, but her demeanor lacked the passion that Lupe displayed.

Although the Bob-Whites and their chaperones were clearly enthralled with Lupe's descriptions, she suddenly seemed to physically pull back as she gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I am so sorry. I talk too much. You are here about the earthquake, not my...our..." she said with a nod to Dolores, "work on Maya history."

"Not at all," Jim reassured her. "We love to hear your stories. I love history." Trixie, still leaning up against his knees, turned to smile at him, reaching out and squeezing his hand at the same time. She knew what history—especially family history—meant to him and the other orphan in their group, Dan.

Lupe smiled at him gratefully. "I am so glad you love the history like I do. We work very hard so that we know the truth about the Mayans. But there is a group, *Sociedad de la Portadores de la Luz*, who do not want to know the truth. They want to spread lies and fear about the Mayan calendar. Their name is supposed to mean "the bringers of light," but they focus on the doom prophecy!"

Mart raised a sandy eyebrow. "The doom prophecy?"

"Sí," Dolores said with a grave look. The smiles that had wreathed the faces of their two hosts were gone, and both looked serious and upset. "The 'Lightbringers'—who do *not* bring light!—are convinced that the world is going to end on December 21, 2012."

"That's in just a few days!" Di exclaimed.

Trixie nodded, looking thoughtful. "I've heard about this. It has something to do with the end of the Mayan calendar, right?"

Lupe nodded. "The calendar has different...er, counts. I am not sure how to explain in English."

Brian spoke up. "'Cycles' is the English word. The Mayan calendar has several different cycles," he explained to the Bob-Whites. At their surprised looks, he grinned. "What? Mart's the only one who can waste time in a library? I read about more than just medical stuff, you know. With all of the 2012 doomsday talk, I decided to read up on it."

"Do enlighten us with your knowledge, oh-wise-one," Mart challenged with a smirk.

"Prepare to be enlightened!" Brian retorted. "The cycles can last from as little thirteen days and to lengths equivalent to many modern calendar years. The main 'Calendar Round' cycle lasted fifty-two years. Those that lasted even longer than that are known as the 'Long Count.' Modern scholars calculate that the Long Count cycles began about 3,000 years before the Common Era. The counts are the number of days that have passed since that mythical creation date."

"Which happens to be August 11, 3114 BCE in the Gregorian calendar," Mart interjected.

Trixie gave him a look. "I won't even ask how you know that."

Mart mimicked Brian. "What? Brian's the only one who can waste time in a library?" He was rewarded by Trixie sticking her tongue out at him.

Brian, ignoring his siblings' bickering as usual, patiently continued, "Some of the counts are based on a solar year, some on lunar phases, one on the planet Venus. Sometimes warfare was even astrologically timed based on the Venus cycle. The cyclical nature of time was very important to the Mayans."

"So, why do people associate doom with the Mayan calendar?" Di wanted to know.

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"Because it ends on December 21, 2012." Brian's statement was met with silence.

Dan finally broke the silence with an incredulous, "That's it? *That's* the basis of these prophecies I've been hearing about? I'm sure our calendar companies haven't printed out an infinite number of calendar years, so does that mean the world is going to end then?"

"I'm not saying I believe in the prophecy. I'm just explaining the reasoning behind it," Brian said.

"So, how many years is the longest Long Count?" Jim wanted to know.

"About 63 million years, give or take a few millennia," Brian said.

"That's a lot of years!" Honey exclaimed.

"Of course, you said that the ancient Mayans believed in the cyclical nature of time," Matthew Wheeler pointed out. "So, if the calendar ends, then it really just means a new cycle would begin, correct?"

Brian, Dolores, and Lupe all nodded. "Yes, if the ancient Mayan culture was intact today, the Maya would erect a monument and have a dedication ceremony to commemorate the ending of the cycle and then just begin the counts again," Brian stated.

"So, this 63 million year cycle is ending?" Miss Trask asked.

Brian shook his head. "Actually, the cycle that's ending is a cycle made up of 5,125 years. Confusing, I know. The Mayan calendar is very complex. It's actually a system of calendars rather than just one calendar, *per se*."

"Sounds like a whole lot of something over nothing, if you ask me," Trixie said. She grinned at her friends. "Well, if the world does end in a few days," she said cheerily, "at least we'll all be together!" Everyone smiled at her words, but Di and Honey looked a little troubled.

"So, how are these Lightbringers causing trouble?" Honey asked their hosts.

"They do not want the Mayan artifacts that we are finding to leave the site. They believe that it is a particularly sacred site. They believe that it is the very site that the ancient Mayans were told how to create the calendar system and given writing and other important parts of the Mayan culture," Lupe explained.

Dolores added, "Maya tradition explains that the god Itzamna, who lived in the sky, gave the ancestral Maya their knowledge of the calendar and writing, as well as many other aspects that became part of the Mayan culture. The Lightbringers believe that the site that we are digging at is the *preciso* spot that Itzamna gave the wisdom. Because of this, they think that this spot is the spot where they will ascend to the sky and meet the ancestral Maya on the day of doom, December 21, 2012."

"They *what*?" Dan asked incredulously.

"They think that they will become higher level beings and be one with the ancient Maya. They believe that this is what the end of the calendar brings. Those that do not live the righteous life that they do and believe as they do will remain on Earth as fire and brimstone rain down on all of the continents. And they think our dig site is the sacred spot of enlightenment.," Lupe explained.

"Wow," Trixie said.

"Wow. It is the good word," Lupe said with a grin and then became serious again. "They try to sabotage us so that we cannot do our work. They hide our tools. We have had to set up guards all the time, which leaves less people to do the digging work."

"That's awful," Di empathized.

"Is there anything we can do?" Dan asked. "I know we're here to help rebuild, but perhaps some of us could help stand guard so that you have more people to dig."

"That is very wonderful of you," Dolores said. "It could happen. We will check. But no matter what, the two of us would very much like to show you the site before you begin helping with the earthquake mess."

"We'd love to see it!" Trixie exclaimed.

"Wonderful!" Lupe clapped her hands excitedly, the happy light returning to her eyes. "We were hoping you would like to see our history, something we love so much."

Honey, who was sitting near Lupe, reached out her hand to impulsively give Lupe's hand a squeeze. "Of course we want to see whatever you want to show us."

Tears sprang to Dolores' eyes. "You are so kind. We cannot thank you enough for all of your help."

Trixie, who was always embarrassed when thanked, said, "And we cannot thank you enough for being such wonderful friends. When would you like to show us your dig site?"

Jim smiled. "What Trixie means is, 'Can we go right now?'" He grinned down at his favorite shamus. "She tends to get a little ahead of herself."

Dolores laughed. "Lupe is very the same! We thought that maybe you would like to rest today, so we planned on taking you tomorrow. But today is a good day, too. It is only about a thirty-minute drive from here. It is up to you."

"We rested on the plane! We'd love to go now!" Trixie said excitedly, looking around to the other Americans for confirmation. "Wouldn't we, gang?"

"If we don't, do we have a choice?" Mart asked drily and then let out a surprised, "Oof!" as Di lightly punched him in the gut.

"Mart, you know you're just as eager as Trixie. Stop giving her a hard time!"

"It's settled, then!" Trixie declared. "Let's go!"

About an hour later...

Trixie had to keep reminding herself that it truly was December. When they'd left New York several hours before, Bob had been worried that they wouldn't get out of the city due to the snowy weather.

And now here they were—in a true paradise. She'd already fallen in love with the sparkling waters of the Gulf of Mexico that lapped onto the sand beaches when they'd been circling to land at the airport, and now, she was even more certain that she'd reached a little slice of Heaven on earth. The sky was a brilliant blue without a cloud to be seen. The lush green of the tropical forest added to that feeling of getting away to a desert island. Trixie kept her eyes glued to the window of the van for a good portion of the ride. There had just been so much to see.

Dolores had, with Mr. Wheeler's blessing, taken the wheel of the van, and Lupe sat in the front with her sister, answering Mart's continuing stream of questions about the peninsula, the Mayans and the archaeological site they were en route to see.

They'd left the small town of San Isidro and traveled along a good-sized road that wound its way through the resort areas and were now turning away from the busy metropolitan area into a beautiful tropical wonderland.

"Where are we going now?" Honey asked, leaning forward to try to see around Trixie.

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"We are going to the site," Lupe replied. "It is in the *Sian Ka'an* Lagoon area. Many Mayan sites can be found here." She smiled as Dolores made a turn on to a small, dirt road that could barely be, with good conscience, called a road.

"*Ch'am K'in*," Dolores called out, her voice beautiful with the old language's cadence.

"What is *Ch'am K'in*?" Dan asked, his voice not nearly as beautiful with its thick New York accented tones.

"It is our...how do you say it?" Lupe frowned for a moment before her face cleared. "Nickname. It is our nickname for the site."

"What does it mean?" There was Mart again, ever curious.

"To..." Dolores demonstrated by reaching out to grab something invisible from the air.

"To grab?" Jim asked.

"*Si*, yes! To grab *el Sol*. The sun."

"Oh, that sounds just beautiful." Diana sighed. She leaned forward over the seat toward the two young women. "I hope we're almost there. I can't wait to see the site."

"Very soon!" Dolores promised.

And it was very soon after that—a short, very bumpy ride through a very verdant area that was just an explosion of beautiful color. Large, beautiful flowers of red, pink, yellow and purple brushed up against the van. Jim, Trixie could tell, was beside himself with excitement at all the gorgeous natural beauty around them. He called out any number of birds he could see out the window, looking back and forth between his copy of *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*, trying to locate ones he couldn't readily identify.

Her face softened, knowing that Jim was never as happy as he was when he was enjoying Mother Nature's wonders. He looked over his shoulder at her, giving her a wide grin. "I think I just saw a toucan, Trix!"

