Mission to San Marcos

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“We’re making our final approach into Puerto Bolivar,” said the pilot of the small eight-person plane. “Please keep your seatbelts fastened until the plane has landed and come to a complete stop.”

“No problem,” muttered Myles Shirtz. “I’m in no hurry to get off.”

The young man in the next seat nudged him. “Hey, what kind of attitude is that, Elder?”

“That’s my ‘two-years-of-not-making-out-with-Natalie’ attitude,” Myles snapped. He’d already had about enough of Gilbert Sykes, and they’d only known each other for a few hours. His fresh-faced, eighteen-year-old junior companion from Provo was way too perky, way too enthusiastic, and way too odd. He seemed to have Asperger’s syndrome or something.

“Pah, making out is overrated,” said Elder Sykes. “Real communication, real connections with people, that’s what’s important. I’ve never even kissed a girl.”

“Big surprise,” said Myles, turning to stare out the window.

Elder Sykes looked hurt, but he fell silent.

Myles could see the small island of San Marcos as they approached. Near the coastal strip of wet sand and foaming waves glistening in the sunlight was a cluster of buildings that had to be the capital city, Puerto Bolivar, nestled in thick rainforest that hadn’t yet been depleted by man’s insatiable need for wood, which spread outward from the large active volcano rising in the center. It looked like a tropical paradise, and gave no indication of its sordid past.

The island was in the Pacific, off the coast of Chile, and had first been colonized by Spaniards in the mid-sixteenth century. The Spaniards had quickly decided they didn’t want it and had “gifted” it to the Portuguese. From there it had switched hands to the British, the Dutch, and the French, before ending up with the Spaniards again. At that point the nations of Europe had reached a mutual agreement to leave it alone and pretend it didn’t exist.

They had pretended so well, in fact, that it remained isolated and unknown to most of the world until the early twenty-first century, when satellite photographs and records of the aforementioned transactions brought it to light. The president of San Marcos, Luis Gonzalez, had then urged the other nations of the world to come spend their vacations there, promising that it wasn’t nearly so bad anymore.

But Elders Shirtz and Sykes weren’t here on vacation. They were here as representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, assigned to preach the gospel to the natives. Myles had just been transferred from the Chile Santiago North Mission, and Elder Shirtz had just gotten out of the MTC. They would be among the first missionaries on the island, along with the senior couple that had preceded them and given them the go-ahead to come. It was the first time in a long time that the Church had reached an area before the Seventh-day Adventists or Jehovah’s Witnesses.

“You know,” said Elder Sykes, “the cool thing about this island is that it has the same name as the town in Mexico where Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales were executed by the Zapatistas during the Revolution for refusing to renounce the Church.”

“You’ve told me that twice already,” said Myles impatiently. “I didn’t want to burst your bubble, but that’s just a faith-promoting myth. They were killed because they had relations with American citizens and the other townspeople accused them of being in league with Carranza.”

“Touché, Elder,” said his companion. “That may be so, but then the soldiers offered them a chance to go free if they would renounce the Church. I’ve read the source documents.”

“Good for you.”

“I just hope I would have that kind of courage under that kind of pressure. When the going gets tough, that’s when you see what you’re really made of, and that’s when God separates the wheat from the chaff. I hope that I –”

“Elder,” said Myles, still staring at the island, “just let me think for a while.”

“Suit yourself,” said Elder Sykes, falling silent again.

Myles contemplated the people he would meet and wondered how much of a cultural shift from Chile they would represent. Though of Polynesian descent, they had reportedly adapted Spanish and other European culture in much the same as Native Americans on the mainland. Spanish was the official language, but most of them spoke Spanglish. That was fine with him. He’d never gotten particularly good at Spanish anyway.

“Hey, Elder,” said Elder Sykes, leaning over his shoulder and also looking out the window. “Hey, Elder –”

“I said give it a rest, will you?”

“I’m sorry, but I just was thinking – I don’t see a runway, do you?”

“It’s behind the trees or something.”

“We’re pretty low. Shouldn’t we be able to see it by now?”

Myles sighed. This kid was getting on his nerves, but for a different reason than usual – this time, because he had a point. He fought back a twinge of worry. It had to be behind the trees or something. Having no runway would have just been ridiculous.

The pilot’s voice came over the loudspeaker again. “Hey, we’ve got some clergy on board, right?”

“Here!” said Elder Sykes, jumping to his feet.

Another voice had said it simultaneously, and they turned to see William Ostling, an evangelical preacher that Elder Sykes had tried to talk to earlier with little success. The preacher scowled and glared daggers at them across the aisle.

“Great,” said the pilot. “Well, if one of you wouldn’t mind saying a prayer for our safe arrival –”

“I’ll do it,” said Ostling. “There’s a *wall* between them and God.” Elder Sykes looked hurt. Myles just rolled his eyes.

“I’m going to attempt a water landing,” said the pilot. “Remember, your seat cushions can be used as flotation devices. We might experience a little turbulence, but everything should be fine.”

At that moment a seagull flew into the starboard engine, which coughed, sputtered and exploded. Myles sighed. He only had two months left to serve. It figured something like this would happen now.

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“That was exhilarating!” said Elder Sykes, wiping the seawater off his glasses as he stumbled ashore. “I guess I shouldn’t have enjoyed it, because swimming is against mission rules, but –”

Myles rubbed the sting out of his eyes and crawled out onto the sand, which was much more abrasive than it looked. The sun beat down mercilessly, feeling much too hot despite the wet clothing against his skin. His muscles ached from swimming so hard; he’d been in no particular hurry at first but had then sighted what appeared to be a shark fin.

He struggled to his feet, then jumped back a bit as he realized the beach was no longer deserted.

“Mis amigos!” said Luis Gonzalez, a swarthy Polynesian man in his late thirties, his arms outstretched as the bodyguards at his sides remained stone-faced and motionless. “Bienvenidos a San Marcos! I’m so pleased you’re not dead!”

“Really?” muttered Myles. “Me too.”

The pilot declined the offered hug but extended a hand to the island nation’s president. “Thank you,” he said, “but this is most irregular. I was led to believe there would be a runway, or at least a suitable place to land.”

“Oh, did our public relations firm neglect to mention that? Most regrettable.” Gonzalez turned to the bodyguard next to him. “José, see to it that Pedro is put to death.”

“Si, Señor Presidente,” said José, saluting.

“Uh, well, that won’t be necessary,” said the pilot quickly. “I only meant that –”

“Ah,” said Gonzalez, ignoring him and turning his attention to the missionaries, “and you must be the representatives from la Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Dias. You have my most heartfelt appreciation, and you are free to proselyte whenever and wherever you wish.”

“Thank you, Señor Presidente,” said Elder Sykes, bowing. “We will strive to be worthy of your hospitality.”

“And you,” the president continued, looking at Will Ostling, “you’re some kind of Protestant, right? We’re all good Catholics here, so don’t hold your breath for a warm welcome.”

“Of course not,” he said with a tight-lipped smile, casting another glare at the missionaries. “Thank you anyway, Mr. President.”

“Now, you Mormones,” said Gonzalez. “Antonio here will show you to your quarters.” Out from behind him stepped a man they’d not noticed, probably owing to his incredible scrawniness and small stature. He wore nothing more than a loincloth and a lopsided grin full of missing teeth.

“Begging your pardon,” said Elder Sykes, looking nervously at Antonio, “but Elder Green was supposed to be here to meet us.”

“Ah, yes,” said Gonzalez, casting his eyes furtively away. “He, ah, has come down with a terrible case of dysentery. Didn’t he tell you?”

“No, but my phone was off for the entire flight, and then it got ruined in the, er, landing.” He glanced at the ocean, where the plane was slowly sinking from view. “What about his wife?”

“Botulism.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Don’t worry,” said the president, “Antonio knows the way. He’ll get you there.” It could have been their imaginations, but there seemed to be an implicit threat in his voice if they didn’t cooperate.

Elder Sykes looked helplessly at Myles, who rolled his eyes again. There were no other options. “All right then,” he told the president.

“Excelente,” said Antonio in a raspy voice. “Right this way, amigos. Do you have any luggage for me to carry?”

“Not anymore,” said Myles, jerking his head back to gesture at the sea, where only half of the plane was still visible.

“Good,” said Antonio. “I hate carrying luggage.”

