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Timeless Mission

by Tom Wells

Dr. Jamal Washington felt like a time traveler as he explored Mission La Purisima with his wife Janice. He delighted in the way the quiet permeated the weather beaten adobe buildings and grounds. The surrounding hillsides shrouded the mission from the modern world beyond. Without the reminders from contemporary cues, simply standing still here transported him to a much simpler place and time. "It feels like we have discovered a time machine," he whispered reverently to his wife.

"It's hard to believe this is just a couple miles from the hospital," Jeniece agreed. "How is it we could live here for three years and never visit?"

"Work," Jamal replied simply. The single word instilled images of white sterile corridors filled with harsh fluorescent lights. This was one of Dr. Washington's first free days in weeks. His wife was an administrator at the nearby Lompoc Medical Center where Dr. Washington headed up the pediatrics ward.

In contrast he stood in the warmth of a California November sun. The clear air carried the sound of wild turkey calls echoing in the deep arcade portico on the face of the padres'

quarters.

Jamal nodded hello to a park ranger as he passed wearing the robes of a Franciscan Padre. The only hint that the man was from the modern world was the radio hanging from the rope belt.

The peace of the morning ended with the roar of approaching school busses. The fresh air that had carried the scent of the recently harvested lettuce in the nearby hand cultivated fields was fouled by diesel exhaust as the busses squealed to a stop.

Jamal and his wife escaped on a wide dirt path leading up to a cross that stood sentry over the mission. Behind them harried teachers called out while they herded the children over to the livestock yard. They hiked the switchback incline under the cover of oaks trees that leaned out from the hillside.

"We need to get out like this more often," Jeniece reasoned with a labored breath as they reached the cross.

Together they looked down onto the valley. Below a ranger who was dressed in a cotton dress with her hair wound up in a tight bun tried her best to address the rabble of children surrounding her. They were too far away to hear, but close enough that the doctor could be amused as he watched the inner circle of children trying to listen while the outer circle of mostly boys pushed at one another. They were more interested in the nearby pigs in a muddy pen.

After watching the kids for a moment Jamal said, "We don't get out because I'm too busy seeing after most of those rug rats down there and you're too busy making sure their parent's insurance keep us paid," the doctor answered as he sat down and leaned up against the wide stone base of the cross. The stones were set in deeply worn grout and not as comfortable to lean against as he had hoped.

His wife hesitated before deciding that a stolen moment snuggling up to her husband outweighed her natural aversion to sitting on the dusty ground. She eased herself in close to him and he put his arm up around her shoulder. They watched as the children were guided into the church building. Their collective chatter and calls echoed up the sides of the hills as they filed into the dark doorway.

Tentatively Jeniece said, "We could move away to a smaller town that can use a new hot shot doctor and a new expecting housewife."

At first these words didn't register with the doctor who had been concentrating on the restored peace in the valley below. Then he twisted and regarded her face looking for the signs of a joke. She nodded her head yes while she searched his face for disappointment. She hadn't been ready for his reply to come as passionate kiss. She felt light headed as she closed her eyes and kissed him back.

Both had been lost in the moment of embracing kisses like this before, but this time was different. The world spun and sparks drifted about in the dark of their closed eyes. An old man laughed somewhere beyond in the darkness. The doctor willed his arms to release while he tried to open his eyes but his body wouldn't respond. The old man's laugh turned into a lyrical chant as the sparks thickened and swirled into a whirlpool surrounding the couple.

The sparks then swirled up into the starless heights above just before something grabbed onto Jamal's shoulders and lifted him up with the sparks. An instant later the doctor's extremities finally obeyed his will to release his hold on his wife while his eyes opened. The dizziness he had felt a moment before returned tenfold when he found himself nose to nose with an olive skinned strange woman who was looking back at him with equally surprised eyes. He was on the verge of losing consciousness when the stranger in his arms beat him to the sensation and fainted.

Instinctively he tightened his hold on the woman to keep her from falling away. As she shifted he realized she was wearing the same cotton dress he had seen on the park ranger moments ago. Then he noticed his arms wore maroon sleeves. His changing observation confirmed he was now wearing a dirty buttoned up shirt in place of the polo shirt he had on before the kiss. He had to fight the urge to thrust the strange woman away so he could see what else was different on him. He eased the woman back gently against the cross's base while he observed that the stones were now set in a freshly grouted mortar.

A strange pale pair of hands came out from behind the woman as he stood. He shot the hands up to his eyes and he gave up a yelp of shock as he examined these foreign new hands that obeyed his will. He felt a stranger's bearded face when he reached up to examine his own.

