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I welcome all comments from readers (wiseguy35@hotmail.com).

Artifact

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Joanne studied the photos, absorbing every detail.

The one in her left hand showed a young woman of 26 lying on a hospital bed. Her honey-blond hair was damp with sweat, and her face displayed both exhaustion and joy. Joanne looked into that face, the face of her daughter Maddie, and remembered the mixture well.

In her right hand was another photo, this one of a newborn baby girl asleep in a plastic basinet. Tiny fingers curled into a lazy fist, the skin on them loose and wrinkled, the pink color mottled. A white stretch cap adorned with a pink ribbon covered the baby's head. In the margin, someone had written the vital statistics: *Joanne Marie, 7 lbs 3 oz, July 27th.*

Joanne sighed. The picture was almost two weeks old already; the baby would look totally different today, she knew. Little ones change so quickly. As she taped the pictures to her makeshift dressing mirror, she caught a glimpse of herself and realized that the big ones can change a lot, too. In three months at the archeological dig, the sun had bleached her hair enough that the gray streaks had become the dominant color. Her skin had darkened a few shades as well, and the crow's feet at each eye seemed to have grown. *Joanne, you're starting to look like a*

grandma, she confided in herself. It was good that she'd be going back home soon. Spending summers on a dig had been exciting at 25, interesting at 35, and endurable at 45, but at 58 Joanne was finding that her intellectual curiosity tended to fade after a few weeks without a soft bed, a private bathroom, or central air conditioning.

Or, she thought in annoyance as her door popped open, *a bedroom with a lock*.

A bright young face poked through the doorway. "Lunch in ten, Grannie," the intruder announced.

Joanne didn't even turn her head. "Okay, Nina," she replied as the door closed again. Wincing at the usual protests from her arthritic knees, Joanne rose from her chair and headed for the communal dining room.

As dig facilities go, she mused, this one wasn't that bad. An abandoned mission, graciously leased to the dig team by the Mexican government, made a good home base. It was a solid structure, at least, instead of a tent village like many other digs. One wing of bedrooms had been turned into an office, a darkroom for photographing objects recovered from the dig, and what the team had taken to calling the Bits Room -- a long room full of storage cabinets and tables, where grad students had the tedious job of trying to assemble bits of broken pottery and other artifacts into recognizable pieces. The rest served as a small dormitory to house the team who worked the dig. They took turns cooking meals on the ancient gas stove in the kitchen and ate them together so that everyone could help in the cleaning up.

Lunch was beef stew, cooked and served up by Jeff, the team's photographer, and Leo, a grad student. The stew was excellent, but as usual Joanne ate very little -- her appetite had been one of the earliest casualties of the rampant heat and humidity.

"Pecking at your food again, I see," came a gruff male voice. Joanne turned to see Dr. Henry Lambert approaching, loaded plate in hand. "May I?" he asked, indicating the empty seat next to her.

Joanne nodded. "Please." Dr. Lambert was the chief archeologist, the man who'd discovered the ruins of a 16th-century village here in central Mexico and persuaded a prestigious American university to provide funding and staff to excavate and study it. Dr. Lambert had also been the one to persuade Joanne to leave the air-conditioned comfort of her

Anthropology Department offices to lend her talents to his team for the summer.

"Jeff is going to think you don't like his cooking," the doctor remarked. "You hardly eat at all these days."

Joanne sighed. "It's not the food, it's the environment. I'm getting too old for field work."

"Nonsense. Age is all in the mind."

"Tell that to my knees," Joanne retorted. "And my eyes. And my hair."

"You look fine to me," he said, smiling.

"You're an archeologist, Henry; it's your job to appreciate ancient, decrepit things." It was an old joke, but they chuckled together anyway.

"Speaking of ancient things..." The doctor shifted a little closer to Joanne and his voice dropped to a quiet, conspiratorial tone. "I have something to show you after lunch."

"Oh?"

Dr. Lambert put his finger to his lips. "Top secret stuff," he whispered.

Joanne nodded and fell silent, allowing herself to listen while the rest of the staff discussed their morning progress.

"We've got about three more boxes for the bits room," said Andres, a thirtyish man with a powerful build who supervised the excavation team. "Found several nice-looking whole pieces, too, ready for cataloging."