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They followed a dirt trail into the rainforest and around the edge of the capital city, to a cluster of small thatched-roof wooden shacks arranged apparently at random in a clearing. “Small”, in the sense that each had about enough room for five people to stand upright, and that was it.

Antonio pointed to one. “Yours, señores,” he said.

“Does it have a bathroom?” asked Myles.

Antonio blinked. “A what?”

“Okay, fair enough.” This was a third world country, after all, or even a fourth world country if there was such a thing. “Is there an outhouse somewhere?”

“No comprendo.”

“A latrine?”

“Stop making up words.”

“A hole in the ground?”

“Señor, I don’t know what you’re trying to ask for.”

Myles fought to contain his exasperation. “The call of nature. I need to answer it.”

“Oh, por supuesto!” The light of recognition dawned in Antonio’s eyes. “Si, if you’re self-conscious for some reason just go into the jungle. Don’t use the pale green leaves that grow in clusters, or you’ll get a nasty rash and possibly permanent scarring.”

“You’re joking,” said Myles, but the serious look on Antonio’s face suggested otherwise.

Elder Sykes, looking uncomfortable, cleared his throat. “Thank you, Antonio,” he said, “but we really must speak with the Elder and Sister Green. Can you take us to where they’re staying?”

Antonio nodded. “Only Presidente Gonzalez knows where they are, but I can take you to speak with him and I’m sure he’ll be glad to help you.”

“Great.” Elder Sykes looked a bit disturbed, but tried to hide his misgivings.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” said Antonio.

Before Myles could protest, they’d gone. He muttered something unfriendly under his breath, then went into the hut that had been designated as theirs, ducking through the low entrance. What he saw displeased him – nothing, literally nothing, but a floor of dirt and a window cut into the other side. The respite its roof offered from the blazing sun was the only item in its favor as far as he was concerned.

Elder Sykes followed. “Don’t worry about our stuff,” he said. “I have all the discussions and relevant scriptures memorized.”

“Yeah, that’s great,” said Myles. “Look at this. We’re supposed to *sleep* here?”

“I guess so. Relax, it will be like camping. But don’t enjoy it too much because camping is against mission rules. Just –”

“Camping? Elder, we’re next door to the capital city. ‘Camping’ is not what I had in mind.” He opened his wallet and pulled from it a photograph that had providentially escaped the worst of the soaking in the ocean. “The things I do for you,” he muttered to it.

A whistle from the doorway made them both look up. There, in a skirt made from the same material as the roof and a top made of coconut shells, stood the scrawniest woman they’d ever seen. Myles imagined that he could have reached around her waist with his thumbs and forefingers.

“Hola, caballeros,” she said in a sultry yet nasally voice, batting her eyelashes. “You new in town?”

“Yes we are, actually,” said Elder Sykes. “Could you –”

“Elder.” Myles gave his junior companion a warning look.

“What?” Elder Sykes was sincerely confused.

The woman winked at them. “Let me give you chicos a taste of San Marcosian hospitality.”

“Thanks, we’d appreciate that,” said Elder Sykes. “Everyone’s been real friendly so far, and –”

“Elder!” said Myles. “Don’t talk to her. She’s going to get us into trouble.”

“What? Why?” Elder Sykes was genuinely confused. “Because she’s immodestly dressed? She’s still a child of God, Elder.”

Myles was incredulous. “Were you raised under a rock? This woman is a –”

“Hush,” she said, gliding across the dirt floor over to him and putting a spindly finger to his lips. “You’re so tense. Let me calm you down.”

“Beat it, sister,” said Myles, recoiling. His revulsion had less to do with her intentions than with the smell at this proximity, indicating that she hadn’t bathed in months.

Her gaze fell to the picture still clutched in his hand, of a white woman with piercing brown eyes and golden tresses cascading over her shoulders. “Ah, tienes novia. Lo siento. I understand.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

“Cual es su nombre?”

“Natalie.”

“Natalie. That’s a nice name.”

“Thanks.”

She turned to Elder Sykes again. “How about you, big boy? Estás soltero?”

“Rosita!” Antonio’s voice boomed as he rushed in, leaving room in the hut for only one more person. “These are missionaries! Holy men! No les moleste!”

She pouted. “No sabía. I just thought they were businessmen or something.”

“Well, they’re not, so leave them alone. Get out.”

“Hey, wait,” said Elder Sykes. “Maybe she’d like to hear our message.”

She perked up. “Message?”

“Ah, señores, you are too kind,” said Antonio. “But surely you do not think una *mujer* is fit to hear the word of God?”

There was an awkward silence. “Er, yes,” said Elder Sykes. “The word of God is for everybody.”

Antonio looked at them, then at Rosita, and shrugged. “Fine, suit yourselves. I’ll get something to eat and we can discuss things over dinner.” He turned to leave and pointed a warning finger at her. “Come with me. I don’t trust you.”

As soon as they’d gone, Myles demanded, “What was that about? ‘A woman is unfit to hear the word of God’? What is this, Afghanistan?”

“Look at the bright side, Elder,” said Elder Sykes. “We’ve been here less than an hour and already gotten our first teaching appointment! And once they learn the gospel, they’ll know that all are alike unto God!”

“Yeah, great,” said Myles.

“You seem tense, Elder.” Elder Sykes cocked his head and peered quizzically through his glasses. “Aren’t you happy to be here?”

“You’re very perceptive, and no,” said Myles. “Chile was tolerable, but this place is hotter than outer darkness and we have to sleep in the dirt. That’s not my idea of a swell time.”

“Why are you here, Elder?”

“Why am I here? I’ll tell you why I’m here.” He held up the picture still in his hand and waved it in his junior companion’s face. “This wonderful, precious girl wouldn’t marry me if I didn’t serve a mission like her. Oh, and my parents would disown me too. Small detail.”

“I see. So you wouldn’t have come otherwise?”

“I don’t know. Not to this craphole, I can tell you that much.” Myles put the picture back in his wallet and began to pace back and forth, not an easy task in the small hut. “To Fiji, maybe, or Tonga, or Samoa. You know, an island paradise that actually *is* an island paradise.”

“Hmmm.” Elder Sykes scratched his head. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m surprised you made it this far.”

“Me too. I thought that whole ‘raising the bar’ thing in ‘04 was supposed to filter out guys like me. Oh well.” He sighed. “Only two more months.”

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Two more months seemed like eternity when he saw what was for dinner. “Cockroaches,” he said. “You actually eat cockroaches.”

“Por supuesto,” said Antonio. “Las cucarachas multiply like, well, like cucarachas. They’re the most plentiful food source on the island.”

Myles stared at his plate with a certain amount of skepticism.

“Don’t worry,” said Antonio, “I cooked them to get rid of any diseases. What do you think we are, primitives?”

“No, of course not,” said Elder Sykes before Myles could open his mouth again. “My companion didn’t mean to offend you. He’s just not used to gourmet fare.” He popped one into his mouth and crunched on it, smiling. “Mmm! Just like mother used to make!”

They were sitting cross-legged in a circle in the hut, with plastic plates and cups. Rosita went around and filled all their cups with water from an earthenware jug.

“Gracias,” Antonio told her. “Now beat it.” She gave him a curt nod and turned to leave.

“Wait, hold on,” said Elder Sykes. “Can’t she eat with us?”

Antonio laughed. “Oh, you americanos have such a sense of humor.” Then he realized the man was serious, and his jaw dropped. “Good grief, señor, has the sun fried your cabeza? She is una mujer. She eats outside.”

“But why?”

“Porqué? I just told you, señor, she is una *mujer*. Do I need to draw you a diagram?”

“My companion lied,” said Myles. “I do think you’re primitives. What if I told you that women are actually a kind of human beings?”

“No need to patronize me,” said Antonio, rapidly growing annoyed. “I’ll have you know that I’m quite progressive about women’s rights. Pues, I don’t even flog her when she speaks out of turn.”

“Oh, I stand corrected. You’re a prince.”

“Look,” said Elder Sykes, trying to defuse the situation, “can we just let her eat with us? We’re going to discuss the gospel, and this message is so important that even a woman – er, I mean everyone should hear it.”

“Bien. Whatever.” Antonio gestured at the ground. “Sientate, Rosita.”