Instinctively he tried to leap back but the white hands followed. Now he looked down and saw that he was wearing stiff khaki canvas pants held up with worn blue suspenders. His tennis shoes had been replaced with poor fitting boots.

The worst came when he realized how bad he smelled. A mixture of whiskey, profuse body odor and a hint of urine assaulted his nose. The woman stirred and murmured his name before she came to. Jamal wondered how the stranger knew his name before he realized that his wife was about to wake back up to the same shock he hadn't come to grips with yet. He dashed behind the wide cross base as she stirred.

Confused she said, "Jamal, where'd you go?" Then she cried out, "What the hell? Who? Where's my ring? What happened to my hands? Who?"

From behind the cross Jamal tried to answer in a stranger's voice, "I don't know how baby, but it's us. Some fool's gone and put me in a smelly white man's body."

"Stop it Jamal," Jeniece insisted. "I don't know what you did but come out here and stop this shit!"

"Alright baby, but you better get ready because you won't recognize me when I step out."

Jeniece looked at her hands and then felt heavier breasts than she knew. Then she felt narrow hips under her strange dress. She lifted the hem. Tightly laced boots led up to the unshaven olive skinned legs of a stranger. She hadn't seen hair on her dark legs since she was fourteen, but she knew her hair should have been as dark as her naturally jet black hair should be. She reached up and discovered her hair bound up in a tight bun on her head. She fumbled around and removed a large wooden pin, releasing the long gently wavy flow of a stranger's brown hair. Her own hair had been cut far shorter and was days overdue for a straightening.

Accepting that as unrecognizable as he might be, the man who came out from behind the stone pillar was going to be her husband, she warily said, "Alright Jamal. It's safe to come out now. I'm ready for whatever you look like."

A tentative strange young white man stepped out to look at her. They surveyed each other for a moment. Jamal was now a blond haired man at least ten years younger than his contemporary self. He stood several inches shorter. Jeniece was shorter and younger too, but

she was far better groomed than her husband's new presence.

The couple turned and looked down onto the valley. The buildings they had known were there, but little else looked the same. A light haze of smoke hung in the air. There were more wooden buildings in addition to the adobe structures. A grouping of domed Chumash huts had appeared where the parking lot and animal pens had been less than a minute before. What's more the entire valley was filled with people and animals. The Chumash natives were dressed in the same clothes Jamal was now wearing, but their hair was much longer and many wore colorful bandanas like hats. Uniformed soldiers attended to their horses next the the barracks building. Robed Franciscan Padres intermingled with the others. A donkey was attached to the mill walking in circles as it was led by a small Chumash boy who watched Spanish boys playing with wooden swords nearby.

"Where did all of the trees go," Jeniece asked.

Jamal had been too focused on the mission to realize what Jeniece was talking about. He widened his view and saw that the surrounding hillsides were nearly devoid of the oak trees that had covered the valley hillsides before they awoke into this strange dream.

"This has got to be one of the realest dreams I have ever had," Jamal said.

"Are we supposed to know that we are in a dream though?" Jeniece answered.

"What else could this be," he countered. "It sure as hell can't be real."

The brush below stirred as a gray haired native made his way up the much narrower trail from the mission below. This Indian was wearing matching linen clothes belted with a light blue sash around his waste and a matching light blue twisted headband holding long neatly combed hair out of his face. He wore a leather purse over his torso and an elaborate shell necklace hung around his neck. The man's dark, flat face was crossed with deep wrinkles.

When he reached the stunned couple he held out a leathery hand and said, "Hola. Bienvenidos los viajeros del futuro."

Jamal exchanged a confused look with his wife before saying a phrase he used often with the migrant workers who frequented his hospital, "No Espanol."

Smiling warmly the old man said, "Forgive me English, Eagle did not tell me what tongue you would use when he brought you to us."

Jamal grabbed the man's still offered hand and said, "Hola. I'm Dr. Jamal Washington and this is my wife, Jeniece. What the hell is going on here."

Releasing the doctor's hand the old man said, "I have called upon Eagle to bring you to our time of need. Eagle says that he had to fly high up into the future to find the ones we needed under the Savior's tree."

"No disrespect sir, but this isn't really us," Jeniece said. "My husband isn't this white and short in his real body."

"Eagle cannot bring anything of the land though the Sky. He can only carry your spirit. Eagle has brought your spirits here and taken our people to rest in your bodies until you have finished."