Jeff nodded, swallowing the last of his stew. "I'm still working on last week's lot, but I'll make room." Looking at Joanne, he added, "That is, unless you'd like first crack at them."

"Any markings?" she asked Andres.

The big man frowned and shook his head. "Nah, they're pretty plain."

"I'll pass, then, thank you. I've got plenty to do before I pack for home as it is."

Plenty indeed, she thought to herself. During the summer she'd amassed a large collection of research notes and photos of items taken from the dig, all of which bore some kind of writing or symbolic markings. Part of her job was to try and interpret those glyphs; to determine what civilization had founded and then abandoned this village in the first place, how they had lived, who they were. Perusing that material, looking for patterns, marking similarities to other known cultures, could keep her busy for months after returning home.

Joanne helped with the clearing up after lunch, then made her way across the compound to Dr. Lambert's bedroom and office. She knocked once, heard him grunt a "Come in," and slipped inside.

Dr. Lambert drew the makeshift curtains across his window. A thought seemed to strike him: he stuck his head out the window, looked around, then pulled back in and fixed the white linen back in place. "Can't be too careful," he said quietly.

"About what, Henry?"

The doctor reached under his bed and picked up a small canvas bag. "We found something at the dig this morning," he explained. "I wanted to make sure you see it."

Joanne took the bag from him. Its weight, and the faint clinking sound as the contents moved in her hand, gave her a clue as to the reason for the secrecy. She reached inside, pulled out the item, and drew in a sharp breath.

In her hand was a necklace. The centerpiece was a translucent crystal of some kind, rounded and polished, ringed in a silvery metal with a dull sheen. A series of metal bars formed a short, flexible band that would sit flat against the wearer's collarbone, with a simple but clever clasp at the back to hold it together.

"It was quite a trick smuggling this thing past the *federales*," Lambert noted, "but I knew you'd want to see it up close."

Joanne nodded, her attention already absorbed by the shiny thing in her hand. The Mexican authorities kept several men at the dig for "security" purposes; it was well understood by all that their primary duty was to grab anything that appeared to have significant monetary value and secure it for the government. A few things had been seized so quickly that Jeff hadn't even had a chance to photograph them first. If one of those

soldiers had seen the necklace, Joanne felt sure it would have vanished right away, never to be seen or studied.

Lambert was shifting in his seat like an excited child. "What do you think?"

"The workmanship is exquisite," she replied, watching how the uneven room light played through the translucent crystal. "Better than anything else we've found here."

"Yes, yes," he said, impatient. "But look at these." He whipped out a penlight from his shirt pocket and shone it on the center of the necklace.

Joanne looked again and saw what she had missed at first: the penlight's beam revealed symbols etched into the metal ring surrounding the crystal. The lines were sharp and well-defined, but shallow enough that she had missed them in the relatively dim ambient light of the room.

"Ah," she said. "Yes, I see what you mean. These are *very* interesting."

"Mayan?"

"Possibly. This culture definitely had some strong Mayan influences, much as the Huastecs did. But the Huastecs never did any metal work like this that we know of."

"Mixtec?"

Joanne shrugged. "That's been the puzzle all summer, hasn't it? All the evidence suggests this place was built around the time of the Spanish conquest, when the Aztecs pretty much ruled this area. Yet the things we're finding suggest Mixtec, Huastec, Toltec, Zapotec ... it's as if the inhabitants had been borrowing from almost every neighboring culture, including some we thought to have died out by then."

"I told you it would be interesting," Lambert said with a grin.

Joanne was staring into the crystal center again. "Can I take this back to my room?"

"Please," he assured her. "Take as many notes as you need to, study it all you like while you're here. Give it to Jeff when you're done, and he'll take it from there."

"What about the government?"

"They'll get it," he promised grudgingly. "But not until we've learned everything we can from it first."

Every joint in her body creaked as Joanne pushed away from her desk later that night. With tired eyes she took in the results of her afternoon and evening's work: a highly detailed, accurate sketch of the centerpiece of the necklace, with every glyph faithfully reproduced. Placed under a magnifier, the symbols had turned out to be much more intricate than she'd initially thought; *amazing workmanship for the period*, she repeated to herself.