“Gracias,” she said. Having stood by patiently through the whole argument, she joined the circle as if nothing had happened.

Myles rolled his eyes and raised his cup to take a swig. His throat had been parched all day and now was actually beginning to hurt. But as his gaze focused on the water he realized that what he’d thought, had hoped, was a trick of the lighting was all too real. “Antonio,” he said, fighting to keep his voice steady, “this water is brown.”

“Felicitaciones, señor,” the native responded, still annoyed. “You’re not colorblind.”

“And there’s crud floating in it. A thousand little pieces of crud. You guys *drink* it like this?”

“Yes, señor, that’s generally what one does with agua. Is there a problem?”

“Oh, not really,” said Myles. “I just have this odd preference of not becoming violently ill and dying, but hey, I’m open to new experiences.”

“Relax,” said Antonio. “Only one in fifty people get gonorrhea from it.”

Elder Sykes had raised his own cup to his lips, willing to give the water a try as he had the cockroaches. Hearing this, however, he turned green and quickly set it back down. “Er, hey,” he said, “maybe we could start the lesson now. That all right?”

“Yes, please do,” said Antonio. “If you’re sure una mujer is fit to hear it.”

“I’m sure. All right, so what do you guys know about God?”

“Oh, mucho. We’re all good Catholics here. I would read la Biblia cover to cover if I had one. And if I could read.”

“We can teach you! We can teach you to read!” Elder Sykes seemed genuinely excited by the prospect. “But first things first. God is our loving Heavenly Father, and we are His children. We were sent to Earth to learn and progress so that we can return to heaven and become like Him. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“There was a grand council in heaven, and all of God’s spirit children were there. Billions of people. He announced His plan. But there was a problem! Once we, the spirits, had taken bodies and come to Earth, we would sin and become unclean, and then we couldn’t dwell with God anymore. Our sins would need to be punished, but God didn’t want to punish us. He asked for a volunteer to make un expiación for our sins so that we could become clean again. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Jesus Christ, His firstborn spirit child, stepped forward and said ‘Here am I, send me’. Lucifer stepped forward and said the same thing. The Father chose Jesus, because Lucifer wanted the glory for himself, and he wanted to use his own version of the plan that would take away our freedom of choice so we couldn’t sin at all. We would never learn or grow that way. So there was a war in heaven, and when it was over, a third of God’s spirit children were cast out with Lucifer. The rest came to Earth.”

“Fascinating. I never heard that in Mass.”

Elder Sykes turned to Myles expectantly, waiting for him to continue the lesson. Myles wasn’t in the mood, but it was his job, after all, so with a silent groan he continued. “I know what you guys are wondering now,” he said. “You’re wondering, what did we do during that war in heaven to deserve getting sent to a place like San Marcos?”

“Si!” said Rosita, speaking up for the first time since dinner started. “Si, that’s exactly what I was thinking!”

“Yo tambien,” Antonio admitted. “Oh, see? She just spoke out of turn and I’m not flogging her. I told you.”

“Your chivalry is an inspiration to all of us.” Myles decided not to press the issue. “So, Rosita, what are your thoughts about getting sent here?”

“Oh, I think about it all the time,” she said, eager to keep talking now. “Every día y noche I pray to Dios and express my gratitude for living on this island.”

He blinked. “Beg pardon?”

“Si, es verdad! I marvel at the beauty of the ocean, of the jungle, of the volcano that stands over us. The plants, the birds, the animals – everything is a masterpiece, and everything testifies of God. Es un milagro.”

Myles shook his head in stupefaction. “No comprendo.”

“It is beautiful,” agreed Elder Sykes, ecstatic about her positive attitude that matched his so well. “And then there’s family and friends, right?”

“Si! Antonio es el mejor amigo en el mundo.” She gave him a hug. He was skinny enough that her arms could have gone around him twice. He patted her on the back, looking embarrassed.

The lesson continued smoothly despite Myles’s confusion and reluctance to participate. As they were wrapping up, Elder Sykes asked the investigators, “As the Lord answers your prayers and you feel that our message is true, will you follow the example of Jesus Christ and be baptized by one having authority from God?”

“Si!” said Rosita, clapping her hands with joy.

“Eh, posiblemente,” said Antonio. “Vamos a ver.”

After making a return appointment for the next day, the two natives left. Myles stood in the doorway and watched the sun falling beneath the horizon. He glanced at his watch, which had turned out not to be as waterproof as advertised. “What time do you think it is?”

“I don’t know,” said Elder Sykes. “But Elder and Sister Green said it’s not safe to go out after sundown. I think we should just do some scripture study and call it a day.”

“Scripture study? My standard works are enlightening some blessed fish right now, Elder.”

“Scripture masteries. Don’t you remember them from seminary? We can go over those.”

Myles sighed. “Knock yourself out, Elder. I’m going to bed. Or going to ground, I should say. I may as well start trying to get used to it.”

“But scripture study is –”

“Don’t push me, Elder. This hasn’t been a fantastic day.” Myles lay down in the dirt and winced. He could feel pointy rocks just beneath the surface, and shifted a bit in a vain attempt to get comfortable.

“Come on,” said Elder Sykes, “don’t be so down about it. So this isn’t Costa Rica. You saw how happy Rosita and Antonio manage to be, right? Don’t tell me their positive attitude isn’t contagious.”

“Fine then, I won’t tell you.”

“Elder, listen to me. We’re here for a reason. If we look on the bright side and count our blessings, we just might be able to enjoy our stay.”

Before Myles could think of a snarky reply, Antonio reappeared in the doorway. “Lo siento, señores, I almost forgot,” he said. “Try to toss and turn while you sleep, so los gusanos don’t nibble on your flesh too much.”

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“Ah, what a beautiful morning!” said Elder Sykes, standing and stretching. He winced at the aches where the worms had nibbled him.

“Somewhere else, maybe,” said Myles, rolling over with a moan.

“Let’s go tracting, Elder, as soon as we’ve had our scripture study and exercise. If the rest of the natives are anything like Antonio and Rosita, we’ll have more appointments than we can teach.”

Myles mumbled something under his breath.

“Beg pardon, Elder?”

“I said, my toothbrush. My flipping toothbrush is in the ocean. How am I supposed to brush my teeth?”

“We’ll ask Elder and Sister Green about it when we see them. Don’t worry about that now, Elder. We’ve got some proselytizing to do.” He rubbed his chin. “Aw, fetch, I have stubble. That’s against mission rules.”

They did their scripture study and exercise, Myles with considerable reluctance. As they emerged squinting into the blazing sunlight and oppressive heat, Antonio came walking up to greet them. “Hola, Mormones,” he said. “How are you esta mañana?”

“Bien, gracias,” said Elder Sykes.

“Eh,” said Myles.

“Excelente,” said Antonio. “What are your plans for today?”

“We’re going to see if we can find anyone else who’ll listen to our message,” said Elder Sykes. “I figured first we’d check these other huts around here.”

“Ah, maybe later would be better,” said Antonio, looking nervous. “There’s something going on in the city I think you should see.”

Elder Sykes looked at Myles, the senior companion, for guidance. Myles shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Vamanos,” said Antonio. “This way.”

As they walked, Elder Sykes asked him, “Dondé está Rosita?”

“Oh,” he said, “she’s, ah, *working*.”

“I see. What’s her job?”

Antonio and Myles both stared at him incredulously.

“Okay, yeah, I’m missing something obvious, ha ha, I’m so naïve,” said Elder Sykes. “Come on, just tell me.”

“She is una abogada,” Antonio explained sarcastically.

Elder Sykes raised an eyebrow. “A lawyer. Oh. I see why you don’t like to talk about it.”

They entered the city proper of Puerto Bolivar and could immediately tell something was going on. The air was charged with a palpable electric fervor. The unpaved streets were empty, aside from litter, human waste, and crippled beggars, but carried distant shouts from somewhere up ahead. Antonio quickened his pace and they followed him, followed the noise, to the town square where a dais had been set up and William Ostling stood preaching.

“Oh, great,” said Myles.

The crowd was in a frenzy. They hung on to the preacher’s every word and cheered when he made a particularly scathing point.

“They’ve come to preach a different gospel,” Ostling yelled, shaking his fist. “The Bible says that whoever preaches a different gospel, let him be accursed. They’ve come to tell you of a different Jesus, a Jesus who is the brother of Satan, a Jesus who lacks the power to save you. The Mormon Jesus demands works. The *true* Jesus extends grace.”