She gave him an answering grin, turning quickly to see if she could see the toucan outside of the window. It was then that she noticed the closeness of the flora suddenly pulling away, and a wide clearing opening up around her. Her eyes blazed, and she called out excitedly, "Oh, we're here! We're here!"

And so they were.

Lupe's smile was nearly as wide as Trixie's, obviously enjoying her friend's exuberant enthusiasm.

"Welcome to *Ch'am K'in*!"

All eyes were riveted to the sight in front of them. Several stone structures surrounded an open courtyard area where there were many more present-day constructions: a couple of open air tents at one end and a large network of taut rope and stake configurations highlighting areas of current excavations. The dig almost seemed like a busy hive of workers to Trixie, much as their ancestors of long ago must have looked as they worked to build the towering structures around the edges of the active courtyard.

"I think that's the temple," Mart said excitedly, breaking into Trixie's reverie. He had an open book on his lap, one of many he'd stuffed into his oversized backpack.

Lupe opened the door with a laugh. "Come out to see for yourselves!"

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The Bob-Whites, Mr. Wheeler and Miss Trask filed out of the van, following the two Mexican women toward the dig. Two rather sturdy-looking men, who had, at first, looked quite stern to see the van approach, relaxed upon recognizing the sisters.

“¿Cómo estás, Ramon? Gabriel?” Lupe hailed the two men as they neared the edge of the dig site. A spattering of Spanish Trixie didn’t understand soon followed.

“Come, come!” Dolores urged them. “Come meet everyone.”

It took several minutes for the large group of archeologists and that of the Americans to laughingly meet and share names. Most of the group, Lupe explained, were archeology students from the *Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán* in Mérida.

“We are very fortunate to have such wonderful treasures so close to study,” Lupe said with a smile.

“Can we explore around the site a little?” Di asked, her beautiful face eager. “I’ve always wanted to see a Mayan temple.”

Lupe nodded. “Just be careful, and do not go inside any of the structures today.” She gestured with a hand toward a smaller, rounded structure near the far end of the site. “Especially not the *temazcal*. It is not...how do you say?...not safe.”

Brian nodded in return. “We’ll just look around outside.”

Dolores looked up from where she was speaking with a couple of the other archeological students and said, “We won’t be long. There are a few things that have been discovered since we left to get you at the *aeropuerto*.” She glanced uneasily at her sister.

“I’m sorry,” Lupe began.

“No need to be sorry,” Miss Trask said firmly. “We will explore the site for fun ourselves, and we’ll look forward to another time when you have more time to give us a detailed tour to tell us a little about it.”

“Exactly,” Honey urged the two young women. “Go ahead and do what you need to do. We’ll be fine.”

Thus reassured, the two young Mexican women joined some of the other staff over by one of the tents, Spanish flying back and forth between them in a rapid cacophony.

“No looking for lost Mayan treasure at the bottom of the temple, girls,” Mart said in a lofty tone as he headed off with Jim toward a small, squat structure closest to them with several ornately carved designs on top of it.

“That’s because he wants to find them first,” Dan said, supposedly confidentially, but pitched so that his friend could hear him.

“I heard that!” Mart called back.

The girls laughed as Dan grinned and then hurried up to follow after Mart and Jim.

Brian hesitated a moment, looking at the others, before Honey waved him away with a dismissive hand. “Oh, shoo. Go be with the boys and do boy things. We women will be just fine without you.”

Brian laughed at that, but Trixie noticed it didn’t take him long to join the other male Bob-Whites, who had stopped in front of the structure, gesticulating and peering over Mart’s shoulder at one of his guidebooks.

“Men,” Diana said with a hmp.

Matthew cleared his throat. “I think that makes me *de trop*.”

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The girls all swiveled around to look at Matthew and Miss Trask, the latter of whom was trying hard to bite back a smile.

"Oh, Daddy," Honey said, immediately going over and linking her arm with her father's. "You're never *de trop!*"

"I agree," Trixie said vehemently. "And I don't even know what *de trop* means!"

"I think it's something like 'too much'," Diana said. "But I'm with the others. We only count male Bob-Whites as being the irritating half of the species."

"Especially Mart," Trixie said with a sniff. "And since when do you use words like 'species', anyway? Mart is rubbing off on you too much!"

Diana tossed her hair and merely stuck her tongue out at Trixie in reply.

Matthew chuckled. "Well, I'm glad to hear I escape from the label, ladies." He looked thoughtfully around the site and then gestured toward the large pyramid near the top edge of the courtyard. "We aren't to go *in* the temple, but perhaps looking around it might be interesting?"

The four women readily agreed to this plan, so they all walked across the edge of the courtyard to the imposing temple at the far end of it.

The pyramid was easily recognizable as a pyramid, mostly by the shape of it. But the old pyramid had quite a different feel to it than the recognizable pyramids of Egypt. Rising many feet above the flat area on which they were walking, the base of the pyramid was made of moss-covered gray stones, carefully carved and set in place.

The front of the pyramid had even steps cut into it, rising up to an elaborate structure on its top, which, from what little Trixie remembered from her reading before she'd come, was the temple itself.

"I'm always amazed at what people so many years ago were able to accomplish," Miss Trask murmured as they got close to the pyramid.

Diana snapped a few pictures before she replied, "It truly is amazing. I mean, even now, it would take a huge amount of labor and planning—cranes to lift the stones, specialized stone carvers, architects to plan everything out, lots of construction workers..."

"...and they did it all without modern-day tools," Matthew said, shaking his head. "Unfathomable."

Trixie stood near the base of the pyramid, staring up at the centuries-old temple and not proceeding with the others as they walked around, examining the four sides. It was as if time stood still for her—or as if she was getting a peek into another era.

Brown-cheeked men with tight, muscled bodies, chanting an ancient, unfamiliar language, climbed the steep stairs up to the temple. The one who appeared to be the leader held a large stone tablet in hand, calling out to his gods. And then the chanters fell silent. The leader called out seven words, the last of which she knew. One she had just heard a few minutes before.

"Bak, way, k'ak', ja, pakal, tok, k'in!"

The chanting began again, and a thunderous sound echoed from the temple. Trixie's mouth went dry, and she found herself oddly compelled forward. Each step she took seemed not to be her own.

But all of the sudden, an equally strong force pulled her back. Irritation filled her, and she whirled around to find Jim, his hand gently circling her wrist.

"Hey, Trix!" he said, "I called you half a dozen times."

She blinked, staring at him uncomprehendingly.

"Are you okay?"

"I..." She started to speak before realizing that anything she said would just not make sense. Trixie closed her mouth, biting her lip before she found the voice to say huskily, "I'm fine, Jim. Just fine." She gave him a weak smile. "Just daydreaming a little, I think. So easy to imagine ancient Mayans working on this site, you know?"

Jim's green eyes gazed at her in concern, but he let it drop, knowing full well how little Trixie liked overprotective worry. "It is pretty picturesque," he agreed. Jim then gestured toward the group congregating near the van. "Dolores and Lupe want to take us to dinner. Some terrific spot with genuine local food, I gather. Everyone's all ready to leave, just waiting on you." He hesitated a moment before he asked again, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," she rushed to assure him. "Just fine." And then, in order to distract him from his worry, or worse yet, a lecture, Trixie slipped her arm through his and began walking toward the van. "I can't wait to have some *authentic* Mexican food." She smiled up at him as they strolled toward the others. "I know I sound like Mart, but I'm starving!"

They reached the others shortly, and the two Bob-Whites noticed that Dolores and Lupe were gesturing and talking excitedly to the senior archeologist at the dig.

"What's going on?" Trixie asked.

"They found some sort of stone tablet," Dan offered.

"With Mayan writing on it," Mart interjected. "It's broken—looks like maybe in two pieces. They've only found one piece, but they're really excited about it."

"With writing on it?" Jim demanded. "I wonder what it says."

In the flurry of Spanish coming from the three people not too far away, Trixie suddenly heard a few of the words she'd heard only a few moments before. Her eyes widened, and without a word, she stepped away from Jim toward the two young women. "Lupe," she said in an urgent voice. "Those words. What do they mean?"

Lupe looked at her, startled, almost as if she'd forgotten that her American friends were present. "They are Mayan words. I told you the word for sun," she began. Then, she frowned. The words in Mayan were obviously not ones she could reach for easily in English. She turned back to the others, another rapid spate of Spanish following.

After a moment, she turned back to Trixie. "The other words—they are shield and flint?" She scraped one hand against the other as if trying to light a match. "*Comprende?* Flint?"

Trixie nodded. "Like flint and steel."

Lupe's face cleared and she beamed at Trixie. "*¡Sí!* Yes!"

Before Lupe could turn back to the others again, Trixie put her hand on the young woman's arm. "What does it say on the tablet?"

Lupe shook her head. "They are not finished with the... *traducción*...oh, the..." She grasped for the word, having difficulty grasping it.

"The translation?"

"*¡Sí*, yes. The translation." Lupe's dark eyes lit then, as she continued. "It looks as if we have a

profecia—prophecy. It is very exciting!”

Trixie suddenly felt the same, strange sensation overtake her that she had felt near the pyramid. “What prophecy?” she asked in a low, hoarse voice.

Lupe stared at her for a moment before she said slowly, “I am not sure. They still...do the translation. But they did mention something about seven *desconocidos*.” She shook her head. “I do not know the word. Not from here. From far away...seven...”

“Strangers.” Trixie felt the hairs on her neck stand on end. *Seven strangers from far away. A prophecy.* She could not, at that moment, do anything other than stare back at the pyramid and its temple atop it. A cold shiver ran down her spine.

With every inch of willpower she possessed, she broke her gaze away and looked instead to her friends, who were chattering amongst themselves.

All but two, that was.

Jim, who looked at her with that all-too-familiar gaze of worry.