Jamal was incredulous when he said, "You mean some old timer white dude is waking up in my body right now kissing my wife?"

Smirking at the mental image of Eldin Hayes waking up in a stranger's body, the old man said, "The spirits that come from now will sleep until the moon rises tonight. I need you to help me before the sun sets, and then we can return here and Eagle will restore your spirits."

Jeniece picked up on what the crazy old Indian was not saying so she asked, "What if we don't make it back here be *the moon rise*?" She said the last part with a mocking tone.

The old man looked down and shuffled one foot as he said, "If the spirits from my time wake up in your bodies, they will not stay here at the Savior's Tree. If they do not stay here, Eagle will not be able to find them and you will not go back where you belong."

"What are we here for then," Jeniece asked.

"The Holy Father is sick. Dr. Hayes cannot cure him. My people fear his passing is near."

"Well you're in luck then," Jamal said confidently, "I happen to be a doctor myself."

"That is why you are here," the old man said. Not wanting to waste any more time on the hill, he turned and started back down the hill.

Jamal and Jeniece exchanged a glance before following their escort. They tried to ask questions on their way down the hill but the old man either did not hear them or he chose to ignore them. The couple turned their conversation to each other instead.

"So do you think I'm in the doctor's body," Jamal asked. They had to squeeze in tighter

to each other on the way down. The trees were gone, but the Manzanita and sage brush had filled in thick without the acidic influence of the oak trees in the area.

"You look awfully young to be a doctor but I know the schooling took less time," Jeniece replied. "But you look and smell like hell. I can't imagine a medical professional letting himself go so far."

"Maybe he meant you were the doctor," Jamal pondered.

Janice couldn't help scoffing at the idea saying, "No chance in hell of that. I'm part of the delicate class in this time. You should just be glad we didn't come back in our real skins. Our people are probably still slaves in this time."

They had reached the bottom of the hill at edge of the Chumash encampment. The natives stopped what they were doing and watch as the trio marched on to the main buildings of the mission. Their dark eyes bore into them, but it was especially evident that they were looking at Jamal with contempt.

Not missing this Jamal said, "I get the feeling that white men are almost as strange in these parts as we would have been in our real bodies."

One of the women called out, "Deja ahora el hombre antes de traer la ira de los soldados nos!" the doctor and his wife had no way of knowing the woman had just warned Jamal to leave before he made the soldiers mad.

The mission had seemed real and authentic when they were touring the grounds less than an hour ago. Now it was obvious how empty the place had been before. The main buildings looked the same, but a full thriving outpost of humanity could not be experienced by walking through a vacant museum, even when that museum.

This was a living mission with people and animals everywhere. Unlike the park rangers, the padres in this time sported their iconic Franciscan Monk partially shaved haircuts. A merchant led a native boy pulling an impossibly large cart. Chickens roamed freely. An ox stood and defecated next to a narrow aqueduct cut in the ground. Spanish soldiers in matching blue uniforms with red sashes around their waists were dipping their canteens into the tainted water for refills. The soldier's children ran about playing and teasing natives while the Spaniard women sat in groups under the shade of olive trees.

The bells in the church tower rang out and the women and natives began to make their way to late morning services. Mothers called their children to their sides as they went. The ones that passed by Jamal and Jeniece were jeering at Jeniece. One of the women muttered, "Put a, ella es una vergüenza para el Comandante."

Jamal didn't know much Spanish, but he understood that puta was likely implying that his wife was a whore or a slut and he didn't like that the Comandante was somehow tied to that reference. He thought about whispering his thoughts to his wife but she seemed to be understanding the icy vibe.

The proper ladies had their hair held in place with variations of the wooden hair pick that Jeniece had removed to look at her own hair. She was inwardly scolding herself for letting her hair down. These women watched her following the old native man with as much contempt as she imagined she would receive if she had been wearing a fabled scarlet letter of shame. She understood that she was going to have to learn to stay out of sight as much as she could during her time here. She was relieved when they reached the arches of the long-house. She remembered this would be the officers and padres residences. She felt less conspicuous in the shade that the portico offered against the sun.

The old man was about to step into an open corridor that split the long building masses under the single roof when an imposing soldier wearing an impeccably clean uniform stepped into their path. He wore the same navy blue uniform as the other soldiers, but his shoulders were adorned with bright gold ropes and his shirtsleeve cuffs were a bright red with brass buttons. A polished sword hung to one side and a pistol was holstered to the other. His white gloved hands were clenched. His stern face was neatly shaven with the exception of the pencil mustache lining his upper lip.

His eyes bore down on Jeniece for a moment before he turned to address the old man saying, "Qué contraste mi hija con el cerdo?"

The native fearlessly answered, "Sí Comandante."

The Comandante's face reddened with a rage he was barely containing. His piercing eyes flashed on Jamal and he spat out, "Tiene usted un deseo de muerte médico?"

Jamal was a doctor who had treated hundreds of migrant workers, so he understood the

word deseo meant death and pairing it with médico wasn't good at all. He tried to diffuse the moment by saying, "Look Sir, I am not doing anything wrong with this woman."

Jamal wouldn't have thought it possible but the Comandante's face hardened even more before he spoke again though clenched teeth saying, "Being too drunk to remember how to speak the King's tongue is not helping you now swine! You have shamed my daughter for the last time cabrón!"

"Por favor, Comandante," the old man pleaded, "The doctor thinks he knows what is wrong with Prefecto Payeras, but we must hurry before it is too late to save him."

The Comandante took a deep breath and let his rage subside before he stepped aside. The old man quickly went past waving the others to follow. The Comandante stepped out and bumped Jamal who felt like he had been struck by a stone pillar. Then his fingers locked around Jeniece's arm with an iron grip.

"Where do you think you are going Christiana?" the Comandante demanded.

The old man turned back and said, "Por favor, Comandante. You know the Prefecto only lets your daughter care for him. She has been there every moment of his illness. Let her help now."

The Comandante released his grip and looked coldly at Jamal then at Jeniece. He stormed away before he showed the tears he couldn't hold back.

The old man led the stunned couple into a small dark and cool room with a wooden bureau on one wall and single bed on the opposite wall. A wooden cross hung above the Padre. The ailing Padre was almost lost in the thickly piled blankets on the bed. The poor man was sweating profusely and he convulsed as Dr. Washington approached. The padre seemed unaware of his new visitors.

Jamal didn't need to make physical contact with the padre to know his fever was well past the century mark. He lifted the man's hand and felt a weak pulse beneath the limp wrist.

"It could be dysentery," Jamal mused out loud. "God knows the livestock should be nowhere near the drinking water for this place."

"No doctor," the old man immediately replied. "The residents of the Great Hall get all of their water directly from the well in the rectory yard."

"Hmm." The doctor was still holding up the hand while he thought. There were red soars on his forearm.

"Have you been using leaches on this man?"

The old man spat on the floor and said in disgust, "That was Dr. Hayes's idea, Señor. I begged him not to do it but he sent me out and wouldn't let me back after that. That is why I sent for you."

After nodding his head, Jamal saw the dark pigmentation of the Padre's fingernails.

"Has the Padre been working with lead?" he asked.

"No."

The doctor flung back the cover and examined the emaciated body. The unconscious Padre instinctively strained to curl up in a tighter ball to warm himself. When he rolled he revealed the spotting of diarrhea under his backside.

It was a crazy hunch but Jamal couldn't ignore the signs so he bent down and smelled Padres faint breath.

Jamal shot up and asked the old man, "Have you been using garlic to treat this man?"

"No Señor."

Jamal put his hands on the man's thin shoulders and pleaded, "This is important, very important. Has he been eating any garlic at all? Anything including the smallest ingredients in your food would mean doubt, so think long and hard. Are you sure he hasn't had garlic in the past few days?"

"Prefecto Payeras can't eat garlic or onions. They give him a rash."

Jeniece went to the shivering old man and eased the covers back over the man's frail body.

The Padre faintly exhaled the words, "Bendigo a mi hijo."

"What did he say," she asked.

The old man turned to Jeniece and said, "He says bless you my child. You have been so good to be by the Prefecto's side almost ceaselessly since he fell ill"

Jamal hadn't been paying attention. He asked, "Is Prefecto an important title for the Padre?"

"Si. Friar Payeras was elected Comando-Prefecto of the Santa Barbara District last year. That is why we neophytes are so desperate to save the blessed man."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," Jamal said.

"Spain will not be able to hold onto her colonies in the Americas much longer. When the Spanish support goes, the soldiers like the Comandante will no longer be paid to defend our mission. My people will be left defenseless against the forces of tyranny that will fill the emptiness. The Prefecto knows this, which is why he remains here in La Purisima Concepcion. He is trying to find a way to keep the soldiers here after Spain is gone from our lands."

"So someone would have the motive to poison the Padre."

"Si, but how do you know the Perfecto has been poisoned?"

"He has the classic symptoms of arsenic poisoning. We need to figure out who is poisoning the Padre. I can tell you how to treat him now, but that won't stop the mystery person from trying to kill him some other way."

"But Señor, how can we possibly figure that out before you need to return?"

Jamal looked at his wife who had taken a fresh cloth from the bedside washbasin to cool the forehead of the Padre. "The Padre will be fine if the poisoning is stopped now and if we can get him to drink plenty of water and get some fresh food in him. Since we can't trust anyone and knowing that my wife needs to seriously keep under the radar right now; it'll be up to you and me to go out and find out who is poisoning the Padre while she stays here. Our first stop should be whatever room this man lives in." Jamal was patting himself on the chest.

He went to his wife and kissed her on the forehead and said, "Just stay here if you can. Don't wander about too much, and don't let anyone near the Padre."

Sheepishly she said, "But I need to go pee and get some fresh water."

The old man laughed a little and said, "The baño is just outside in the Padres yard. You will be safe going there. The soldier's wives are not allowed in that yard. Only you, the Padres and the Comandante are allowed in the yard."

Jeniece gratefully said, "Gracias," before getting up and taking the wash things with her out the door.

"Your espousa is nice Señor. I never noticed how beautiful the Comandante's daughter

is until this morning."

"Well you should see her in a her own body wearing a cocktail dress, she'd knock your socks off," Jamal wistfully said looking on at the door his wife had gone through.

"What do you mean, 'Socks,' Señor?"

Jogged out of his thoughts Jamal said, "Take me to my place, señor."

As they went the old man said, "Please do not address me as señor, Señor. Neophytes like me are not worthy of the title to the Spaniards."

"What do I call you then, *Señor*," Jamal said putting emphasis on the title as if the old man deserved it.

"They call me the, Hechicero, the sorcerer, because they make fun of my traditional healing ways. But I fear the Padre would be dead already if Dr. Hays was left to treat him until now."

"Yes, but what is your name?"

Blushing at the request, the old man finally conceded, "I am Sisquoc, Señor, because I am the one my people come to for stopping what ails them."

They had walked out into the noon sun. The people were scattered, most had retreated for lunch. Jamal stopped and offered his hand and said, "Well pleased to meet you Señor Sisquoc."

The old man looked around to confirm he was not being watched before he accepted Jamal's hand and said, "Gracias Señor, but please call me Hechicero, the others will suspect something is wrong if you suddenly start using my real name. The real Doc Hayes doesn't even realize that Hechicero is not my real name."

"Well your secret is safe with me, Sisquoc," Jamal said amiably. Then he turned back to the long-house and said, "Why'd you bring me out here? I wanted to go to my quarters."

Sisquoc laughed and said, "Oh you don't live in the Great Hall anymore Señor. They kicked you out almost as soon as you arrived. You live over there."

Sisquoc was pointing at a pile of sticks that formed a barely recognizable hut sitting next to the pigsty. It seemed appropriate to Jamal considering the state of his clothing. He led the native to the ramshackle bivouac and looked inside. Just as he feared, there was no chance in

hell he'd find something cleaner to wear than the rags he already had on. Just the smell of the place alone was enough to convince him of that. Jamal was relieved when he pulled his head away from the bivouac and smell the pig slop nearby.

"What are we doing here, Señor? Do you think the doctor was poisoning the Padre?" Sisquoc asked.

Before Jamal could answer the merchant, Juan Rodriquez, arrived followed by his cart pulled by the native boy. Pots, and bottles and other wares clattered together as the cart stopped. Rodriquez was a plump Mexican dressed in brightly colored clothes topped with a wide brimmed hat. He slapped the boy on the back of the head and cursed, "Chico torpe!" for stopping the cart too soon.

Juan Rodriquez was tolerated, but not at all liked by the people of the mission. It was a fact that merchant was either unaware of or he simply didn't care much about.

The merchant had a knack for knowing how to find the things the mission population needed and didn't make for themselves. He then charged to the limit of what each buyer could afford for those things without remorse, regardless of how far beyond a decent profit that price was.

Rodriquez switched into salesman mode and said, "Hola Doc, you're looking sober today. Care to remedy the condition?" He pulled out a bottle of whiskey and waved it in Jamal's face.

Jamal grimaced and moved the bottle out of his face. He began looking over the amazing variety of junk piled high on the cart. It seemed impossible that the little native boy could pull something that outweighed him several times over. Jamal said, "Thanks, no. