

I. She Digs Archaeology

2013. The pervasive wood smoke of Mexico City created an orange midday glow. Death. Its challenging presence rode hot thermal wavelets, making the ground quiver.

In the chorizo-flavored heat, Julietta Aguilar hurried along the west foundation of the El Templo Major, dark chestnut hair pulled back into a loose knot that kept time with her stride. Although native to Mexico like many in the dig crews, Julietta Aguilar was U.S. educated. That fact alone had built a wall separating her from locally educated archaeologists — and from various regional perceptions and sensibilities. But she took these tensions in stride; her mind was focused on the unraveling of the secrets she now walked upon.

The majesty and scale of the temple where she stood absorbed her every waking moment. If it meant digging seven days a week to become published, she would. The Templo Mayor was her muse.

The structure sat on a plaza of flat irregular limestone pavers once tread by Cortez and Montezuma, now a pit fifty feet below the surface of modern Mexico City, eagerly occupied by her and others digging for knowledge and fame. Around these excavated acres an aggregate of five centuries of civilization rose above her, framing the great hole with colonial and modern structures.

Excited by the prospect of a new discovery, Julietta clambered down eight wooden steps, under an awning and into a cavity littered with exposed bones. Sacrificial victims, the estimate was four hundred. The scale of death she and her crews discovered continued to awe her.

Looking over the paved mall, its depths not yet explored, she wondered how many more bodies rested under the broad stone mosaic. Often she envisioned the irregular stony slabs moving, and bony hands reaching through the dirt to pull their skeletal remains free to walk away. Sometimes their primeval pain seemed to rise from the earth and travel up her body, numbing her senses. Questions tumbled inside her:

Who were you? Why did you end like this?

Julietta knelt and studied a loosely arrayed set of female bones; the head had been placed on a partially excavated jade plate with an engraved butterfly. After photos were taken, the plate and bones would be carefully removed and archived.

At first thrilled by the unique placement of the head, she turned inward and thought of the young woman's hopes. Was she loved? Did her spirit find fulfillment in its discovery? What was it like under the priest's knife? She found her only answer in the empty eyeholes in the skull, eyes that seemed to hold a terrified expression of violent death.

If she had lived five hundred years ago it might have been Julietta's bones interred here now. Wealth and status meant nothing to the Aztec god's lust for blood. Julietta's family was wealthy, and her father was a widely read political writer and publisher, but that kind of power would not have saved him or his family. The priests sacrificed everyone -- nobles, wives and their children.

That thought always put things into perspective. Just how important were her problems? And she did have them. It wasn't just the lack of a love life for a young, ambitious PhD dedicated to her work. Solitude and moments of depression came with the job. In fact, and sadly, it had been over a year since the last man -- far too long. But male companionship was not high on her priorities. No, the main difficulty was, as always, her parents.

Needing to prep for a meeting in the coming hour, she left the pit and the bones and found shade near a newly uncovered wall that had emerged from stony rubble.

A sultry breeze that was more of a promise than a commitment pushed at the heat in weak gasps. Sitting on the cobbled ground near a pile of stony debris, surrounded by her scattered tools, her journal on her lap, Julietta looked up at the muralized barrier of painted jaguar warriors who danced in a bloodletting ritual.

Conversations of nearby workers and their clattering tools created a sound snippet that seemed to give life to the bloody animated visual. Aztec jaguar knights had been dangerous and fanatical individuals in life.

Thinking of the coming meeting she felt like opening a vein and joining them. She was filled with frustration: her team's work had been

without any significant finds, aside from the jade plate for months now. Nothing dramatic had been uncovered.

Dr. Matos, her boss, was a world-renowned archaeologist, but he needed impressive results to pull more money into their research stream. Some days she couldn't look him in the eyes.

Frustrated, she poured through her journal. Had she missed some obvious link? She reorganized her photos and reread several entries. There was nothing. Angry, she slammed her workbook on the pavement and sent her trowel clattering across the stones.

Above her head, the warriors gyrated, flinging blood, their open mouths showed bleeding tongues. Their character was gothic yet beautiful, and then something caught her attention.

A piece of fuzz clung to one of the savage dancers. She leaned over for a closer look. The outlaw particle was somehow stuck to the pigment. A light whisk with her brush didn't dislodge it. Nature had applied glue to the fluff so that it seemed stuck to the graphic with a malevolent grip.

She gave it an easy tug. Sounding like heavy paper crackling, the performer fractured and collapsed into a black void. She stared, trembling, heart pounding, and choked back emotion. "My God, what have I done?"

First racked by fear of reprimand, and then entranced by the mystery of empty space, she peered into the aperture. Where there had been a paper-thin sheet of stucco was now darkness.

From the black opening she was embraced by an outpouring of air, centuries old that joyously rushed from its captivity. Scented like incense, it carried a hint of wood smoke. She then felt a strange tactile sensation, as if hundreds of fingers massaged her body and then left in a whispering ether of sighs.