And Mart, who was watching the temple with the same rapt concentration as she herself had been only a moment before.

Trixie turned back to Lupe. “Will you excuse me?”

Without waiting for an answer, Trixie turned toward Jim. She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring look and squeezed his hand before she hurried to where Mart stood, a flabbergasted and also somewhat haunted look on his face. Trixie could feel Jim’s worry following her, knowing that his sharp green eyes traced the path she took toward Mart, and she knew that she should have tried to reassure him better, but she just *had* to know what Mart was staring at. She needed to know if he had seen the same thing that she did.

She needed to know if she was crazy.

When Trixie reached her brother, she placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Mart started slightly and then turned wide blue eyes on her. Every one of his freckles stood out against his pale face.

“Did you see it, too?” Trixie whispered.

A look of surprise passed over Mart’s features. He looked toward the others, who were still chatting animatedly, save for Jim, who stood frowning at the almost-twins. Mart appeared to regain some of his composure and said in a hushed voice, “The temple was restored. There were Mayans. At least, I assume they were Mayans. They were—”

“Chanting,” Trixie finished for him.

Mart, speechless for once, nodded in affirmation.

“It felt so *real*,” Trixie said, another shiver overtaking her.

“What do you think it means?” Mart asked, turning back to stare in disbelief at the temple ruins.

“I don’t know,” his sister responded, frowning. She threw a glance over at Jim, whose concern was growing into restlessness. “Jim’s getting suspicious. I think we should act naturally until we can talk to the Bob-Whites alone about this. We need to research whatever it was that they were chanting. Do you think you can remember it?”

Mart nodded. “It’s weird. Even though it was so foreign sounding, I feel as though it’s etched into my

brain.”

“Me, too,” Trixie said, throwing another glance over at Jim, whose patience had clearly run out. He was heading toward them. Quickly, Trixie said, “Lupe also said something about a prophecy with seven strangers from far away.”

Mart groaned. “Not again.”

Jim arrived next to them just in time to hear Mart’s last words. “Not again what?” he sounded casual, but Trixie knew that this particular blasé tone coming from Jim was deceptive.

Trixie smiled brightly as she looked up at the handsome redhead. “Lupe mentioned a prophecy, and Mart’s worried I’m going to drag you all into a mystery!”

Honey overheard Trixie’s remark. “A prophecy!” The honey-haired young woman turned toward their hostess. “There’s a prophecy?”

Everyone gathered around Lupe to hear her explanation. “*Sí*,” she answered Honey before continuing, “they have found a mention of seven...” The young Mexican woman paused, floundering for the word that Trixie had used a few minutes before.

“Strangers,” the pert blonde supplied again.

Lupe nodded her head animatedly. “*Sí*, strangers. The whole *profecía* still must be translated from Mayan, but it mentions seven strangers and the end date. The one soon.” She stared at the Bob-Whites, her nearly black eyes filled with the gravity of the situation. “And *you* are seven strangers from far away.”

Brian, perhaps because he was so stubbornly logical or perhaps because he couldn’t bear the thought of being involved in another supernatural mystery, quickly said, “But there are many strangers from far away. Certainly not everyone involved in the dig is local.”

“This is true,” Lupe conceded, but the seriousness did not leave her eyes. “Some come from the north of Mexico, and a few came from the United States and Peru. But I don’t think that a group of seven arrived together from any one place.”

“Well, we’re not seven,” Jim pointed out. “We’re nine.”

Miss Trask smiled, trying to lighten the mood. “Maybe chaperones don’t count.”

Matthew Wheeler nodded his agreement. “I’d say you’re definitely a group of seven. I don’t think that you’re the group of seven mentioned in the prophecy, since I don’t believe in prophecies, but—”

“Oh, don’t say that!” Dolores burst out. “It is not good luck to say such a thing!”

Trixie wondered whether Honey and Jim’s dad would tell Dolores that he didn’t believe in luck, either. Mr. Wheeler must have thought better of it, for he did not offer anything but silence to Dolores’ outburst.

Honey, ever the peacemaker, broke in with, “I know that ever since our trip to New York City with our friends from Iowa, Trixie and I have been firm believers in prophecies.”

Trixie’s sandy curls bounced animatedly as she agreed with her best friend. “Every line in that prophecy came true.”

Mart snorted. “You mean the prophecy that rhymed *after* Miss Trask translated it from Spanish?”

Trixie glared at him. “I’d think you’d know better than to doubt after what we’ve seen.” Her words were

pointed. She realized that the others would assume that she meant what they'd seen in New York City in terms of the prophecy as well as all of the events they had witnessed in recent times that could only be described as paranormal in nature. She knew that Mart, however, would know that she was specifically referring to the Mayan vision that they had both just miraculously experienced.

A looked passed between the two siblings. When Trixie glanced over at Jim a moment later, she realized that his astute gaze had not missed her silent interaction with her almost-twin.

She hastily said, "Anyway, once the prophecy is translated, I'd be interested in hearing about it. Whether or not we're the strangers in question, it's still fascinating to learn about prophecies of ancient cultures."

Dan agreed. "We're here to do as much as possible for the village, but we'd also love to learn about the culture. I can't wait to immerse myself in the Mexican culture and learn your local ways. Learning about what came before, what a culture is based on, is often very telling."

Before Mart could tease his best friend about how "cultured" he sounded, the strains of an argument reached the ears of everyone in the group. Everyone turned and saw four people quarreling vehemently. Two men and a woman, who all were dressed for the dig, appeared to be arguing with a man wearing brightly colored garb.

"Oh, no!" Lupe cried.

"What is it, Lupe?" Honey asked, reaching out to touch the obviously agitated girl's shoulder.

"It is one of the Lightbringers," Lupe explained as she stared over at the group. Other workers were hurrying over to support their colleagues. "I do not know how he got past *la guardia*."

The Bob-Whites didn't need Miss Trask's Spanish skills to know that she referred to the guards that patrolled the archaeological site.

"Especially dressed so flamboyantly," Mart muttered under his breath.

"You're not kidding," Dan said. The man wore a woven shirt that looked rather like a tunic. It was predominately purple, but a wild pattern of yellow, red, blue, black, and white was woven into it. Wrapped around the tunic at the man's waist was a brightly woven turquoise tie. The ensemble was completed with yellow pants that featured purple vertical stripes.

The voices were raised enough that Trixie was sure Lupe could understand what they were saying. "What are they yelling about?" she asked.

"*La profecía*," the girl answered simply, and the next thing the Americans knew, Lupe was hurrying toward the group that was clearly mired in conflict, her sister close on her heels.

Di looked helplessly at the others. "Do we stay or do we follow?"

Trixie shot her a rueful grin. "You know me. If I thought we could understand them, I'd be over there in a heartbeat."

"But since you *can't* understand them, you're actually going to practice a little decorum for a change?" Mart asked.

Trixie put a superior look on her face and sniffed, offering no verbal retort.

Jim winked at Trixie. "Well, if that prophecy is about us, and they're arguing about the prophecy, don't we have a right to know?"

Trixie smiled up at Jim. "The man has a point."

Mart snorted but did not say anything, as they watched the colorfully dressed man being led away. He didn't go quietly, though, turning back every few feet to shout something in Spanish. Finally, he was gone. Lupe and Dolores stood talking to their colleagues for several minutes before they returned to their visitors, both of them looking visibly shaken.

"Are you okay?" Honey wanted to know as they rejoined the group.

"Sí," Dolores said, the serious look remained on her face. "*Lo siento...I'm sorry...*"

Trixie shook her head so hard that her curls bounced in an unruly manner. "No," she said firmly. "You have nothing to be sorry for. We just want to be sure you're okay."

Dolores nodded. "We are, but there is so much to tell you."

"About the argument?" Trixie asked.

"About that. And about the prophecy. More of it has been translated."

Suddenly, time seemed to stand still for Trixie. She held her breath as she felt a shiver run up and down her spine. Somehow, she knew that whatever Dolores was about to say was about to change her life forever.

"The one about the seven strangers?" Brian asked. "Is there more about them?"

Lupe and Dolores both nodded gravely. Dolores explained, "The prophecy begins with seven words—*bak, way, k'ak', ja, pakal, tok, k'in*.

Trixie's mouth went dry, and when she glanced at Mart, she knew his shocked face mirrored her own. *Those were the words that they had heard chanted.*

"You said three of the words were sun, flint, and shield. What are the others?" Trixie wanted to know.

"The other words mean bone, fire, water, sun, and, umm, *espíritu*. It means..." Lupe was clearly struggling to find the English equivalent.

"Spirit," Brian guessed based on what the Spanish word sounded like to him. "Like a soul? A ghost?"

Lupe nodded. "*Sí*. Spirit."

"How the seven strangers might...might...*relacionar*," Dolores stumbled over the unfamiliar word, which Miss Trask supplied.

"Relate."

"Relate," the young Mexican woman repeated. "...relate to the objects is not known."

"But the writing says that the seven strangers will save the temple," Lupe finished.

The Bob-Whites stared at each other. The seven of them believed that they were the strangers in question to varying degrees—from Trixie being absolutely convinced to Brian being completely unconvinced—but one thing was certain: saving an ancient and potentially sacred temple was a lot to ask of anyone.

"What was the argument about?" Mr. Wheeler wanted to know. He shared Brian's opinion that the "prophecy" was merely an ancient culture writing down its legends. He certainly did not believe that the Mayans could predict the future.

"Some of the *arqueólogos* believe that it is merely a legend, but others believe in the prophecy," Lupe explained. "They are not Lightbringers, but they are Mayan, and they believe in the wisdom of their

ancestors. They believe that the seven strangers will allow the work to continue...that they will stop the Lightbringers from making trouble,” Lupe said. “The man you saw was a Lightbringer. He overheard two of the workers talking about the prophecy. He says that the seven strangers will save the temple from our work so that the Lightbringers can use it to join their ancestors on December 21.” Her brow was creased with worry.