Some of the icons were vaguely familiar. One resembled a pattern she'd seen on a Mayan fertility talisman, but not quite enough to call it a match. Others reminded her of carvings she'd seen on Olmec structures which were usually interpreted as relating to food or nourishment. *But that's not likely*, she reminded herself. The Olmec civilization had ended around 400BC, overshadowed by the emerging Mayan culture. And the Maya were long gone by the 16th century, weren't they?

Brain-weary, Joanne flipped off the fluorescent light of her magnifier. The smooth, rounded crystal in the center of the necklace went dark momentarily, then picked up the thin streams of moonlight coming from the window and swirled them around like wisps of smoke inside its depths. Unthinking, Joanne picked up the necklace and held it up nearer the window, looking through the crystal and out the window. The pattern of light eddied and churned before her tired eyes, soothing them somehow.

She took a few dreamy steps toward the dressing table and mirror. *Such a beautiful piece*, she said to herself. Slowly, as if guided by someone else, her hands laid down the necklace long enough to undo the buttons on her denim shirt.

Dr. Henry Lambert sat on the end of his bed, rubbing Capsaicin cream into his aching elbows and hands. He'd dismissed Joanne's remarks at lunch, but the fact was that Lambert had seen a few more summers than she had, and on nights like this one his body also complained that he was getting too damned old for field work.

The curtain swished gently, heralding a welcome nighttime breeze. Lambert stood up and leaned into the window, pushing the linen aside to enjoy the air on his face. A soft light shone into his eyes, and he saw her.

She stood alone in the courtyard, dancing slowly in the moonlight. The image was murky, hard to recognize, but Lambert saw the shining jewel on her chest and knew instinctively what it must be. He ran out to the courtyard, looking sharply around to see if anyone else had noticed her yet. Rather than run out into the middle of the courtyard, he beckoned to her from the side. "Joanne!" he called in a stage whisper. "What the hell are you doing?"

She stopped dancing and approached him, gliding along as if carried by the breeze. As she drew closer, Lambert's eyes adjusted to the darkness enough to register two surprising facts. First, this was not a 58-year-old woman in front of him. She was Joanne's height, had roughly Joanne's figure, but the face and the body had the lightness and vitality of youth.

Second, the woman was naked.

Lambert's eyes took in the feminine form as it closed the distance between them. She was beautiful: lithe and lean, with hips that swayed invitingly as she walked and breasts that begged to be adored. And above the breasts, glowing with an inner light of its own, hung the necklace. "Where did you get that?" he demanded hoarsely.

The woman smiled at him, her eyes piercing his spirit, and put a finger to his lips. Her touch sent an electric spark through his body. He felt the blood rushing through his system, collecting in one almost-forgotten point.

For the first time in years, Henry Lambert had an erection.

He stepped backward, feeling his way back into the building, through the hall, to his own bedroom door. She followed, matching his pace, smiling at him, those powerful eyes holding his gaze. They entered the room and he stepped back some more until he found himself sitting on his own bed, looking up into those incredible eyes. Her fingers lifted his jaw as she bent over slightly for the first kiss.

Lambert's lips met hers, and he felt as if her aura were enveloping him, swallowing him into herself. For the first time, he dared to touch her. His hands reached forward and found firm, ripe breasts waiting to welcome them. His heart began to flutter as he explored her voluptuous body, his

hands rejoicing in the feel of soft, firm, female flesh once again. He hardly noticed that the woman's hands were busy relieving him of his clothing.

In moments Lambert was naked, his iron shaft pointing straight up from a nest of gray-streaked pubic hair. Her kisses became more insistent, pushing him down, and he had no strength to resist. His body dropped back onto the bed, overborne by her energy and her weight above him. He moaned uncontrollably as she kissed her way down his chest, down his belly, to take his straining cock into her mouth. Lambert groaned, his cock so stiff it was almost painful, and gave in to the inevitable. He came loudly into her mouth, crying out with each spurt, a tiny voice in the back of his mind wondering if his heart could have withstood much more.

A strong, happy lethargy washed over Lambert's body as his orgasm subsided. He felt vaguely regretful, sorry that he wouldn't be able to satisfy his mysterious partner, but was too spent to say anything. Then, to his surprise, he realized that his cock was still hard. *How the hell can that be?* he asked himself, but his mind could find no answer. Instead, it focused on the awareness of her body looming over him, preparing to take him inside her. Her eyes met his, and he felt his body again gathering energy and channeling it into his groin. She lowered herself onto him and Lambert heard himself start to moan again. Time stretched out into eternity as their voices blended, crying out together repeatedly until they climaxed as one.

Joanne woke up in a slight daze as the morning sun streamed through the curtain onto her bed. Something didn't feel right, but it took her mind a few moments to process the data. Then she realized she was lying naked on top of her bed, with her head at the wrong end.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. Joanne never slept nude; not even in the privacy of her home, let alone out here where anyone could come barging in at any moment. Why had she gone to bed that way?

When *had* she gone to bed, anyway?

Sounds floated in through the window from the courtyard: men shouting, heavy footsteps, a large engine grumbling while its tires crunched the dirt. Joanne hopped up from the bed, threw on her bathrobe, and poked her head out the window to see what was going on.

She saw the site van, a battered old Econoline normally used to transport crew, equipment, and supplies between the compound, the dig proper, and the nearest town. It was parked in the courtyard, engine running, rear doors standing open. In a few moments two men emerged from the far side of the building carrying a stretcher. She couldn't make out the figure on the stretcher clearly, but there was only one other person on site with that much gray in his hair -- Dr. Lambert.

Joanne belted the robe securely and stepped out of her room, only to bump into Nina in the hall. "What's going on?" she asked the younger girl.

"Dr. Lambert is really sick," she replied. "They're taking him to the hospital in the site van. Jeff's going with him. Oh -- Jeff said to ask you if you'd supervise at the dig this morning."

"Sure," Joanne agreed quickly. Someone would have to take Lambert's place at the dig, overseeing the work and dealing with the "security" men. "But what about Henry? What's wrong with him?"

"Dunno; he just collapsed or something, I think. I gotta get dressed." The girl skipped back to her room, the thin cotton nightshirt she wore flapping behind her.

Joanne reached the courtyard in time to see the site van pull out. Once outside the gate, it accelerated rapidly and trailed off into a cloud of dust. She sighed, clutched the robe, and decided it would be a good idea to follow Nina's lead.

She washed up using the sponge and basin in her room, promising herself for the hundredth time that as soon as she got home she'd take a long, luxurious shower. She dressed for the sun in jeans, a lightweight, long-sleeved work shirt and a wide-brimmed hat.

With the site van otherwise occupied, Andres opted to walk the three quarters of a mile to the dig with his crew. Joanne went with them, hoping her knees would hold out, and was surprised to suffer no ill effects from the trek. Once the initial questions on the subject of Lambert were answered, she found herself too busy to worry about anything but the here and now of supervising the dig. The morning seemed to fly by; one minute she was introducing herself to the Mexican security troops, and the next the site van was there to take them back to the compound for lunch.

Jeff updated everyone over cold cuts and salad. "They're still doing some tests to confirm it," he explained, "but the diagnosis is that Dr. Lambert is suffering from acute physical exhaustion. His age, the heat, and a recent surge of ... activity ... combined seem to be the causes." At the word 'activity,' two of the male grad students smirked and nudged each other. Jeff shot them an icy glare and continued. "He'll stay in the hospital for 2 or 3 more days, mostly for observation, but he's expected to recover completely." He nodded toward Joanne. "In the meantime, Dr. Burke and I will split up his duties between ourselves to keep things running."

"How are you feeling, Nina?" one of the smirking grad students asked. "Any saddle sores?"

Nina blushed beet red and looked daggers at the student. "You're a pig, Neil," she spat. "And you don't know what you're talking about anyway, so shut up."

If Neil had a response, it wilted under Jeff's menacing gaze. "Perhaps you two should go wait by the van," he suggested. The boys recognized his tone and agreed, lingering only long enough to rinse off their dishes.

Joanne waited until everyone else had left the table before addressing Jeff. "What was that all about?"

"There's a rumor going around that Nina was in Dr. Lambert's room with him last night. She swears it's not true, and I'm inclined to believe her -- he'd never undermine his own authority that way."

"Undermine it how?" She looked at Jeff's face and answered her own question. "Oh. How did a rumor like that get started?"

Jeff cleared his throat nervously. "There was noise coming from his room last night. I heard it, and those clowns from lunch heard it. He was definitely with someone, and they were ... quite vocal. I think everyone assumed it was Nina because she's the only female on site -- other than you, of course. Not that I'm asking..."

Joanne was at once slightly shocked and a little amused. "Of course you're not," she said. "But for the record, Jeff, it wasn't me either. I turned in early and slept like a stone." *And woke up without my nightgown, in the wrong position*, her mind added, but she didn't volunteer those details.

It was well after dark when Joanne finished for the day. She had spent the whole day supervising the dig, and the time after dinner updating Lambert's logs so that he would know what had happened in his absence. There was no mention of the necklace he'd given her in his logs, she noticed. And there wouldn't be, she concluded, until he was ready to admit its existence to the Mexican authorities -- Henry was nothing if not discreet. *Usually*, she thought, remembering the conversation with Jeff.

By rights she should have been dog tired, but Joanne wasn't quite ready to turn in yet. Instead, she opened her top drawer and felt around for the little ledge she'd discovered above the drawer case. Her fingers found the spot and pulled out the necklace for another look. She stared, captivated, at the swirls of light in the large, smooth crystal, her mind filling with wonder at the craftsmanship of the people who'd made it.

Two figures crept slowly across the courtyard, whispering to each other.

"How did I let you talk me into this?"

Neil grinned at his roommate, Brian, and urged him forward. "It's gonna be great, you know it is. Nina's gonna go apeshit."

"And that's a good thing?"

"Shhh!"

The miscreants quietly opened the door leading to the women's sleeping area. Taking extra care to make no sound, they tiptoed down the center hallway. They kept well clear of the left side door, which was Joanne's room, because they saw a faint light still shining underneath it. The gap under Nina's door was dark. Emboldened, the boys slipped into the room next to Nina's, which was currently unoccupied, and closed the door behind them.

The window faced the outer side of the compound and was covered with a metal grate but nothing else. Nina's window, they knew, would be the same and only a few feet away. Neil grinned wickedly at Brian. "Here goes." He put his face near the grate and began to moan. He started out softly, but quickly let it build to a volume level that he knew would

carry easily into the next room. Brian watched, suppressing laughter, until Neil motioned him to join in. Brian pinched his throat, stretching for the highest possible pitch, and moaned along with his friend. Soon they were doing a spirited reproduction of the sounds they had heard the night before coming from Lambert's room.

The noise was enough to disturb Nina, who had been asleep in her bed. She rose up onto her forearms and looked around groggily. Even in that state, it didn't take her long to realize what was up. *Those pricks*, she thought. She started to get up, but then had a better idea. *Fuck 'em*, she said to herself. *Let 'em get busted by Burke*. She sandwiched her head between two pillows to muffle the sound and went back to sleep.

In the next room, the pranksters were so committed to their noisemaking that they almost didn't notice when the door to their borrowed room swung open. A pale, soft glow caught their attention and drew it toward the doorway in time to see the woman close it behind her. The young men fell silent in surprise as they beheld the slender, enticing form of the naked woman who had joined them. They looked into her face, strange and yet somehow familiar, and found themselves captivated by her presence.

As she strolled toward them, Brian and Neil felt a sudden, overpowering need. Their clothing quickly dropped into a pile on the floor and they knelt before their goddess, cocks extended and quivering, ready to adore her. She kissed them both, then pulled each face to a breast and allowed them to suckle, getting them even more aroused and deeper under her spell.

She chose Neil first, leading him to the bed and allowing him to mount her. Brian watched, transfixed, while Neil grunted and groaned his way to his first orgasm, then eagerly took his place between her slick thighs. All of his energy, all of his life essence seemed to concentrate in his cock, and then to flow into her with his climax.

They took turns in her embrace, their bodies continuing to perform long after their reason told them they were through. All it took was a kiss, or a touch, from the woman and they would become erect again and ready to serve. The minutes stretched into hours until they finally passed out, exhausted.

Nina rolled over, semi-lucid, suddenly aware of silence once again. She looked at the clock: 2:45am. "It's about time," she mumbled, thinking of her unseen tormenters. "I hope you assholes are so hoarse tomorrow that you need a crash course in sign language."

What a gorgeous day! Joanne thought, stretching her naked body as it bathed in the sunlight from her window. She was starting to enjoy sleeping in the nude; it seemed to bring on the most vivid, sensuous dreams. Last night she'd dreamed she was a tribal maiden, young and beautiful, who encountered two Spanish soldiers. She had seduced them with her beauty, bedded them and ridden them to ecstasy, then left them dazed and gasping for breath. A most enjoyable dream. Joanne hummed pleasantly to herself as she washed up and dressed, a good 20 minutes ahead of her normal waking time.

Jeff was already in the kitchen when she wandered over, cooking omelets to order for the crew. "Your turn again?" she inquired.

"Nah," he replied. "It's Dr. Lambert's turn; I figured I'd fill in for him."

"Would you like some help?"

He looked at her in mild surprise. "Sure, if you feel up to it, but you don't have to. I know you had a pretty rough day yesterday; you should probably take it easier today."

"Actually, I'm fine," she assured him, grabbing an extra skillet and taking her place beside him at the stove.

With two chefs, they had no trouble getting everyone served quickly. Joanne and Jeff fixed their own breakfast last and sat together at the end of the long dining table. They were about halfway through their breakfast when Andres came over and sat beside them, an annoyed look on his face.

"What's up?" Jeff asked.

Andres grimaced. "I'm missing two of my grad students," he complained. "Neil and Brian. They're not in their room or the bits room, and they're not in here. The front gate is still closed, so they didn't leave; there's no reason for them to have gone to the dig by themselves anyway."

Jeff frowned. "Have you asked around?"

"Not yet. I was waiting to see if they showed up for breakfast."

"Might as well do it before people start to disperse." Jeff stood up and knocked sharply on the table. "Your attention, please, everyone." A room full of faces turned to him and fell silent. "Has anybody seen Neil or Brian this morning?"

Nobody answered. Jeff repeated the question, and there was a general shrugging of shoulders around the table. "Sorry, Andres," he said to the big man. "Looks like we're going to have to hunt them down ourselves."

As Andres was about to leave, Nina came to them. "I haven't seen those two this morning," she told them, "but last night they were outside my window until oh-dark-thirty on one of their juvenile pranks. Maybe they couldn't get back into the compound or something."

"What were they doing outside?" Jeff asked.

Nina made a sour face. "Making vulgar noises."

"Did you see them?"

"No," she admitted, "but I knew it had to be them. Nobody else would think sitting outside my window grunting and moaning all night would be funny."

With a collective sigh, they finished eating quickly and cleaned up their dishes, then headed out to the front gate. It was a simple wooden structure, big and strong, which they secured at night with a 4-by-4 crossbar. "It was closed and barred when I first got up this morning," Andres recalled. "If they went out during the night, somebody else must have locked it behind them." The two men moved the crossbar aside and pushed the gate open. The women followed them outside and around the perimeter.

"No sign of anyone lurking out here," Jeff observed. "Are you sure they were outside the window?"

Nina nodded. "It sounded like it."

Joanne had a thought. "Maybe they were in that room," she suggested, pointing to another window a few feet from Nina's. "It might sound from inside as if they were standing out here."

"It's worth a look," Jeff agreed. They trudged back around the building and in the gate. Joanne and Nina reached the door in question first and pushed it open. The older woman drew in a sharp breath, and Nina giggled with delight at the scene within.

Neil and Brian lay sprawled on the floor, unconscious and completely naked. Joanne tried a discreet "Ahem!" but the pranksters didn't move. She approached the nearest one, Brian, and knelt at his side. "He's breathing," she said to the men in the doorway. She reached over and put a finger to his neck. "He's got a pulse, too." Taking a firm grip on his shoulder, she shook him firmly. "Wake up, Brian."

Brian's eyes opened into a thousand-yard stare, and a look of horror came over his face. "No more!" he cried out in a very hoarse, crackling voice. "No more, please!" He tried to scoot away from Joanne, but his muscles would barely move.

Jeff came over and stood beside Joanne. "Must be one hell of a hangover," he said. "Why don't you let me and Andres deal with this?" The women withdrew, leaving Jeff and Andres in charge of the prodigals.

Joanne decided that, since it was such a lovely day, she'd walk over to the dig and pick up where she'd left off the day before. Andres arrived in the site van a short while later with this crew, less Brian and Neil. When Joanne inquired about them, he snorted. "They'll live," he sneered. "They admitted to their stupid practical joke, but say they don't remember anything after the first few minutes. I think they got blitzed on some kind of cheap whiskey, threw out the bottle, went over to that room to play their little prank and passed out. They were staggering around the place this morning like couple of seasick tourists; they'd be worthless out here, they can spend the day in the bits room."

By dinner that evening Brian and Neil were at least well enough to face solid food with the crew. Joanne noted them poking gingerly at their chili. *Too bad*, she thought to herself, *because this is really good chili*. She spooned a healthy amount onto a fresh cracker and savored the tastes and textures on her palate.

"Found your appetite, I see," Jeff observed as he sat down beside her.

Joanne nodded. "Andres knows his chili."

Jeff ate a spoonful and agreed emphatically. "So," he said, changing the subject, "are you all packed up?"

"Not yet," she admitted. "I've been too busy at the dig, and trying to wrap things up in the office. I'll have to stay up tonight or get up early to finish packing."

He shrugged. "Don't spend too much time on it," he advised. "The *federales* will just unpack it all in the morning anyway."

"Oh?"

"Yep," he said, nodding. "Every time somebody leaves, the locals do a thorough search of their luggage, study materials, anything they take out of here. They want to make sure nobody smuggles anything of value out of the country. Which reminds me ..." He leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "Are you finished with it yet?"

Joanne blinked. "With what?"

"Good answer," he said, grinning. "With the necklace, of course. I helped Lambert sneak it out of the dig unnoticed. I want to get some good photos of that thing before it ends up around the neck of some politician's mistress."

"I'm almost done," she replied. "I'll bring it over to your room when things have settled down tonight. Would that be okay?"

"Fine."

It was after midnight when Joanne closed up the last box with a sigh. It had taken her all night, but she had all of her research notes, books, and worldly good packed up for the trip home. None of the boxes were sealed, of course -- why bother, since the Mexican authorities would insist on going through them in the morning? -- but it would take only a few minutes to do that when the time came.

She took one more look around the room. The closet was empty, the desk and dresser bare, the washstand cleared of all but the essentials she would need in the morning. Tomorrow's clothes lay folded on top of her suitcase.

And on top of the tallest box, glimmering up at her, was the necklace.

You've been putting it off all night, she told herself. *Time to give it up*. She hefted it in her hand one more time, admiring the cold beauty of that center stone. *One last time*, she decided. Watching herself in the mirror, she tugged her shirt collar out of the way and put the necklace on.

Jeff was getting impatient. He knew Joanne had a lot of packing to do, but would it have killed her to bring the necklace over at a decent hour?

No, he argued with himself, *she's just being discreet. The fewer people see that thing before we "find" it officially, the better.*

Still, he was on the verge of taking the initiative himself when he heard a soft knock on his door. "Finally," he muttered under his breath as he strode over and yanked the door open.

Jeff's jaw dropped in surprise. Before him in the doorway was the most beautiful, fascinating creature he'd ever seen. She looked vaguely familiar, the way the adult children of close friends seem familiar, but he couldn't immediately think of whom she reminded him. Then she reached out and touched his face, and he no longer cared -- all that mattered was getting closer to her, losing himself in her eyes. She drew him to her and kissed him, and Jeff felt himself melting.

In her dream, Joanne was a beautiful young tribal maiden, chosen by the elders to present herself to the Spanish captain. She strolled slowly through the invaders' camp, bathed in the moonlight, wearing nothing but the necklace the elders had given her. Her mind was at peace, as the priest had told her it would be, and her heart full of purpose.

She reached the Spaniard's hut and rapped on the doorway. The door opened and she found herself face to face with the outsiders' leader. He was a comely man, with a strong jaw and a pleasant face. His strange clothes hid most of his body, but she knew that would change.

There was a look of surprise on his face, perhaps even suspicion. He started to speak in the strange yet familiar tongue the foreigners used. She sensed him backing away and reached forward, touching his cheek with a finger tip. She felt the power of the moon, stored in the necklace, flow out through her body and into his. His eyes widened and stared into hers, and she felt the powerful connection that developed between them in that moment. Her center grew warm and tingly; she needed to give herself to him.

She pulled his face to hers and kissed him, feeling the moon's power enclose and embrace them. The captain returned her kiss with growing fervor, and she could sense the strength gathering in his loins. He stepped back and disrobed, his eyes never leaving her face. She saw that his manroot was stiff and long and eager for her attentions. She grasped it in a hand and led him to his sleeping pad, feeling it grow ever more firm in her grip.