The sensation stunned her. Her mind wanted to deny it, but she felt groped.

As if it came from a great depth, a powdery fist of something old and dangerous assaulted her. Biting and dry, the taste of copal deepened and saturated the air around her. She coughed and swallowed.

Copal, a pine resin considered to be the very blood of the tree from which it came, rising in smoke to feed hungry gods during a sacrifice, was often the last olfactory experience a victim had. Its presence shot a

thrill through her like an electric shock.

Was this something that could launch her career?

At the very least it might create a cause that would keep patrons funding their research.

Trembling, she ran her hand along the edge of the broken stucco. The hole gave her a sense of a larger contained volume beyond – a sanctuary perhaps? The inner masonry had probably fallen away from the mural in some earlier time, leaving no support. What remained behind the damaged section was some sort of crawl space.

She looked over her shoulder with a mix of fear and excitement. What had she discovered? She saw two senior members of her crew. Frantic with anticipation, she yelled, "Mario, Reggie, get over here."

In seconds, they stood around her, dusty and excited. Mario knelt and put his head into the opening.

"You okay, Julietta?" asked Reggie. He had an off-handed respect for Julietta. Standing six foot with a sinewy build, he wore a bandana over his hair and today sported a black eye.

Julietta stared at him, wondering about his wound. He'd always interested her. But knowing that her taste in sex was a liability with casual lovers thanks to her sexually abusive grandfather, she guessed that Reggie would probably be shocked by her needs. Better to keep her private life separate from work, she reminded herself. The thought of intimacy with Reggie passed. She guessed the black eye was from the soccer club he played in.

"This hole was an accident," she said. "But look inside."

"Yeah, like my eye," he shrugged catching Julietta's look while Mario leaned in to look. "Played *Los Cruceros* last night. They got a mean goal keeper."

"Wow, this is incredible," said Mario, talking fast, "A lucky happening." Stocky, going on plump, a pink round face with thinning hair, he had a fidgety habit of nodding when he spoke. He often thought out loud to himself while ignoring the verbal reactions of others. Mario shuffled around the aperture, careful not to step on the broken remnants, and trying to see inside. Shorter and more round than Reggie, he had a waist created by his quest for the perfect taco. "Wow, Julietta this could be a major fuck-up or a total bonus deal."

Julietta looked at Reggie, who shrugged his shoulders and tried to

look noncommittal. "Thanks Mario, I'll bear that in mind."

"Stop saying your thoughts, Mario," said Reggie.

"Stop trying to read my mind," said Mario. "I'm just thinking out loud, sorry."

Both Reggie and Mario were Americans who'd graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with honors. She appreciated the international flair they gave her crew.

She pointed to a plywood scrap about a meter square. "Mario, bring that flat over here. We'll gather these plaster shards for the restoration folks." They made a careful jigsaw puzzle of the remains of the fallen dancer and moved him out of the way.

"You two get lights and anything else you think you'll need."

Reggie and Mario took off for their gear.

Her flashlight caught a glimmer of water deep in the somber space. Trying to contain her excitement, she locked her mind on the task at hand and zipped a first aid kit and a spare hand torch into a small backpack.

Reggie and Mario returned, each with multi-colored climbing ropes, lights and canteens.

"Where's Tamale Boy?" she asked.

"Probably at a torta stand," Reggie said, grinning.

"Here he comes," said Mario.

Panting, a young man nearly as wide as he was tall, ran to the group.

"Okay, Tamale, go tell Dr. Matos what happened and where we are." She pointed to the hole. "Then come back, just in case we need help."

Tamale's eyes widened. He looked at the broken wall with a pleading expression. "Can I go with you?"

"No. We need you here at the entry," said Julietta.

Reggie and Mario grinned at Tamale's plight. Julietta was being nice. He wouldn't fit into the opening. She clapped her hands as if to wake a sleeper. "Got it?"

He nodded and lumbered away.

"You two with me?" Julietta asked.

Both men nodded with a grin. "Let's go, but be careful," Julietta warned. She inspected the rim of the hole and felt relief wash over her. The stones that supported the remaining mural were intact. She eased

herself in and worked her way over the fallen cobbles that had once supported the broken warrior. "Don't touch the wall," she yelled out. "We don't want to destroy any more of the pictorial."

They crawled into a cool, cavernous chamber. Not a true cave, the walls were made by man and covered with paintings. Their lights shone on carved impasto bas-reliefs. Julietta shook with excitement. This could be an important discovery. Perhaps a door to fame was finally opening. Once inside, they were able to stand. The ceiling was several feet over their heads and the space was quite large.

She felt as if she were being watched, like a burglar breaking into someone's home. Something brushed against her. She froze, but saw nothing. Reggie and Mario grew quiet.

"Wonder what that was?" asked Reggie.

"Maybe your imagination," retorted Mario.

"Don't be a smart-ass, it was something," Reggie was tense.