The crowd went wild.

“Can a man work his way to heaven? No! My friends, we are all sinners! Only the blood of Christ can save us from the damnation we so richly deserve! Only his grace is sufficient!”

The crowd went wilder.

“That slimy snake,” said Myles. “He’s misrepresenting our beliefs.”

“You tell him!” said Antonio.

“I think I will,” said Myles, starting forward, but Elder Sykes pulled him back.

“Wait, Elder!” he said. “Nothing good can come of that. Contention is of the devil.”

Myles glared at him, but realized that might indeed by giving Ostling exactly what he wanted. They continued listening helplessly.

“They’ve come to establish their cult of legalism on the beautiful shores of San Marcos,” Ostling continued. “They’ve come to convert you, to take ten percent of your income, to fill your days with endless meetings and unreachable expectations. They’ve come to build a temple to their unholy Jesus, to perform secret ceremonies and indoctrinate you.”

The crowd cheered, sounding angrier this time. “He’s hit a sore spot,” Antonio confided in the missionaries. “Most of our citizens don’t even *have* income.”

“Do not let them fool you!” said Ostling, shaking his fist and practically foaming at the mouth. “They will preach the sanctity of marriage, yet they once sanctioned the matrimony of one man to as many as fifty women! They will preach love and brotherhood, yet their priesthood caste and temples barred Africans from admission until as recently as 1978! They will preach humanitarianism and service, yet they tithe their followers to support an oligarchy of old white men, to build their precious temples and even a shopping mall!”

The crowd cheered with less enthusiasm, and many of the citizens began mumbling to one another in confusion. Antonio nudged Myles. “What’s a shopping mall?”

His response was drowned out by Ostling’s raised voice, which could surely be heard throughout the entire city. “You are just another batch of numbers for their statistics, just one more nation to check off their list! They will baptize you en masse with no thought for your individuality, for your rich heritage as a people! *Are you going to let them?*”

The crowd’s former enthusiasm returned tenfold. “*No!*” they chorused.

“Oh, jeez,” said Myles. “We can’t let that creep get away with this. Let me at him.”

“No, Elder!” said Elder Sykes. “Remember, contention is of –”

“Then *you* go up there! Bear your testimony at him or something!”

“Now, look, if we just take a deep breath and –”

“There they are!” said Ostling, pointing at them. “Hello, Mormons! Have you anything to say for yourselves?”

Myles opened his mouth to say something that was probably unbecoming of a Latter-day Saint, but never got the chance because in an instant the angry crowd was upon them. He turned and ran for his life as he was assailed by dozens of fists and feet, and in the corner of his eye he saw Elder Sykes doing the same, as in the corner of his other eye Antonio tried to hold them off by himself.

“No, wait!” they heard Ostling yell, sounding panicked. “Don’t hurt them! What would Jesus do?” But it was too late; his words fell on deaf ears.

Myles was able to easily outpace the malnourished natives, and their blows lacked much strength, but they had the advantage of numbers. He couldn’t keep running forever, especially not in this heat, especially when he hadn’t had anything to drink for so long. His lungs and throat screamed for relief, but none appeared to be forthcoming.

Suddenly Rosita came running around the street corner towards them, waving her arms. “Muchachos!” she cried. “Presidente Gonzalez is on his way!”

Ten seconds later the streets were empty, aside from the litter, human waste, and crippled beggars.

“Thanks,” said Myles, fighting to catch his breath. “I don’t know how you did that, but thanks.”

“El presidente runs a tight ship,” she said.

“And you tried to protect us,” said Elder Sykes to Antonio. “You could have just blended into the crowd. Why’d you do that?”

“Porqué? Señores, I will tell you porque,” he said. “When you taught me last night, I felt something warm en mi pecho, something burning como un fuego. It was a feeling I’ve never felt before, and I want more of it.”

“Me, too,” said Rosita. “I felt it also.”

“Great,” said Elder Sykes. “So you want to keep learning?”

“Si, señor,” they said in unison.

“Awesome. Um, I think we’re done tracting for today, so if you want to come back to our place we can teach you, um, the rest of the discussions.” He turned to Myles. “Is that all right, Elder? Is there a mission rule against it?”

Myles shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care,” he said. “Just get me away from those freaks back there.”

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They taught and discussed well into the evening. Myles made a trip to the beach and collected some salt water, which wouldn’t sustain him long-term but would at least be preferable to what the natives drank. He even tried a cockroach. It was a little bitter, but not as bad as some of the things he’d had to eat in Chile. Still, he’d scream if he had to eat it every day.

As the sun went down again and Antonio and Rosita prepared to leave, he remembered to ask, “Oh, Antonio, can I get a new toothbrush somewhere around here?”

He blinked. “A toothbrush, señor?”

“Yeah, that’s what I usually use to brush my teeth.”

Antonio looked stupefied. Rosita nudged him. “It’s an American custom, I think,” she whispered.

“Ah. I’ll see what I can do, señor. Buenas noches. Don’t let los gusanos bite too much.” He gave them a polite bow and left.

“Well, Elder,” said Elder Sykes, stretching and yawning, “today was a definite improvement over yesterday, don’t you think?”

Myles gaped at him. “Are you out of your flipping mind? That evangelical creep made the entire city hate us, we almost got killed by an angry mob, and we’re still eating cockroaches and sleeping on dirt full of rocks and hungry worms. The plane crash is already looking like a happy memory.”

“Come on, Elder,” said Elder Sykes. “We have two sincere investigators hanging on to our every word! Tomorrow I think we should try again to commit Antonio to baptism.”

“Tomorrow, Elder, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,” said Myles. “We’re going to make Antonio take us right to Señor Presidente’s office, and we’re going to give him a piece of our mind. This place isn’t safe. Our health is in danger, my sanity is in danger, and now our lives are in danger. And *where* are Elder and Sister Green?”

At their mention, Elder Sykes looked a bit concerned. “I don’t know,” he said. “They probably need to stay away. They’re probably contagious.”

“We’ll catch something whether we see them or not,” said Myles. “Unless I can stay in this hut and not eat or drink anything for two months.” He turned away, shook his head and sighed. He pulled out the picture of Natalie and stared at it. “Just keep thinking – if I survive, this will all be worth it. Right?”

Elder Sykes glanced uncomfortably at the ground, then cleared his throat. “Erm. If you don’t mind me saying so, Elder, I was impressed by your reaction to that preacher today. I mean, not by the reaction itself, per se, because contention is of the devil, but I was impressed by the fire in your spirit, by your eagerness to defend our religion.”

Myles shrugged. “Yeah, so? I’m not gonna stand by and let someone slander my beliefs like that.”

Elder Sykes eyes widened; then he beamed. “So you *do* have a testimony.”

Myles glared at him. “Yeah, of course I have a testimony. Why’s that a surprise?”

“Er, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just – you’ve just been so grouchy the whole time I’ve known you, and you said you were here because of your girlfriend and your parents, so...”

“Well, mostly.” Myles stared at the ground as he wracked his mind and wrestled with his emotions. “It’s not that I *didn’t* want to go on a mission, as such, it’s just that... I don’t know. It was such a big commitment. I’m so inadequate. I don’t think I *should* be here.”

“I see.” Elder Sykes stroked his chin, wincing slightly at the stubble. “Why are you here, Elder?”

“Because one of the Apostles had an off day and accidentally approved my application. Good night, Elder, I’m going to bed.” Myles had had quite enough touchy-feely stuff for one evening. He put Natalie’s picture away, lay on the ground and tried not to think about the worms that would soon be keeping him up all night.

“But –” protested Elder Sykes. “Scripture study –”

“Fine. ‘And my father dwelt in a tent.’ I memorized that one all by myself. Good night.”

Elder Sykes nodded to himself. “I see... and what’s the reference?”

“First Leave Me Alone, Chapter Or I’ll Punch You, Verse in the Face. Good night.”

Elder Sykes took the hint. “Well, good night. When you wake up, remember to start the day with a positive attitude. Antonio and Rosita always have a positive attitude, and they’re happy regardless of their circumstances. Count your blessings.”

“Meh.”

That night a tropical storm blew the roof off their little hut and soaked them to the bone. On the plus side, it drowned the worms.

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“At least we got a shower,” said Elder Sykes, wringing out his tie. “No offense, Elder, but you were already beginning to smell like a native.”

“None taken,” said Myles. “So were you.”

“Right, so for today, I’m thinking we should check on the other huts around here and make sure everybody’s safe after the storm, then see if we can teach any of them. Later, when Antonio and Rosita stop by for their appointment, we’ll commit Antonio to baptism.”

“Yeah, about that,” said Myles. “I think we ought to give Rosita a little talk about the law of chastity first.”

Elder Sykes blinked. “What for? I covered it yesterday.”

“Yeah, well, I think we need to go into a little more detail.” He couldn’t believe how oblivious his junior companion was. “The thing about her, see, is –”

“Hola!” she said, appearing in the doorway. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“No,” said Elder Sykes, “nothing at all.”

“Where’s your boyfriend?” asked Myles.

She cocked her head. “Cuál?”

He rolled his eyes. “Antonio.”

“Oh, él es amigo solamente. He’ll be along en un momento. He’s bringing you a toothbrush.”

“Great. As soon as he gets here, we’re going to see Presidente Gonzalez, okay? I’ve got a few words for him.”

“Hold on,” said Elder Sykes, “what about the people right here? Shouldn’t we make sure they’re okay first?”

“Elder, they live in flipping San Marcos,” said Myles. “Whatever happened can hardly make their lives suck noticeably more. In fact, if any of them died, they’re darn lucky.”

Rosita pouted. “That’s rude. Pero tienes razón. We have these storms every week, so they’ll be fine.”

“Told you.” Over her shoulder he saw Antonio approaching, and called out. “Hey, you got me a toothbrush?”

“Si, señor,” said Antonio, holding it out as Rosita stepped aside to let him in. “I made it myself from a stick and el pelo de un puerco.”

“Pig hair, great. Good enough,” said Myles, snatching it away. “I can still feel the cockroach legs stuck in my teeth.” He dipped the brush in his supply of ocean water and brushed vigorously. It tasted terrible, and over the long term the salt would eat away his enamel, but for the moment it was one of his favorite experiences of the entire stay here.

“Si, señor. Fresh pig, right off the street. Only dead for tres días.”

Myles spat hard. He thought of something to say, then thought better of it and decided to just pretend that what had just happened hadn’t just happened. “Right,” he said. “Antonio, we need to see the president ASAP. Can you take us there?”

“Si, por supuesto. Between us, he’s never even busy. He just plays games all day and sits at a desk when he needs to look important.”

“Imagine that. Some things are the same in every country.”

“Careful, Elder,” said Elder Sykes. “Making political statements is against mission rules.”

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Elder Sykes and Rosita were waiting in an alley on the outskirts of Puerto Bolivar when Antonio returned from the town square, where he’d been scouting out the scene. “The preacher is telling the people not to harass false teachers,” he explained to the missionaries, “because it’s not their place to judge or condemn you. He says you’ll get your eternal reward from Satan anyway.”

“What a swell guy,” said Myles. “Is it working? Are they calmed down?”

“No, señor, they’re still pissed. We should take another route. Vamanos.” He led them out of the alley, around the corner, and down another street, sticking close to the buildings.

“I don’t understand,” said Elder Sykes. “You two are so friendly and so teachable. Why did they turn against us so easily?”

“Two days on this island has made *me* irritable,” said Myles.

“It’s not that at all,” said Antonio. “Most of them are happy like us, or at least content.”

“Yeah? Even that guy?” Myles gestured at a leprous beggar who stared dolefully at them as they passed, slowly dripping bits of his skin into the dirt.

“No sé. I’m not a mind reader. But we all have *some* chronic disease or other, and most of us aren’t much richer than him. Still, we have received muchas bendiciones de Dios! Gloria al Señor!” He looked left and right, then hurried across the end of a cross-street leading to the town square, where angry shouts could be heard even from here. “They are actually overjoyed, señores, that foreigners like you are giving them a reason to be angry.”

“Explain.”

“Other peoples, señor, have been conquered and exploited by other nations throughout history. But not us. First the Spanish, then the Portuguese, then the British and the Dutch and the French – all of them rejected us for those purposes. They thought we were worthless, that our island was worthless. So we have never been able to express our patriotism by fighting them or something.” He shrugged.

“So...” said Myles, not certain if he was hearing this right, “your people want to be conquered and exploited so they can resist it, and they think that’s what’s happening now.”

“In a nutshell, si.”

“We don’t have an independence day to celebrate or revolutionary heroes to idolize,” said Rosita. “Imagine how that feels.”

Myles nodded, ostensibly agreeing but mentally confirming what he had already come to suspect; that the heat and disease around here made everyone crazy. San Marcos, as a country, seemed to take great pride in itself; yet beneath this lay a dormant layer of insecurity and self-consciousness, which was manifested by lashing out at unrelated provocations.

Maybe, said a voice in his head, they aren’t the only people who are like that.

Before he could consider the implications of this thought, they rounded another corner and the president’s palace came into view, surprising him not just by its appearance but by the fact that they hadn’t been able to see it sooner. It was the veritable definition of a “great and spacious building”; standing in the midst of abject poverty, it towered over the rest of town looking like the Disney World castle, and at least the size of the Salt Lake Temple.

The pair of bored-looking guards standing out front hardly bothered to return Antonio’s friendly wave as he led his guests through the gate. So far, Myles had been too busy being annoyed to consider the danger they could be heading into, but now he did so. This was the man who knew where Elder and Sister Green were but wouldn’t tell anyone. This was the man who had ordered the death of an underling for not mentioning the island’s lack of a runway to prospective tourists. This was the man whose name alone had yesterday cleared the street of bloodthirsty rioters.

Perhaps a bit of wariness was in order. But then, this was no time to panic, either, especially with him crossing the courtyard toward them right at this moment, as if he’d foreseen their arrival.

“Bienvenidos otra vez,” said President Gonzalez, grinning broadly and holding out his arms. “I am most honored by this unexpected visit. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Business,” said Myles, refusing to play this game on the man’s terms. “Not pleasure.”

“Ah, que triste. Pues, así es la vida.” Gonzalez shrugged. “I am at your disposal, caballeros. But vamanos, we must sit, and have refreshments.”

Myles didn’t want to go any deeper than necessary into what could prove to be enemy territory, but if he upset the president now then they’d never accomplish what they came for and their lives might be in danger anyway. So, with a shrug, he said, “Lead the way.”

“Bueno.” Gonzalez clasped his hands with delight and led them across the courtyard to another entrance, also flanked by guards.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Elder Sykes whispered to Myles. “Siento mal.”

“Yo tambien. But what choice do we have?” Myles started to feel a bit guilty. He still didn’t particularly like Elder Sykes, but he didn’t want to be responsible for anything bad happening to him. “Elder,” he said, “this isn’t going to be a regular discussion. I’m the senior companion. This time, let *me* do most of the talking.”

“If you insist,” said Elder Sykes a bit too eagerly.

They entered a hallway full of ornately carved woodwork and fine tapestries. At the end were a set of doors that appeared to be solid oak, and behind those was the president’s inner sanctum – a sanctum supplied not only with electricity but a large screen television, several video game systems, electronic gadgets, and a laptop computer. A bookshelf full of old and thick tomes was covered from floor to ceiling with dust.

“Wow,” said Elder Sykes. “This is, um –”

“Not quite the standard of living we’ve gotten used to,” Myles finished for him.

“Ah, si,” said Gonzalez, beaming with pride. “Occasionally boaters have accidentally stumbled on our little island home, and I keep the most valuable ones here as, uh, guests. For example, I have an Indian engineer, a Japanese software developer, and a French painter. I keep praying for an Italian chef, a British comedian and a Swedish swimsuit model, but no luck so far.”

Myles fought back a cutting remark and a rising anger. Suddenly, he very much wanted to be a missionary. He wanted to tell this two-bit monarch that only righteous prayers from righteous people were answered. He wanted to explain that this man would be cursed for oppressing the poor and not sharing his blessings. He wanted to point out that this great and spacious building would someday fall just like Babylon – maybe only in a metaphorical sense, but it would fall.

He decided not to say these things. There was probably a trapdoor under his feet.

Gonzalez settled his bulk behind the large oak desk at the head of the room. “Espera, espera, don’t tell me,” he said, holding up a hand. “You’re here to preach your gospel, si? I’ll listen, but don’t get your hopes up about baptism. My Catholic roots run deep.”

“Er, not quite,” said Myles. “But, on that note...” He decided to start with the gripe that would be less likely to annoy their host. “We’ve had some trouble in the city, I’m afraid.”

Gonzalez clasped his fingers together and affected an air of genuine concern. “Trouble? Qué tipo?”

“The other preacher here, William Ostling,” he said. “He’s turned the locals against us with distorted caricatures of our beliefs, almost as bad as Ed Decker’s.”

“Well, I think *that*’s a bit harsh,” put in Elder Sykes. “He didn’t say anything about mind control or world domination.”

“The point is we’re afraid to be seen on the streets. Afraid for our lives.”

“Ah, no problemo,” said Gonzalez. “I’ll take care of it.” He snapped his fingers, and an aide rushed over. “José, take care of it. See to it that Señor Ostling doesn’t bother these fine misioneros anymore.”

“Si, Señor Presidente,” said José, snapping a salute and running off.

“Gracias,” said Myles, and he really meant it. Missionary work was difficult enough, especially around here, without people trying to kill him.

“De nada,” said Gonzalez. “We San Marcosians seek to ensure that all foreign visitors have only the best experience here. Will there be anything else?”

“Yes, actually.” This was a perfect opening to complain about his own less-than-great experience here, but now that he was on the president’s home turf he was having second thoughts about that, so he moved on to the other remaining item. “Elder and Sister Green. Where are they?”

“Oh, ellos. Si. They are, of course, still recuperating.”

“*Where* are they?”

“Someplace very safe, very sanitary.”

Myles felt something snap inside, and before he could stop himself he was leaning over the desk, into the president’s face, with a snarl. “I’m not going to ask again. *Dondé están*?”

Gonzalez raised a bemused eyebrow, but relented. “Te dije la verdad,” he said. “He really does have dysentery, and she has botulism. Mas eso no es todo.”

“No?” Myles stood back up, suddenly feeling even warier. “How so?”

Gonzalez let out a heavy sigh from the very depths of his paunch. “You see, señores,” he said, “when your elderly amigos discovered the truth about this place – that it hasn’t changed after all, that it’s the same dump that was rejected as a colony by five countries – they were stunned. They were going to tell everyone.”

He leaned over the desk, and didn’t seem nearly so happy or friendly anymore.

“I could not let that happen,” he said.

“You monster,” said Myles. “You mean, you – you –”

“No, no! They are muy seguros, señor, like I told you. But they won’t be leaving anytime soon.” He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head. “You must comprender, no? Necesitamos sangre fresca. Necesitamos investment and infrastructure from other nations, wealthier nations. We can’t have a couple of meddling Mormones scare them off.”

“You idiota,” said Myles. “This is the twenty-first century. You’ll be lucky if you can keep your dirty little secret for ten minutes after the first real tourist gets here.”

“Not if mis hombres have cuchillos at their gargantas, encouraging them to report favorably.” He pantomimed putting a knife to his throat. “Si, before long people will get suspicious. But by then I will have a number of hostages to do my bidding or encourage others to do so.”

Myles was speechless, unable to believe what he was hearing. He rounded on Antonio instead, who’d been listening silently. “Have you known about this all along?”

“Si, señor,” said Antonio, looking away from his accusing gaze.

“He has been most useful,” said Gonzalez. “Always keeping an eye on your activities and whereabouts by pretending to help you out and be interested in your message.”

“*What*?”

“Por favor,” said Antonio, “we are just patriotic citizens, trying to do what’s best para nuestra país. You can hardly blame us.”

Myles rather felt that he could, and he rounded next on Rosita. “Tú también?”

“No,” she said, looking as horrified as he felt outraged. “No sabía nada. I *am* interested –”

“Señor,” said Antonio, looking a bit annoyed, “must we go over this again? She is a *mujer*. Why would we involve her in such a critical plan?”

“That’s it, I’m done,” said Myles. “I’ve had it. I’ve had it with you people and I’ve had it with your stupid island.” He glared at Presidente Gonzalez, but his rage was now directed toward someone else, the one person he’d trusted in this whole place. “Sabes algo, Antonio? You’re right to be proud of your country, because San Marcos has a very special place in God’s divine plan.”

“Si?” said Antonio, looking suspicious. “And qué es eso?”

“Simple,” said Myles, keeping his voice and expression calm. “If the world ever needs an enema, He’ll need a place to put it.” And with that he turned and marched out of the room, not caring what the president’s guards might do to him. Elder Sykes glanced worriedly between him and Gonzalez, then hurried after his senior companion.

Antonio turned to Rosita. “Needs a what? No comprendo. Do you?”

“No.”

Gonzalez just shook his head with bemusement as he watched the missionaries leave. They could leave his palace, but they would remain on this island for a very long time. And that was good, because he was rather fond of them.

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“Elder!” said Elder Sykes. “Elder, wait!”

“For what?” said Myles, not slowing his march across the courtyard. “For something to go right around here? I won’t hold my breath.”

“Oh, Elder, don’t be that way. Focus on the positive –”

“The positive? The positive?” Myles stopped and turned to face his junior companion, forcing the other man to stop short to avoid running into him. “Name one good thing that’s happened to us here, just *one*. And things that only serve to slightly ameliorate the bad things don’t count. Okay, so we got two investigators on the first day. Big flipping whoop, look how that turned out! One of them’s a backstabber, and the other, since you obviously still haven’t noticed, is a –”

“Elder, calm down! Take a deep breath!”

“Stop calling me that, will you? That’s what’s wrong. The first thing that went wrong, the very first thing, was when some genius in Salt Lake decided it was a good idea to send us here. Some revelation that was! Why did the Lord’s anointed let these insecure fascists pull the wool over their eyes, at the risk of our health and our lives?”

“Everything happens for a reason,” said Elder Sykes, standing his ground and refusing to enter a shouting match.

“Most annoying BS Mormon cliché ever. You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Look, seriously. If the Lord didn’t want us here, he wouldn’t have let us come. We just need to be patient in our trials and remember that we can’t see the big picture.”

“Great. Let me know how that works out for you,” said Myles. “In the meantime, I’ll be working on getting the heck out of here ASAP. Natalie will understand. I’ve been through more than enough crap for her already.” He turned and stormed off toward the outer gate.

“For her?” Elder Sykes contemplated and blinked, then raised his head and called after his companion. “That’s your problem right there, Elder!” he said. “You shouldn’t be here for Natalie, or even for your parents, but for the Lord!”

“Yeah?” Myles called back, stopping and turning once again. This time his junior companion had gone too far, had pried too much into his affairs. “That’s easy for you to say, isn’t it? You don’t have to worry about the pressures of having a nice LDS girl, do you, since you probably never will!”

His junior companion’s face fell, and he instantly realized he’d gone too far.

“I’m sorry,” he said, running back over. “I’m so sorry – I didn’t mean...” Why had he said that? Why had he gotten personal? It disturbed him how much this place was getting to him. He didn’t like to think of himself as a jerk, but now he was appalled at himself.

“It’s all right,” said Elder Sykes, pushing away the offered arm of comfort. “You’re upset. I get that. I should mind my own business.”

“But I didn’t mean it.”

“Of course not.” Elder Sykes didn’t sound convinced at all.

Myles realized there was nothing he could say that would soothe the sting of his words, and was struggling with that dilemma when José entered the courtyard, looking very pleased with himself.

“Hola,” said José. “No vos preocupaís, amigos. Señor Ostling has been dealt with.”

“Huh? Oh, gracias,” said Myles. Suddenly that didn’t seem so important anymore. But, in an attempt to distract his sulking companion with a different line of thought, he asked, “What did you say to him?”

José seemed amused by the question. “What do you suppose, Señor? I explained to him he was sentenced a la muerte.”

Myles went pale and his stomach lurched. “You *killed* him?”

José rolled his eyes. “Claro que no, Señor.”

“Oh.” Myles felt a great sense of relief.

“I sent my underlings to take him up the volcano,” José continued, “and hang him above its mouth. When the heat and fumes eat away the rope, it is Madre Naturaleza, not I, who will kill him.”