She stopped at the edge of his bed. His arms went around her, drawing her closer to him, pressing his member into the flesh of her buttocks. His hands found her breasts and squeezed them while he planted small kisses on the nape of her neck.

Her juices began to flow freely, and she was ready to receive him. She bent over onto his bed, reaching between her legs to find his rigid member and guide it into her secret place. He needed no further encouragement -- grabbing her hips, he pulled her tightly against himself, burying his probe as far as it would go. Her body responded to his insistent movements, and their passions surged in unison until his seed poured into her. She felt the flow of his essence and accepted it hungrily, letting her body gratify him with the sounds of her pleasure.

Soon his grunts and movements slowed, and then ceased. She felt him disengage and stagger backward, but they were not finished yet. She turned to face him again and the necklace glowed, sending a new rush of power through her. She took his limp hand, letting the power run into it, and in moments his body was hungry for her again. She stepped backward and he followed, gently pushing her back to the bed. He knelt on the floor at her feet and kissed his way up her thighs. He paused briefly at her pelt, inhaling her scent and inflaming himself further, then continued kissing up the middle of her body until he found her lips. His mouth closed over hers as he slid his member inside her again.

Her legs closed around him, pulling him in tighter, and their bodies gyrated together in the timeless dance of the beast with two backs. Their passion grew louder and stronger, overpowering all reason, until in a burst of silvery lightness they climaxed again. She held him inside her until his gift was completely given, then rolled to one side, letting his exhausted body flop back onto the bed.

She lay back swimming in the afterglow, waiting, until the moon called to her again. The captain gasped when she touched his chest, and groaned in faint protest when her fingers found his dwindled manroot, but under her enchanted touch it rose again to full height. She toyed with it until it strained for the ceiling, then climbed up above the man's spent form and plunged herself down onto him. His body could scarcely find the energy to move, but as her hips worked his member inside her she felt the fires beginning to burn within him again. She reached up toward the moon, invoking its magic one more time, and the moon responded. The man twitched weakly, the last of his energy flowing into her center, and fell silent.

She looked down at the unconscious figure and smiled. It would be many days before he would feel strong enough to make war on her people.

Joanne sat in front of the mirror for the last time, running a brush through her honey-colored hair while the Mexican authorities finished going through the last box of research notes. In short order, they gave her permission to seal the boxes and a note for Customs attesting that she carried no valuable items that did not rightfully belong to her.

Joanne thanked the officers in Spanish with her most charming smile, and they helped her to load the sealed boxes into the site van for transport. With Nina's help, she affixed labels to all of the boxes so that they could be shipped to her office at the University. Her one suitcase and carry-on bag also went into the van.

Andres came up to her in the courtyard, jingling the van keys in his hand. "I thought Jeff was driving into town this morning," she remarked.

The big man shrugged his shoulders. "He's not feeling well this morning," he explained. "He asked me to take you in, and to pick up the supplies for him. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready. Is Jeff going to be okay?"

"I think so. He sounds like an 80-year-old man through the doorway, but he says it's just a stomach flu. He'd better not try to blame it on my chili."

With a laugh and a round of good-byes, they piled into the van and drove out of the compound. Their immediate destination was a small town called San Jimenez, about an hour's drive from the dig site. There wasn't much there, but the town did have a bus station, a large general store, and a post office. Her boxes would be shipped to the University by UPS from there; Joanne and her luggage would get on a bus to Mexico City, where she could catch a flight home.

Once they were well clear of the site, Joanne reached into the map pocket in the back of Andres' seat and pulled out a thick clasp envelope. Watching the driver, she quietly removed a dark blue bandana from the envelope and let the empty envelope slide back into the seat pocket. Andres' eyes peeked in the rear view mirror. "You okay back there?"

"Fine," she said. "Just stretching a little bit."

"You can still move to the front seat if you want," he offered. "The view is a lot better."

"No thanks. I like the legroom here."

"Suit yourself."

As his eyes returned to the road, Joanne parted the folded bandana enough to verify that the necklace inside it was undisturbed. Satisfied, she opened her purse and slipped it inside, next to the handful of tampons she'd borrowed from Nina. Joanne hadn't needed tampons in several years, but something told her it might be wise to have a few on hand in the next day or so.

Her fingers fell on the picture of Joanne Marie, born 7/27, and Joanne smiled. She was looking forward to a long, happy visit with her new granddaughter.

-wg
11/7/01