Before anybody could respond, Miss Trask broke in. “It’s been a long day of travel and excitement,” she gently reminded them. “Perhaps we should head back to the hotel.”

“I could use something to eat,” Mart said.

“What’s new?” Trixie asked, rolling her eyes.

“I think we could all use something to eat,” Mr. Wheeler said diplomatically.

The ride back to town was a quiet one, with everyone looking out the window at the scenery as it slid by. Not only were they thinking of the work that they had ahead of them trying to help out in the wake of the disastrous earthquake, but now Lupe and Dolores’ worries about the archeological site had become their own. The Perez sisters were sure that the prophecy would make the Lightbringers more determined to cause trouble, and the Bob-Whites agreed.

Dolores was once again behind the wheel, and well before they had reached their hotel, she pulled the van into a parking spot along the road in front of a brightly colored stucco building. A small sign proclaimed the establishment to be “Casa Frida.”

“We love this restaurant,” Dolores explained. “We would love to eat here with you.”

The Bob-Whites and their chaperones enthusiastically agreed, and the mood of the group lightened considerably as they stepped through turquoise doors and into a charming restaurant painted in pinks and purples. White linen cloths topped tables at which bright red wooden chairs sat invitingly. Cheerful reproductions of contemporary Mexican art lined the walls. Everyone was instantly in love with the bright atmosphere.

Soon, they were seated at a table and it wasn’t long before the table was littered with delicious Mexican dishes. Mart was sharing his *chile en nogada* with anyone who would taste it, declaring it a “delectable concoction marrying savory and sweet.” It was the specialty of the house, with its bright green, red, and white colors representing the Mexican flag, and Dolores explained that it was a traditional dish served to celebrate Mexico’s independence. The dish consisted of a roasted poblano chile stuffed with ground meat, apples, pears, plantains, almonds, and raisins and then covered with a walnut cream sauce and topped with pomegranate seeds.

Dan and Brian passed around their traditional *mole poblano* for the others to share, and Trixie jokingly declared that no one was going to get near her delicious garlic shrimp, but in the end she relented and shared with anyone who wanted a bite. Mr. Wheeler enjoyed his *arrachera*, grilled skirt steak, immensely. Honey and Di raved about the beans cooked in clay pots, which accompanied their enchiladas, while Miss Trask delighted in her *crepas de cuitlacoche*, corn mushroom crepes served with grilled cheese. Jim did not regret the chicken breast with creamy poblano sauce that he had ordered. In the end, all of the Bob-Whites tried a little of everything while Dolores and Lupe beamed at them. Their favorite restaurant now had a special place in the Bob-Whites’ hearts, and that made their own hearts warm.

The trouble at the dig site was forgotten until the Bob-Whites convened in the girls’ room.

“Okay, spill it, Trixie,” Jim said unceremoniously after they had said good-bye to Dolores and Lupe for

the evening and good-night to Mr. Wheeler and Miss Trask. "Something had you and Mart seriously freaked out at the dig site."

"It did?" Honey whirled on her friend. "I didn't notice anything!"

Jim said, "Trixie acted like she was on another planet for several minutes, and when she snapped out of it, she was pale and looked stunned." He gestured at Mart. "And a few minutes later, Mart did the same thing." He looked back at Trixie. "What happened?"

Trixie and Mart shared another look, each bolstering the other. Trixie took a deep breath, focusing on the abstract beach scene depicted in the print that hung above her bed. She then turned to her friends and described her vision as best she could. After she had finished speaking, Mart agreed that his vision had been virtually identical to Trixie's.

"And you saw ancient Mayans?" Di asked, shock and fear displayed on her pretty features. The Bob-Whites were sitting on or sprawled about the two double beds in the room, and she shifted to be closer to Mart, entwining her arm with his and leaning her head on his shoulder.

"I think so," Trixie said thoughtfully. "They were chanting the words that Lupe identified as Mayan from the prophecy."

Jim, looking unhappy, moved to sit closer to Trixie, just as Di had done with Mart. Dan looked concerned, and Brian looked skeptical.

"I believe that you think you saw something," the oldest Belden began before he was interrupted by both of his younger siblings protesting in unison.

"We *think* we saw something?"

Brian would have laughed at the indignation mirrored on the almost-twins' faces, which already were so similar, if the situation hadn't been so serious.

"I admit it's weird that you would *both* see the same thing," Brian conceded. "But you also both have vivid imaginations, and you'd been hearing stories about the ancient temple. And the prophecy could be completely unrelated."

Trixie crossed her arms and raised a sandy eyebrow as she stared down her oldest brother. "So, Mart and I *imagined* real words in a language that is completely foreign to us? Words that then appeared on a tablet that the experts think is a prophecy? Yep, because our imaginations are just *that* good."

Brian sighed but did not respond to Trixie's sarcasm. What could he say to that?

"There's not much we can do about anything anyway," Dan spoke up. "It's been a long day, and it's getting late. We told Lupe and Dolores we would meet them at eight sharp tomorrow morning. We've got a lot of work ahead of us, so we should try to get some sleep."

Jim agreed. "Unless they take us up on our offer to help guard the archaeological site, we won't even be going back there. Let's get a good night's sleep so that we can be useful tomorrow. We came here to help with the earthquake recovery, and that's what we need to focus on."

On one hand, Trixie agreed. Their main focus needed to be on helping the village recover from the devastating earthquake.

But she didn't agree that they wouldn't be visiting the archaeological site again. She could feel it in her bones that they would be back at the temple.

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## *The Sacred Cholq'it*

True to Trixie's premonition, the Bob-Whites did find themselves back at the temple site four days later. They had put in three long, hard days of work helping the local residents of San Isidro as well as all of the other aid workers who had descended en masse following the natural disaster. With their carpentry skills, Jim and Brian were put to work helping to repair residences whose foundations still were solid. The girls helped Lupe and Dolores and other volunteers pass out supplies, such as diapers, bottled water, and other needed items, to residents who still were living in tent cities after the complete destruction of their homes. Mart and Dan had been assigned to a relief truck and were helping to make deliveries of medical and other supplies to the various stations and tent cities that were set up around the disaster area.

The Bob-Whites had not been prepared for the devastation that surrounded them, but they admired the plucky spirit of the locals, who seemed determined to persevere no matter what.

On the fourth morning after they had arrived in Mexico, they dragged themselves out of bed, tired and sore but energized by the work that they were doing, and expected to continue their work. After their usual morning breakfast of *pan dulce*, a sweet bread not unlike a donut, eggs, and chorizo, the Bob-Whites were ready to meet the Perez sisters.

Trixie started to fidget when the sisters were ten minutes late, insisting, "It's not like them!" when the others tried to assure her that the two were just stuck in traffic or had overslept.

When the two dark-haired young women finally arrived fifteen minutes after their normal time, they were in an excited state.

"There is new news from the temple site!" Lupe burst out. "We must go there!"

"Is everything okay?" everyone wanted to know.

Dolores and Lupe both nodded their heads, gesturing. "*Sí, sí*, but you must come to the site!" Dolores said.

"They found the rest of the prophecy!" Lupe added.

It seemed to Trixie as if the van was barely moving, so great was her sense of urgency and excitement to get to the temple site.

She couldn't explain it. Not in a normal, rational way.

Trixie glanced over at her older brother, who'd thrown himself into the earthquake relief work with a vengeance over the past few days—almost as if he was getting out frustrations with hammer and nails. He hadn't said much over the last few days that wasn't related to the work they'd been doing. Even Honey, with all her tact, hadn't been able to drag more than a few monosyllables from him when the topic drifted, as it was wont to do, to the temple and the archeological work being done there.

*Well, I can't help it if the paranormal seems to have a fascination with us.* Trixie wrinkled her nose at Brian, who couldn't see her, seated two seats ahead of her. She couldn't understand, after all they'd been through, why he was still so persistently stubborn and skeptical.

Honey's nudge broke through her preoccupation. Trixie turned to her friend with a rueful smile. "I just like all of us to be together. On the same page."

"I know what you mean," Honey said quietly, glancing at Brian before her gaze returned to Trixie. "But really, Trix, he's the most stubborn of all of you. He takes a long time to make up his mind about something, but when he does, it's nearly impossible to get him to change it."

"I just don't understand how he can be so close minded!" Trixie huffed out a breath and threw herself

against the seat's back. "I mean, after all we've been through and seen!"

"But we haven't figured out *why* we're seeing these things and being compelled to do these things," Honey said practically. "Brian needs a reason why." She shrugged her shoulders a little. "And it doesn't help that it's only you and Mart who had the visions of the Mayans." She shifted her glance over to where Jim was sitting, joking with Mart and Dan. "Maybe if Jim had one, he'd consider it."

Trixie rolled her eyes. "All he'd say would be that crack about the dinosaur in the bushes again." She sighed. "No one ever believes me straight out of the gate."

Honey hesitated but finally seemed to decide against responding. The two young women spent the remainder of the ride in silence.

When Dolores finally arrived at the temple excavation site, the Bob-Whites, their chaperones and the Perez sisters climbed out of the van and immediately headed over to where a large group of the archeological workers stood together, exclaiming excitedly in Spanish.

"What are they talking about? What's going on?" Trixie demanded, her excitement and curiosity nearly unbearable.

Lupe's eyes gleamed with a matched excitement. "They are translating the prophecy."

"How long will it take to do that?" Mart asked eagerly.

"Oh, the correct translation may take many weeks," Dolores said discouragingly. "They must choose very carefully." Her brow furrowed as she continued, "It is not so easy. The Mayan words...there is...not the same belief. How do you say?" She looked from one Bob-White to another with a plea.