“But that’s not what we wanted,” said Elder Sykes.

“You should have been more específica,” said José.

“Get him down from there right now,” Myles snapped.

José raised a condescending eyebrow. “You think I take orders from you, Señor? Try to remember that you are *guests* here.” He left them and re-entered the palace. The missionaries, not wanting to risk seeing Gonzalez again after making a scene in his office, didn’t dare follow.

Myles kicked at the dirt. “Fetch. On top of everything else, now we’re indirectly responsible for someone’s slow and terrifying death. Even Ostling doesn’t deserve that. Well, maybe he does, but –”

“We have to go rescue him,” said Elder Sykes, his sadness immediately replaced with a sense of urgency.

Myles nodded. “For once, Elder, we agree on something.”

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“High on the mountaintop, a banner is –”

“Shut the fetch up, Elder.”

“Sorry.”

Myles wiped the sweat from his brow again, knowing as he did so that he didn’t have much left. Maybe it was the salt water he’d been drinking, or the low nutritional value of the cockroaches, but he was already exhausted after making it only halfway up the volcano’s slope. He didn’t understand how the malnourished natives could get up it so fast.

“What if we’re too late?” asked Elder Sykes.

“Then at least we’ll have gotten a good workout,” said Myles.

As they continued upward, even his junior companion began to show signs of distress. The trail was well-worn, but still hard on their feet, and very steep. Roots, vines, and thorny bushes hit at their feet and legs, and the trees didn’t grow tall enough to offer any relief from the sun. Myles imagined that by the time prisoners reached the summit, death would come as a relief.

He was startled when all of a sudden the terrain flattened and there was the crater stretching out before them, slowly belching steam and ash into the air. One solitary dead tree grew off to one side with a long naked branch hanging precariously out over it, from which Will Ostling was hanging by his ankles. He looked even more surprised than the missionaries, but his surprise quickly turned to anger.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Saving you,” said Myles, assessing the situation. “Duh.”

“You fools,” said the preacher, beginning to panic, “I’m already saved! I have nothing to worry about! But if either of you should die here, without accepting the real Jesus, your souls are doomed!”

“That’s nice,” said Myles. He turned to Elder Sykes. “Stay here. I’ll go get him.”

“But –”

“No ‘buts’, Elder. I’m the senior companion, I’m stronger than you, and you probably have asthma.”

“Fair enough.” Elder Sykes couldn’t dispute that logic.

Ostling stopped yelling and caught his breath, then choked. His face was red, and not just from hanging upside down; fumes were in getting in his eyes and lungs, and though they didn’t know how long he’d been hanging here, it seemed a miracle that he’d stayed conscious. Myles approached the tree and gave it a once-over. It was smooth and lacked many branches, so climbing it wouldn’t be the easiest thing he’d ever done, but he could manage.

“Careful, Elder!” said Elder Sykes.

“Thanks,” muttered Myles, rolling up his sleeves. “I was going to be reckless, until you said that.” If only Natalie could see him now. He pictured her smiling face in the photograph in his wallet, imagined that it was egging him on, and then climbed.

“You fool,” Ostling said again. “Leave me before it’s too late! The branch won’t hold you!”

“Sure it will,” said Myles, climbing out onto it. He’d gone only a few feet when it cracked and dropped a few inches, nearly causing him to lose his grip and tumble into the crater below. His heart leaped into his throat. “Oh sh –”

“I told you! You’re too heavy!”

“But I’m all muscle!” Myles protested.

“Irrelevant!”

“Careful, Elder!” called Elder Sykes again.

Myles glanced around frantically, his eyes already watering and throat already hurting. If he could just untie the rope holding Ostling and pull him back up, they could get back and scramble down the tree together before the branch broke – couldn’t they? No, of course not. Who was he kidding? But he had to try. No one would say he let a man die in front of him without him lifting a finger to stop it.

He started forward again, very carefully –

*Snap*!

This time the branch dipped so abruptly that he did lose his grip. He saw the rock and magma coming up to meet him, and hoped it wasn’t a preview of his eternal destination –

He jerked to a halt as Ostling grabbed his ankles, nearly ripping the branch from the tree altogether. “Thanks,” he said with a cough, trying to ignore his pounding heart and the spinning caldera below him.

“Don’t thank me,” said the preacher. “We’re only prolonging the inevitable.”

“Elder!” called Elder Sykes. “I’m going to throw this vine out to you. Grab it!”

Myles saw him, upside down, standing on the lip of the crater with a vine in hand, its end tied in a loop with a perfect square knot. He laughed in spite of himself, risking another mouthful of smoke as he did so. “Yeah, right, kid,” he said. “You can’t throw that f –” The vine soared out to him and he instinctively caught it, blinking in stupefaction at what had just happened.

“Great,” said Elder Sykes. “Now hold on, I’m going to pull you both in. This could get bumpy.”

“Elder,” said Myles, exasperated, “you got lucky with the throw, but there’s no way you can pull both of us, all right? No flipping way.”

“What other options do you have?”

Myles paused. “Touché, Elder.”

“Oh, Lord help us,” said Ostling.

Elder Sykes tugged, the branch broke off completely, and Myles plummeted again and flipped right-side up as the vine carried him toward the crater wall. He hit it hard enough to bruise his ribs and knock the remaining wind out of him, but at least he was alive – for a moment longer. He risked a glance downward and wished he hadn’t after he saw the branch burst into flame mere inches beneath the soles of Ostling’s expensive leather shoes.

He glanced back upward and wished he hadn’t done that, either. Elder Sykes was straining just to hold them, let alone pull them up. He looked like a vein in his forehead was about to pop. And his toes were sticking over the edge of the crater, farther and farther as their weight pulled him forward.

“Let go, Elder!” he yelled.

“No!” said Elder Sykes. “I can do it –“

“You’ll die, idiot!”

“Either the Lord will strengthen me, or we’ll all die together, Elder!”

Myles closed his eyes. This wasn’t how he’d pictured his life ending. Then again, he’d never pictured his life ending at all. He’d always felt, somehow, as if he would live forever. Even the plane crash when arriving on the island hadn’t seemed real. But now everything was happening in slow motion, and he had plenty of time to think about it.

If he’d done so sooner, he would have done things differently. A lot differently.

Elder Sykes pitched over the edge, losing his glasses. But he didn’t fall. Someone had grabbed him around the waist and pulled him back.

“Hola,” said Rosita.

She was quickly joined by Antonio. “Hey, no hard feelings about earlier, bien?”

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“Wow,” said Elder Sykes. “You natives sure are stronger than you look.”

“Gracias,” said Antonio. “I’m telling you, Señor, las cucarachas can’t be beat for nutritional value around here.”

They had accomplished most of the trek back down the volcano in silence, overwhelmed by what had just happened and trying to get some good clean oxygen back into their lungs. Now, as they returned to what passed for civilization around here, they had begun to talk again, but fell silent when they saw who was waiting for them.

“Felicitaciones,” said the stonefaced Presidente Gonzalez. Beside him stood José, and behind them stood the mob of angry townspeople that had chased the missionaries the other day. “Que sorpresa. You got him.”

“Look, señor,” said Myles, stepping forward to protect his junior companion and the others, “if you want to kill somebody, take me. Leave these guys alone.”

“What?” said Elder Sykes, stunned. “No, Elder –”

“Silence!”

The president’s booming voice, louder than they could have expected, was met with exactly that from everyone assembled.

“You are misioneros, si?” he said, his voice returning to normal. “Then it is your job to answer mis preguntas.”

“S-si, señor,” said Elder Sykes. “We’ll do our best.”

“Here is mi pregunta para ti,” said Gonzalez, beginning to pace and think aloud. “This predicador has reviled against your religion – distorted it, you told me. He had even endangered your lives. Yet you have endangered your *own* lives, now, to save him. Why?”

Elder Sykes opened his mouth to speak. “Well –”

“And not only that,” Gonzalez continued, gesturing at Antonio and Rosita, “but you have inspired two of my own citizens to follow your example. Cómo?”

Elder Sykes opened his mouth again. “Well –”

“Rosita went first,” said Antonio. “I followed because I felt guilty for misleading them.”

“Oh, por favor,” said Rosita, giving a him a playful punch in the shoulder. “When we saved them from the mob the other day, you were as noble as me.”

“Dos veces you risked yourselves? Fenomenal,” said Gonzalez, stunned. “Explicame. Tell me why.”

Elder Sykes opened his mouth a third time. “Well –” Then he stopped, as if constrained by something, and slowly turned to his senior companion. “Elder Shirtz, maybe you can explain it better.”

Myles felt his usual reluctance to participate in the discussions slip away, yet he almost protested that he didn’t know what to say, because this situation wasn’t exactly covered by them. But then he realized, to his astonishment, that he actually did, and it was.

“It’s the pure love of Christ,” he explained. “Charity. If we are to follow Christ’s example, then we must love our neighbors as ourselves, as He loves us. And greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend.”

He realized, to his even greater astonishment, that there was moisture in his eyes from more than just the smoke. And to greater astonishment still, he noticed that Gonzalez had moisture in his eyes too.

“I misjudged you Mormones,” said Gonzalez. “Your Elder and Sister Green promised they would bring humanitarian aid, but I didn’t believe them. No one has ever done anything nice for us before. Everyone has abandoned us. But now...”

“You’ll let them go?” said Myles.

“Yes, immediately. José, see to it.” The aide bowed and ran back to the city. “And tambien, I think I would like to take your lessons.”

As one, the crowd behind him cheered, expressing the same desire.

“And, um, I might listen in too,” said Ostling, staring at the ground and kicking at a pebble with his half-melted shoe. “Just so I can accurately represent your false teachings, I mean.”

“Take a number,” said Myles.

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At the end of the exhausting day they trudged back to their hut. It was still missing a roof, but that didn’t seem to matter so much anymore.

“I’m going to miss this place,” said Elder Sykes.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said Elder Shirtz with a snort. Then he softened. “But I know what you mean.” The Greens had told them they were being transferred back to the mainland until conditions around here had improved. Given how much work that would take, he would probably spend the remaining two months of his mission in Chile after all.

Only two months? Where had the time gone? He was still eager to see Natalie, to be sure, but now he was just as excited about the other people he needed to see, the people God had sent him to reach.

Elder Sykes glanced sidelong at his companion. “Why are you here, Elder?”

Elder Shirtz smiled as the words came unbidden to his lips; the same as he had recited in the MTC, yet now laced with meaning he had barely grasped before. “To invite others to come unto Christ by helping them receive the restored gospel through faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end.”

Elder Sykes nodded, satisfied.

“Come on, Elder,” said Elder Shirtz. “Let’s see if we can squeeze in some scripture study before bed.”

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 As the plane dipped toward the runway of the Salt Lake City International Airport – and thank heaven there was a runway this time – Elder Shirtz was still thinking long and hard, as he had been during the entire portion of the flight that he hadn’t slept through. Even while flying over the beautiful snow-capped, cloud-shrouded mountains outside the city, his attention remained absorbed by the photograph of the radiant young woman that he had taken from his wallet.

 Rosita stood on the beach of San Marcos in a soaking white jumpsuit, spreading her arms to the sky and smiling from ear to ear, as pure and innocent as the day she had been born. Elders Sykes and Shirtz stood on either side of her, the latter in another soaking white jumpsuit, and beside them stood Antonio, looking sheepish yet unmistakably happy. He hadn’t opted for baptism yet, being too loyal to Catholicism, but soon. Very soon.

 “*Ah, she does not get the priesthood, because she is a mujer*,” he had said. “*I cannot wait to get it myself.*” They had needed to explain a few more things to him after that.

 It was nothing short of miraculous how the necessary humanitarian infrastructure had been put in place in a month and a half – even Rosita’s law firm had finally gotten off the ground – and the two missionaries had been allowed to return and baptize several of their investigators. Scores, in fact. But El­der Shirtz knew it wasn’t about the numbers. It was about the worth of souls, and he would never forget that again. He would never forget Antonio, Rosita, Gonzalez, Ostling – who had remained behind – or any of the others.

 *“You are still citizens of San Marcos,”* he had told them, *“but now, also citizens of something greater – the great worldwide community of Zion. Jesus Christ is your revolutionary hero. With Him in the lead, you will fight as Christian soldiers, and gain your independence from Satan.”* They had cheered, and Gonzalez had declared a national holiday.

It was not lost on him, however, that perhaps his most important convert had been himself.

 To say nothing of Elder Gilbert Sykes, the man who had been patient and never given up on him despite him being arrogant and rude and completely unbecoming of a missionary. There was a lifelong friend, and a true Christlike example that he was now humble enough to acknowledge and emulate. Elder Sykes was still in San Marcos, having more opportunities to reap the fruits of their labors, and he deserved it.

 *“I didn’t mean what I said about not finding a girl,”* he had told Elder Sykes as they parted ways. *“You’re twice the man I am, and –”*

 *“Aw, don’t mention it,”* Elder Sykes had said, shrugging him off. *“You aren’t so bad yourself.”*

 *“I’m not beyond hope, anyway. You going to be around when your time is up?”*

 *“I’m going to BYU.”*

 He had rolled his eyes. *“Big surprise.”*

 *“Think they’ll ever send any sisters out this way?”*

 *“Nah,”* Elder Sykes had said, rolling his eyes again, *“they’d get their nails dirty.”*

 But now, he realized as the plane slowed to a stop, the time for reflection was over. It was okay to think about the future now, because it had arrived. He smiled as he replaced the photograph of Rosita’s baptism in his wallet, next to the one he’d had for much longer. He didn’t bother to look at that one now, because in just a few minutes he would be looking at the real thing, and doing more than just looking.

 Now he figured a temple marriage would actually make sense, now that he had gotten his act together and actually had a chance of reaching the celestial kingdom. Maybe he would propose right then and there in the airport. So he didn’t have a ring – big deal. That could wait. The commitment was the important part.

 After what seemed like years, the passengers were allowed to exit the plane, and then everything was a blur as he literally ran through the terminal, toward the baggage claim. Amongst the crowds of people waiting to welcome home their missionary friends, his eyes picked out the group that was familiar to him and doubled his pace. His parents were in the front, arms outstretched, and they embraced him.

 “Welcome home, son,” said his father.

 “We’re so proud of you,” said his mother.

 “Thanks,” said Myles. “I guess you won’t have to disown me now.”

 His father blinked. “Wait, what? Who said anything about that?”

 But Milo had already disengaged from their arms, for as much as he loved them, neither was the person he’d most looked forward to seeing for the last two years. There she was, right behind them, amongst his other friends, and it seemed for a moment that if all the trials and tribulations of his mission hadn’t been worthwhile already, they would have been now. Electricity shot through his body from head to toe as he stepped forward for a kiss –

He suddenly halted, and his face fell, as he noticed two things in rapid succession. The first thing was the ring on her finger. The second thing was apparently the reason for the ring on her finger – the man who had given it to her.

“Hey, Myles,” she said cheerfully, flipping her golden hair and giving him that smile that drove him wild. “Good to see you again. Oh, this is my husband Arnold. Arnold, Myles.”

“How do you do,” said Myles, in a daze. This couldn’t be happening. Any moment now he would wake up – right? But as he shook the man’s hand, he knew it felt too real and solid to be a dream.

“Er, hi,” said Arnold, glancing awkwardly between him and Natalie. “I’m good. You?”

“I’m... good. Also.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Natalie, as if just noticing their discomfort. “You didn’t get my email while you were in San Marcos, did you? I tried to tell you. Arnold and I met at a stake activity three weeks ago, and we just really hit it off. You know how these things happen sometimes.”

“That’s... good. Good for you,” Myles said, still numb.

“Well, we’d better go get your luggage,” she said, and turned and walked off. Myles followed, mumbling to himself as he tried to come to grips with this. His family and other friends trailed behind, the latter muttering about how he had ignored them.

“I’m terribly sorry about this,” said Arnold, looking guilty. “I guess you probably feel like punching me in the face. Or her, for that matter.”

Myles opened his mouth to say something affirmative, then thought better of it as he realized it wasn’t in fact the case. The numbness was clearing and in its place was not pain, but acceptance. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, putting his arm around Arnold’s shoulder. “Congratulations. Let me buy you a Jamba Juice.”

Arnold gave him a confused and slightly suspicious look. “Really? You’re not upset?”

“Eh,” said Myles, beginning to smile in spite of himself, “que será, será.”