"Disagreement?"

"*Si*, yes. Disagreement on the translation."

"But won't they have an idea?" Trixie persisted. "I mean...just a general idea of what the prophecy means?"

"Maybe!" Lupe said with a smile.

"I hope so!" Diana said. "I'm really interested to see what the Mayans said!"

The others all added their agreement to Diana's words. It was then that Trixie realized that her oldest brother's deep voice was not one of the ones she heard.

With a frown, Trixie glanced around her and finally saw Brian standing on the far end of the site, surveying the *temazcal*, his back to the others.

She slipped away from her group of friends, whose attention was focused on the archeologists and their work, and headed over to where her brother stood, staring at the *temazcal*.

"What are you looking at?" she asked him in a quiet voice.

Brian didn't answer her for a long time. His dark-eyed gaze was fixed on the rounded structure that looked almost like an igloo but without a front tunnel-like door. Finally, he spoke, his voice reluctant. "Here."

"Here...what?" Trixie gave him a quizzical glance before she looked back at the rounded structure. A vague memory wafted through her brain that this was the *temazcal*, and it wasn't safe for them to enter.

"This is where it has to take place." Brian's voice still had the slow, reluctant quality to it that Trixie

associated with his vocal unwillingness to be dragged into her mysteries.

“What has to take place?” But as soon as the words were out of her mouth, Trixie already knew the answer to her own question. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as that familiar, delicious shiver ran through her. *Here*.

“The prophecy gets fulfilled here.”

Trixie looked again from the *temazcal* to her brother. “Didn’t Lupe or Dolores say that we should stay away from here? That it wasn’t safe?”

A grimace crossed her brother’s face. “Yes,” he replied. “And we should listen to them. Be safe. Cautious.” Brian ran a hand down the back of his neck. “But I can’t, Trix. There’s just this...I don’t know. This...*pulling*. I can’t describe it. Like...”

“Like something disastrous is going to happen if you don’t do what you’re being compelled to do?”

The siblings turned, startled, at the voice behind them. Mart stood there, giving the *temazcal* the same troubled look that Brian was giving it.

“Exactly like that,” said Brian grimly.

Trixie snuck a glance over to where the others stood. The barrage of Spanish wafted over to them—excited, lightning-fast and obviously full of interest. The rest of their party sent several looks their way, with Jim already frowning at them in concern. She turned back to her brothers and said in a low voice, “There’s no way that Lupe or Dolores are going to let us into the *temazcal* to do anything. We’re going to have to come back here without them.”

Brian groaned and squeezed his eyes shut.

Mart frowned at her. “And how do you expect us to sneak out without Honey’s dad? Or Miss Trask? They’re the ones who have the keys to the van. We’d never be able to walk here in a short amount of time.”

“Maybe we could tell them we want to see the archeological dig at night?” Trixie asked. “I’ll bet it’s beautiful.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “Oh, yes. They’re going to let us zoom off into a protected archeological site, at night, without the permission of the people who are running the dig.”

“Not to mention that tooling around the Mexican countryside by ourselves, when none of us speak Spanish, isn’t the safest thing in the world to do,” Mart pointed out.

“Well, what do you suggest?” Trixie asked hotly. “Do you think any of us are going to be able to sit in the hotel room and ignore this...whatever it is?”

Her brothers fell silent, exchanging troubled looks. Trixie risked a glance over at the others again, and a muttered curse passed her lips. Brian glared at her, but she waved her hand. “Here come the others. I hope you have some way of convincing them to join us and not institutionalize us,” she hissed. “Remember that the prophecy mentioned seven strangers, not three.”

Dan was the first to reach them, and his mouth quirked up at the corners. “Three Beldens avoiding the large group, scheming and plotting in a corner. This doesn’t look good for the safety of the universe.”

“Be glad young Robert isn’t here with us,” Mart quipped.

“I’ll say a Hail Mary for that,” Dan agreed readily. “But what *are* you guys doing over here? I thought you’d be chafing at the bit to find out what the rest of the prophecy said.”

## *The Sacred Cholq'it*

The others joined them then, Jim slipping an arm around Trixie's shoulders. "What gives?" he demanded. "Dad is already suspicious."

"Thank goodness it wasn't just you and me over here, Trixie," Honey added. "Then the fat really would have been in the fire."

"We told him we'd fetch you guys and bring you back. Lupe and Miss Trask are joining forces to do a rough translation of the prophecy from Spanish to English for us," Di said. "It won't be perfect, but at least we'll know what the gist of it is."

"Brian's been converted to the dark side," Mart said, with a sidelong glance at his brother.

Brian gave Mart a sour look.

"Converted to the dark side?" Dan asked lightly. "That sounds ominous."

"He had a vision, I think," Trixie said. "Like me and Mart."

"No," Brian said, shaking his head. "No vision. Just..." His voice trailed off as his dark gaze turned unwillingly back to the *temazcal*. "The prophecy has to be fulfilled here. I don't know how I know it. I just...know."

All of the Bob-Whites looked at the rounded structure. It was made from similar gray stone as the rest of the buildings surrounding the temple. The stone that made the top of the *temazcal* was worn and crumbling, barely held together by the green moss that wove in between the carved pieces. An oval-shaped door led inside the structure, but it was, as many buildings were of ancient times, built for a much shorter person. Even Trixie thought she might have to bend a little to enter.

Jim frowned. "What do you mean? The prophecy has to be fulfilled here? Inside this place?"

"I thought Lupe said this place wasn't safe and that we shouldn't enter it," Dan added, a matching frown on his own thin face.

"I know," Brian said. "Like I said, I can't explain it. And I'm not happy about it. But there it is."

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," Honey said, wrapping a hand around Brian's. "Daddy is looking to get back to town so we can help with the earthquake victims. We only have today and tomorrow before we have to return home for Christmas. He said he's as interested as we are in the archeological site and the prophecy, but he thinks the earthquake victims need our help more."

"And he's right," Jim said firmly. "Let's deal with what we came here to do first, and then we can talk about the prophecy and the *temazcal* tonight."

The Bob-Whites all agreed, and the seven friends walked back toward where the others were gathered. Trixie felt, though, an almost physical pain walking away from the site. Quick glances at her brothers indicated that they, too, were feeling the effects of whatever was calling them to the *temazcal*.

*Soon*, Trixie promised herself. *Soon*.

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Despite Trixie's concern, the day did fly by, and she was almost able to put the siren call of the *temazcal* and the Mayan prophecy behind her. But as soon as they left their aid jobs, the sense of urgency was back with a vengeance—perhaps even stronger than before. After a delicious dinner with the Perez sisters, Mart grabbed Trixie's hand to pull her over near him. He said in a harsh, low voice, "If we don't get over to that archeological site soon, I'm going to crawl out of my freakin' skin!"

Trixie couldn't help but agree with her brother. She had also noticed that all of the other Bob-Whites

had looked distinctly uneasy when they thought no one had been watching them at dinner. “Bob-White meeting in the girls’ room in fifteen minutes,” she said in a very quiet voice, darting a glance at Miss Trask, who was speaking with Honey and Di as they all walked down the hallway to their rooms. “Tell the others.”

Mart nodded grimly and let go of her hand as he turned to follow Dan and Brian, who were talking in hushed tones, into their room.

Trixie glanced behind her at Jim, who was in earnest conversation with his father. Jim didn’t look her way, almost as if he were deliberately trying *not* to look at her. She hesitated for a moment, but finally, when Honey and Di broke away from Miss Trask and hurried over to her, she unlocked the door to their room and went inside.

She waited until the other two young women had entered the room before she closed the door. Trixie was surprised to see Honey hopping from one leg to the other in her excitement. “What’s wrong?” she demanded of her friend.

“Couldn’t you tell? All during dinner?” Di was the one to answer Trixie’s question. The dark-haired beauty threw herself onto one of the beds, her violet eyes wide and dramatic. “Everyone was about ready to tear out of the restaurant! I felt like I was ignoring a life-or-death call to just be sitting there!”

“Me, too,” Honey said, nodding her head vehemently. “All I could think about all during dinner was how I *had* to get my hands on that prophecy translation. I don’t even remember half of what I said during dinner.” She flushed a little as she pushed a long strand of hair away from her face. “I hope I didn’t embarrass myself.”

“Mart said he felt like he was crawling out of his skin,” Trixie said. “I felt the same way. It was like how I feel when I want to solve a mystery, but about 1000 times worse!” She waved her hand toward the boys’ room next door. “I told the boys to come over in fifteen minutes—just to give time for your dad and Miss Trask to go to their rooms and not be suspicious.” She gave the other girls a look of chagrin. “I wish I’d said five minutes instead of fifteen. Ten more minutes is going to feel like an eternity!”

A knock on the door interrupted the girls’ conversation. Trixie hurried over to the door and opened it. Mart immediately pushed his way past her, followed by the other three male Bob-Whites.

“It hasn’t been fifteen minutes yet,” Trixie felt compelled to point out.

Brian, the last one in, closed the door behind him and locked it. “We waited until we saw Mr. Wheeler and Miss Trask go into their rooms, and then we hightailed it over here.”

“They probably figure that we’ll want to talk a little before we go to bed anyway,” Dan pointed out as he sat down next to Di on the bed. “And it’s not like we’re going to be inappropriate with all seven of us in here.”

“I don’t think Dad’s particularly worried about *that*,” Jim said with a rueful look at Trixie. “I think he’d be happy if that were the only thing they had to worry about.”

Trixie stuck her tongue out at Jim. “Can I help it if mysteries find me?”

“Find *us*,” Honey interjected. “They find *us*.”

“Yes, true. They find us,” Trixie quickly agreed with a smile.

“I don’t care which of you they find,” Brian grumbled. “I just wish they’d leave *me* out of it for once.”

“Hear, hear!” Diana called out. “And these paranormal ones are even worse than the regular ones!”

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"Well, we're stuck in this one for now," Mart said, for once not even attempting to tease Trixie. "So, we've got to make the best of it." He looked at Jim in inquiry. "Did you weasel the key to the van out of your dad's pocket?"

Trixie's mouth fell open as she looked at Jim in surprise. "You *pickpocketed* your dad?"

Jim's indignation was swift. "I did *not*! I asked him for the key, and he gave it to me."

"Did he want to know why you wanted it?"

Red crept up Jim's neck, staining his face. "Well, you all have to go with me at some point before breakfast tomorrow to some of the little stores near the resorts we passed on the way to the archeological site. I told him we wanted to do a little Christmas shopping before we went home on Saturday. I don't want to be a complete liar."

"We'll have to go up that way to get to the site anyway," Trixie said with a nod. "We can stop on the way back."

"But we don't have any idea what we're supposed to *do*," Dan interrupted. "All we've got are weird feelings and the prophecy that mentioned seven strangers."

"That's where this comes in!" Honey waved a piece of paper in front of Dan.

"Is that the prophecy translation?" demanded Mart.

"Yes," Honey said. "I begged Miss Trask to give us the copy she'd written down. It took them a while to come up with something between Miss Trask's Spanish and Lupe and Dolores' English."

"Well, don't just stand there!" Dan urged her. "Read it!"

"Does it rhyme?" Mart quipped, even as he moved in closer to try to read over Honey's shoulder.

"Mart!" Trixie gave him an exasperated look.

"No, it doesn't rhyme." Honey said matter-of-factly before turning her attention to the prophecy and reading it aloud. "Oh, sun, great bringer of day, save us from the devouring of the earth into an eternal night. Flint will provide a spark. Bone, a willing sacrifice. Fire will light the way. A shield for protection. Water shall be the vessel for the spirit to rise from the earth. Protect us and deliver us to a new day."

"A willing sacrifice?" Brian had locked onto the words and dismay crossed his handsome face.

"Okay, we are seriously *not* doing anything with human sacrifice," Diana protested.

"We're not slaughtering chickens or some other poor animals, either," Dan added.

"What about those words? The ones Mart and I heard in the visions we had?" Trixie asked.

"They're all part of the prophecy," Honey said. She held out the paper to Trixie to show her. "According to what Lupe wrote here, *bak* is bone. *Way* is spirit. *K'ak'* is fire. *Ja* is water. *Pakal* is a shield. *Tok* is flint, and *k'in* is the sun."

"Seven words for seven people," Mart said, his tone thoughtful.

"It seems like there's a list of instructions in the prophecy," Jim said, looking over his sister's shoulder at the paper she still held in her hand.

"That makes sense," Trixie readily agreed. She, too, peered at the paper. "Something about the sun. Bringer of day, save us from the devouring of the earth into an eternal night. Devouring of the earth?"

"They did just have an earthquake down here," Brian said quietly.

"But that already happened," Trixie said with a frown. "And it wasn't an eternal night. I mean, yes, it was terrible for the people who lived here, but they're still here and rebuilding."

"What if there's another earthquake?" Diana asked, her voice small and tinged with a bit of fear. "A bigger one this time?" Her violet eyes grew large. "I've seen pictures of some of those earthquakes...where the whole earth seems to open up and buildings slide into big cracks in the ground. Maybe that's what they mean?"

"Now wait just a minute," Dan said, looking from one of the Bob-Whites to the other. "These Mayan...gods...or whoever they are...want us to go out to that *temazcal* place, come up with a bone from God knows where, and have some sort of ritualistic ceremony in the *middle of an earthquake*?"

"Maybe it's to *prevent* the earthquake!" Trixie said impatiently. "It says here," which she punctuated by pointing vigorously to the paper Honey held, "*save us from the devouring of the earth.*" She raised an eyebrow at her friend. "Maybe we have to do this in order to prevent an earthquake."

"Be that as it may," Brian said, shaking his head, "we have no idea where we're going to find a bone for a sacrifice."

"And I'm keeping all 206 of mine, thank you very much," Mart retorted.

"Everyone just calm down," Honey said, her voice rising in frustration over the clamor around her. "Let's just look at this in parts." She pushed her way out of the circle of her friends and sat down on the bed next to Di and Dan. Then, she spread the paper out on the bed. "Ignore the bone part for right now. We'll deal with that last." She gestured toward the paper. "First thing, the sun. What do we do about that?"

"Some kind of light source?" Jim asked, frowning as he looked down at the paper.

"You'd think they'd use the word 'light' if they meant that." Mart scratched his chin. "I think they're talking about the sun god himself."

"Okay, the sun god," Honey said. "That would be the sun. But it's nighttime. And besides, that little house or whatever it's called that Brian thought we had to use is all closed, other than the door. And that door doesn't even face east toward the sun. It faces south."

"Maybe we need to make some sort of hole in the top?" Brian said, rubbing the back of his neck and looking uneasily at the others.

"Great," Dan said sourly. "Not only are we going to be performing human sacrifice in the middle of an archeological dig we have no right to be on in the middle of a freakin' earthquake, but we're going to be defacing protected ruins as well?"

"All we'd have to do would be to remove maybe *one* stone," Trixie said. "And the stones on top are loose as it is. We just have to have a place where the sun can shine in."

"Okay. So, remove stone to let sunlight in. Gotcha." Honey pulled a pen out from her purse and checked the item off of the list. "Now flint...flint..."

"That's an easy one," Jim offered. "We'd just need matches or a lighter or something like that. Anything that will start a fire."

"We can pick some up at one of the stores near the resorts," Brian said.

"Bone...oh, yeah. We're ignoring the bone for now," Honey said with a slight grimace before she continued, "Fire..."

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"Well, we've got that with the flint-slash-matches," Dan said.

"A shield for protection." Honey looked up at the others with a frown on her face. "Do they mean a shield shield? Like something Captain America would use?"

"Or more likely, an ancient Mayan?" Mart couldn't resist adding.

Brian whacked him on the back of the head.

Mart yelped and rubbed his head, glaring at his brother, but didn't comment further.

Jim frowned as he looked at the piece of paper. "It's got to all fit together somehow. The seven strangers and the seven tasks, so to speak." He pointed at the text. "We're making a sacrifice of some sort to the sun god. At least, that's what this appears to be."

"The sun is in the sky," Dan added thoughtfully, "so whatever we've got to do has got to go up."

"Well, a fire would go up," Diana said. "The smoke, at least!"

"They mention this bone, though. Bones don't burn, do they?" Honey looked doubtfully at the others.

"No," Brian said, shaking his head. "And then we've got the problem about the water." Brian tapped the line about the water. "Water would put *out* the fire."

"Oooh!" Trixie's eyes lit up as the pieces clicked into place. "Not if it were boiling on top of it."

She scurried over to the bureau and grabbed the coffee pot, waving it in front of the others.. "You light a fire, you put the water inside a pot on the fire, which acts as a shield for the water from the fire..."

Light began to dawn on the other Bob-Whites' faces. "And then you put the bone inside the pot..." Jim added.

"...and the 'spirit' of the sacrificed person rises up in the steam produced by the boiling water!" Mart exclaimed triumphantly.

"That's it!" Diana clapped her hands together, her face excited and pleased. But a moment later, the pleased expression vanished and a troubled one was left behind. "But where in the world are we going to get a bone from?"

"Did they find any people at the site?" Trixie asked. "I mean, maybe there are already 'perfect sacrifice' victims that they've uncovered at the archeological site."

Dan groaned. "This just gets worse and worse."

"Well, I don't think they're going to take animals as a sacrifice, even if we were willing to go kill some animals," Trixie said practically, "which we aren't, and we certainly can't kill any humans or go messing around with graves or anything like that."

"But is this any better? Taking a bone from some poor victim of this Mayan god cult?" Brian asked, his voice irritated as it often got when he was out of his comfort zone.

"Well, they already were a sacrifice to begin with." Trixie sighed. "And there isn't anything we can do for them now to prevent that. And maybe this was something that meant a lot to them. I don't know. But that's probably our *only* opportunity for finding some sort of bone to complete the ritual with."

"I have visions of spending Christmas in a Mexican jail," Dan muttered, "trying to explain how a bunch of American Protestants and Catholics got mixed up in an ancient Mayan ritual. Especially when none of us are Mexican or Mayan!"

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"I would skip this all together, if I could," Brian sighed. "But I don't think I'm going to sleep a wink unless we get this over with." He raised an eyebrow at the others. "Do any of you feel differently?"

No one answered him in the affirmative, so Brian took the silence as an agreement to move forward. "So, what we need here is some sort of lighter or matches, a pot or a kettle to use as the shield, some water and, God help us, a bone. Is that everything?"

"I think so," Honey said as she perused the list again. "I don't think we'd need anything else."

"Well, then," Mart said, stretching his arms above his head as he got to his feet. "Let's get on the road before someone here asks us what we're doing and where we're going. I don't relish giving any tricky explanations."

The others readily agreed with Mart, and the seven friends quietly got their things together and hurried out to the van.

The drive was mostly done in silence. Jim kept his eye on the road as he drove, and the only time they stopped was for Mart to slip out of the car to get the few required items that they didn't have with them. He soon returned with a brightly colored cooking pot, several lighters and a gallon of purified drinking water. "I figured we'd better have plenty, just to be on the safe side," he said.

Tension ratcheted up in the van as Jim entered the wildlife refuge. The beauty of their surroundings, so breathtaking during the sunny daytime, was more ominous and dark as they traveled through the woods. It seemed almost too quiet. As if the animals, birds and other wildlife were collectively holding their breath, waiting for the seven Bob-Whites to complete their mission.

"Well, we're here," Jim said, peering through the windshield to look at the darkened grounds of the temple site.

"Gosh, it's creepy," Di said with a shiver. "It's such a big place and so dark. I can't understand how those archeology people can possibly guard all of it. And what about thieves?"

"Lupe mentioned that they lock up the more valuable pieces off site, and I think the archeologists stay in a nearby town and commute to the site," Mart offered as he collected the items they needed from the floor near his feet.

"We're not here alone, though," Brian said with a frown.

Trixie leaned forward, peering around her brother's shoulder. "Oh! Those costumes! Aren't those the...oh, shoot. Those weird people who protest the dig? What are they called again? Lightbringers?"

"I think so," Jim said with a slow nod. "Looks like we'll find out for sure. They're coming our way."

Two men in the bright, flamboyant tunics they'd seen earlier approached the van and gestured to Jim to roll down the window. Jim did so but with reluctance. "Can we help you?"

"You are the seven strangers, *sí*?" The taller man was the one who spoke first. His tanned face was all eagerness.

Jim glanced at the others before he replied, "We think so."

"*Bueno!* Good!" He beamed at them. "We are making ready at the temple. Come! Come with us."

Brian leaned across to speak with the men, shaking his head in disagreement. "No. We go to the *temazcal*."

The two men looked at him in bewilderment. "No! The temple is the sacred place."

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"That may be," Brian said politely, "but the prophecy is about the *temazcal*. We will go there."

The two men glanced at each other and began speaking in low, hurried voices, all in Spanish. Finally, their faces cleared and they gave Brian knowing nods. "Yes, yes. The place of rebirth. We understand." He waved in a general way toward the large shadow of the temple. "We will wait in the temple."

With that, the two men disappeared back into the darkness.

Jim rolled up the window of the van as Dan muttered, "This just gets crazier and crazier. Please don't tell me one of them is going to come over to volunteer to be a sacrifice for us."

"That'd be something to write home in a postcard about, wouldn't it?" Mart quipped. "Performing ritual sacrifice at a Mayan *tezacal*. Wish you were here."

Trixie groaned. "Will you clowns get out of the van and get moving? We don't have much time!"

The seven Bob-Whites filed out of the van, carefully making their way across the uneven ground to where the white-topped archeological tents gently dipped and swelled in the evening breeze.

"Everyone got their flashlights?" Jim asked. In answer, six small beams turned on, lighting the area around them.

"We've got to get a bone of some sort," Honey said in a quiet voice. She flicked a gaze at Brian. "Brian, you're...."

"...the med student. I know." Brian sighed heavily. "I think there were some bones in one of the tents over there, closer to the temple."

Carefully, everyone followed Brian over to one of the closed tents. He lifted a flap and peered inside, flashing his light around. After a moment, he pulled his head back out, shaking it. "Nothing here but potsherds."

The next two tents were also not successes, but in the third, Brian was gone a much longer time. He finally came out, holding a small bone in his hand. "This is a metatarsal, I think. There were only a couple of bones in there, and I figured I'd take one that would be small and less likely to be damaged by our little experiment."

"Good thinking," Jim said approvingly.

"I hate to rush you guys," Mart said in a low voice, but we've got about a half-hour until midnight. If we don't get started soon, we're not going to finish in time to save the world before December 21st."

"Not to mention that with Trixie's track record, we'll have Mr. Wheeler and Miss Trask sending out the cavalry if we don't get back to the hotel soon," Dan added. He gently pushed Honey and Di forward. "Let's go!"

Within a few minutes, the Bob-Whites had reached the *temazcal* on the opposite side of the site. Jim shone his flashlight over the top of the rounded building, gazing at the roof critically. "Anything up there that can be moved without damaging the structure too badly?"

Brian stood on tiptoe, trying to use his own flashlight to make the area of light at the top bigger. "I can't see anything."

Trixie sighed. "This isn't helping." She looked from Jim to Brian before she finally grabbed her brother's hand and tugged it. "You're a teensy bit taller than Jim. C'mon!"

She pulled Brian into the *temazcal*. Both siblings flashed their lights around its interior. The inside was remarkably simple. In the center was a round circle, which Trixie surmised was the sacrificial fire pit. If

there had been painted drawings on the inside of the *temazcal*, they were long gone. Mexico's muggy tropical weather did not have the arid dryness of Egypt, which had preserved the pyramids' reliefs.

"Let me climb onto your shoulders," Trixie said as she gestured upward to the highest point of the room with her flashlight.

Both siblings could easily see moss weaving its way through the stones at its top. "There's bound to be at least one loose stone," Trixie said.

With a sigh, Brian crouched down into a squat, low enough so that Trixie could scramble onto her brother's shoulders. He groaned as he made the effort to get to his feet. Trixie swayed a bit uncertainly, grasping at his dark hair. "Don't drop me!" she demanded.

"Notice I'm being a gentleman and not commenting on the fact that I'm trying to stand up with a lot more weight on my shoulders than I'm used to," he grumbled.

"You failed the gentleman test by mentioning that," Trixie said cheerfully. She hooked the top of her feet around Brian's back and urged him forward. "I think I'm close enough to the roof to grab one of the stones."

Obediently, Brian walked gingerly forward, stepping over the stones that outlined the fire pit. Trixie shone her flashlight up near the top. Most of the stones looked fairly sturdy, and she had a sudden hope that pulling one out wouldn't bring the whole roof down on Brian and her.

"Trix? Hurry up, will you? I don't want to be ungentlemanly, but my shoulders are killing me."

"Okay, okay." Trixie stretched her hand up, wincing as she felt the slippery moss against her fingers. Finally, she got purchase on one of the stones and wiggled it back and forth until it finally came out into her hand—along with a spray of moss, dirt and God knows what else.

Brian shook his head, coughing. "Trixie!"

"Sorry! I'm sorry!"

"You guys done?" Dan poked his head in the door, surveying the two siblings. "Mart has twenty of twelve on his watch, and Jim's nearly catapulted through the door three times to rescue you from falling rock. I finally sent him off with Mart to go get some firewood for the fire."

Brian gingerly squatted down again so Trixie could scramble off his shoulders. "There hasn't been any falling rock," she said indignantly. "Just a little dirt and moss. That's all. I didn't even dislodge any other stones."

"Take a situation where Jim has very little control, mix in the paranormal, and add a dose of you, and you're lucky he's not either in the fetal position or hovering around you like a vampire searching for dinner." Dan's eyes crinkled up at the corners as he smiled. "He's nuts about you, you know."

Trixie's face softened as she sighed. "I know he is." She brushed off her hair and her shoulders as her brother did the same. "I'm nuts about him, too." Then, she gave her friend a wry look. "Not nuts about the overprotective qualities, but definitely about the redhead himself."

Honey poked her head around Dan. "Jim and Mart are headed this way with the firewood. Can we get started?"

All seven Bob-Whites soon were crouched around the fire pit inside the *temazcal*. No one spoke for a few moments as Jim arranged the wood in the pit.

"I got wood that was easy to burn," Jim said as he finally leaned back, wiping his hands on the back of

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his jeans. "Hopefully, it'll heat the water up quickly." He looked over at his sister. "So how do we start, Honey?"

Honey frowned before she turned her flashlight to the prophecy translation. "Well, if we each take a part, we'll cover everything, I think, including the seven strangers requirement."

"But how do we do the spirit thing?" Diana asked. "There really isn't anything we can do there."

"Six of us will do the parts we can. Honey can read the prophecy," Dan said.

"Sounds good to me," Trixie agreed.

Honey cleared her throat and began to read in a low, husky voice. "Oh, sun, great bringer of day, save us from the devouring of the earth into an eternal night."

Trixie put the stone she'd removed from the roof inside the fire pit before returning to her seat outside of the circle.

"Flint will provide a spark."

A flicker of blue light and then a flame glowed from the lighter Mart held in his hand. He then let the flame go out and handed the lighter to Jim.

"Bone, a willing sacrifice."

Brian slipped the metatarsal bone into the large pot.

"Fire will light the way."

Carefully, Jim lit several pieces of the wood and then sat back on his haunches, watching as the flames licked through the timber he'd placed there.

"A shield for protection."

Dan lifted the large pot and placed it gingerly over the fire, causing a spray of sparks to shoot out underneath in different directions. But Jim's carefully built fire still continued to burn.

"Water shall be the vessel for the spirit to rise from the earth."

Diana took a deep breath and poured a little water into the pot, and then a little more, filling it enough to let the bone float within it, but not too much where the water would take a long time to boil.

"Protect us and deliver us to a new day."

The seven Bob-Whites then sat back to wait.

Trixie had many times heard the old adage of "a watched pot never boils", but this was taking it to a level of ridiculousness.

In the shadows that played across her friends' faces from the firelight waxing and waning, she could see the same eager concentration on the pot that she knew she had herself. Seconds seemed to seem as long as hours as they waited for bubbles to form on the surface of the water.

But then everything changed.

It started as a low thrum in the background, growing stronger as Trixie stared, mesmerized by the flames. A sonorous chant wafted through her ears, and she felt a rolling wave underneath her that knocked her flat on the ground.

Sparks flew upward, rising in a thin curl of smoke. She heard a hissing noise, like that of an angry snake.

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A column of steam unfurled from the pot, winding around the smoke.

"Bak," the hoarse word seemed to crawl of its own volition out of her throat. She barely registered the voices of her friends finishing the Mayan chant, "*way, k'ak', ja, pakal, tok, k'in!*"

The twin columns of smoke and steam reached the opened hole in the roof, and suddenly, everything started to shift. The ground shook, dirt and moss rained from overhead and the pot lurched dangerously on its precarious perch. She stared as the stone she'd placed into the pit vanished through a rip that appeared suddenly in the dirt floor of the *temazcal*.

So entranced was she by the spectacle that she barely registered the splash of water that was thrown onto the fire, reducing it to sizzling ash, and the rough, grabbing hands that pulled her to her feet and out into the open air away from the *temazcal*.

Coughing, blinking and disoriented, Trixie tried to get her bearings. Dirty and disheveled they all were, but all six of her friends stood outside the *temazcal*, looking at each other with a mix of terror and disbelief on their faces.

"What..." she croaked. "What just happened?"

"Earthquake," Dan replied, shaking his head incredulously. "A damned *earthquake!*"

"That's a first for us," Mart said, his voice roughened by smoke and, if Trixie judged right, fright.

"Causing an earthquake. I thought we were supposed to help people recover from one. Not cause another!"

"I want to go back to the hotel." Di's violet eyes were wide and terrified.

"Me, too," Honey echoed her firmly. She clutched Brian's arm, holding on for dear life.

Jim put his arm around Trixie's shoulders, giving her a kiss on the top of her head. "Let's go, shamus. There isn't anything left to do here. And we should see if Dad and Miss Trask are okay."

But something in Trixie would not let her leave. Her blue gaze was riveted to the *temazcal*.

"Trix?" Jim's voice grew urgent, but also seemed to be further away. It morphed into an indistinct buzz in her background as Trixie slipped from Jim's embrace and headed back into the *temazcal*.

The room was much as it was before. The pot lay broken in pieces over the dying embers of the fire, the white of the bone gleaming grotesquely in Trixie's beam from her flashlight.

But Trixie's interest was not on any of these things.

The ripped earth had closed, shoving rock and dirt upward to seal the seam. It had also thrust up something else. Something very, very different and unexpected.

Lying on the ground was an intricately carved, beautifully decorated round disk made of stone. Similar to ones she'd seen before at the site. This one, however, was not worn and thousands of years old. This one was brand new.

"*Tzolk'in*," Trixie murmured as she ran her fingers over the stone disc. "*Tzolk'in*."

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It surprised none of the Bob-Whites to find out that while the earthquake had wreaked additional havoc on many of the already-stricken homes and businesses near to the temple site, the temple itself remained unharmed.

The disk Trixie had found had caused a huge stir of excitement in the archeologists' quarters. Lupe and

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Dolores had chattered in a mélange of Spanish and English about the new calendar that had appeared out of nowhere into the *temazcal*. The Lightbringers were thrilled that the Mayan temple had escaped damage and destruction, proclaiming the seven strangers heroes.

Their last day in Mexico was spent helping the aid workers again. All of the group was strangely quiet and seemed to have minds that were elsewhere—not truly on the work that they were doing.

The Bob-Whites offered no explanations for or ideas about the strange occurrences at the Mayan site, and when even Mart refused to speculate, Matthew and Marge both had their suspicions as to where the seven young people really had been the night before.

Hugs and goodbyes were shared with the Perez sisters, with many promises on both parts that they would meet again someday. The Bob-Whites, with shaky smiles and tears, filed into the van, with Dan giving each girl one last loud smack of a kiss on their cheeks before he got in and closed the door behind him.

Matthew and Marge climbed into the front seats, ignoring the din of the talking young people in the back seat. As he started the engine of the van, Matthew leaned over to Marge and said in a low, confiding voice, “I know I’ve got questions about what those kids were up to last night.”

He pulled off of the dirt road that led to the small hotel and turned onto the larger road that would take them to the airport. “I’m sure you do, too.”

“Yes,” she murmured, glancing over her shoulder to where Trixie and Mart were in the middle of a squabble over some small souvenir they’d picked up during their trip.

“But you know what?” Matthew gave her a wry smile. “Sometimes I feel that as long as they’ve returned safe and sound, the less details I know, the better.”

The corners of Marge’s lips turned up as she settled back more comfortably into her seat. “You are a wise man, Matthew Wheeler. A very wise man.”

*The End*  
*(but not the end of the world!)*

### Dana’s Notes

#### *October 2012 Notes*

First off, Susan is a saint. Truly. I procrastinated longer than ever this year, and she was so sweet about it! Working with her on these stories every year is so fun. We feed off of each other in a way that energizes us. She gets me excited about writing in a way that no one can! Best 10 years ever! :) I’m so thrilled to have this joint project to look forward to every year, and I can’t believe it’s a decade old already!

Forgive any errors about Mexico or the Maya. I haven’t been to Mexico in a very long time, and I’ve never been to San Isidro! There are numerous San Isidros in Mexico, it would appear, so we had some leeway where to place Dolores and Lupe’s hometown (which was named as San Isidro in *The Black Jacket Mystery*). We chose to use the San Isidro in the Yucatán Peninsula because that’s closest to traditional Mayan lands. Any mistakes on the geography are because there is not a lot of information to be found online!

Assuming the world doesn’t end on December 21, 2012 (ha!), we’ll be posting the ending on that day. We thought that would be a fun twist on our Halloween story to post the ending on the exact day it takes place.

Many thanks to everyone who has been so supportive of this universe!

Dana word count: 3,191

#### *December 2012 Notes*

## *The Sacred Cholq'it*

I procrastinated. Again. I suck, but Susan, as I said before, is a saint. Thanks for putting up with me, sweetie! {{HUGS}} Not to mention that she wrote the lion's share of the story and all the hard parts, too, because I was just so darn blocked. I owe you so much, my friend!

Again, any mistakes about the disaster relief efforts, languages, culture, geography, and so forth are not for lack of trying. Susan and I are all about the research (do you know how many times we fall down the rabbit hole of research only to realize we've written 10 words in 3 hours because we're so engrossed? \*g\*), but I know I certainly could have made mistakes, not having experienced any of this firsthand nor being an expert on the Mayan or Mexican cultures.

The symbol divider found in the story includes the Mayan symbols for the seven words in the prophecy in order: bak (bone), way (spirit), k'ak' (fire), ja (also spelled ya or ha, water), pakal (shield), tok (flint), and k'in (sun).

Merry Jixmas to all!

Dana part 2 word count: 3,336; total word count: 6,527

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### Susan's Notes

#### *October 2012 Notes*

Whoo-boy! Are we mean this year or what? \*insert little evil grinning guy from Jix here\*

I can't believe we're at Year 10 of this universe already! It honestly seems, in many ways, that Dana just said to me, "Well, if you don't have anything for Fright Night, you can always co-write with me on this story idea I had..."

We have so much fun with this every year. And it was even FUNNER this year, 'cause we got to plot and scheme in person. :)

Lots of research has gone into this already, and I can't guarantee that, even with the research, that I'm even close to being correct about Mayan architecture, the Spanish and Mayan languages, Mexican culture and geography or archeology. Rest assured, the errors are mine and not those of the people's sites that I found to help me.

The bird book Jim consults is considered one of the premiere books on Mexican and Central American birds. I figured Mart would bring the travelogue books, and Jim would bring the ones on the flora and fauna of Mexico. :)

Dolores and Lupe Perez are actual canon characters—the two Mexican penpals of Trixie and Honey's who had a devastating earthquake in their hometown of San Isidro that inspired the ice skating fundraiser in *The Black Jacket Mystery*. We thought it'd be so much fun to revisit them, especially considering our 2012 Mayan theme. :)

My notes will be more thorough for the last part of this story. I promise. :)

And, as always, it is sheer pleasure to work with Dana on these stories every year. We really do have a wonderful time. :) She has fabulous ideas, is a gem to brainstorm with, and makes my October one of the highlights of the year. :)

And this year, you get a double dose of us. ;)

See you in December!

Susan word count: 2,549

#### *December 2012 Notes*

Whew! I must say that it was a rather exciting finish for us! Fortunately, the world did not end today, December 21st, so you have been able to read the rest of this story. \*grin\*

I realized I sadly forgot to include my links in my last author's notes, so I am rectifying that now!

These pages will tell you about the temazcal and some of its history and uses:

## *The Sacred Cholq'it*

- <http://www.tlahui.com/temazi.html>
- <http://www.cyberbohemia.com/Pages/originoftem.htm> (no longer available)

This page was instrumental in helping convert some of the Mayan language into English for us. It is an interesting overview of the Mayan symbol language and some of the meanings of the pictures. The ancient Mayan language is a lot more like Chinese in that it uses pictorial symbols to designate whole words. This just scrapes the surface of the language, and I'm definitely no expert in any language (although I don't do too badly with English ;)), so anything I screwed up is my own fault and not that of the Ancient Mayans or of people who spend a lifetime on this work of translation. <http://www.ancientscripts.com/maya.html> (no longer available)

This site will give you a little overview as to the architecture of Mayan structures.  
<http://library.thinkquest.org/10098/mayan.htm> (no longer available)

The word Tzolk'in that Trixie uses is the Mayan word for "the count of days" (the calendar).  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya\\_calendar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_calendar)

This site was helpful with archeological stuff: <http://www.enviro-explorers.com/archlearning.html> (no longer available)

There are 206 bones in the human body. And they do burn (partially) at 1292 F. But they are also made up of a good portion of non-flammable matter. More about that here:  
<http://www.stgeorgeoc.org/PastorsCornerCremation.htm>

Captain America is a super hero who uses a shield and potsherds are fragments of pottery found at archeological sites.

There are more sites that I perused as I did some research on the Internet, but these are the main ones.

Characters, of course, belong to Random House and we're making no money off their use here. Dolores and Lupe Perez come from the Mysterious Code. They're pen pals of Trixie and Honey's.

It is always so fun to write these stories with Dana. :) We have such a good time, even when we're scrambling to finish at the last moment!

Thank you all for being so interested in these spooky stories of ours! Ten years of writing them already! It's hard to believe!

See you again next year for more paranormal fun! :)

Susan part 2 word count: 7,346; total word count: 9,895

Total story word count: 16,422

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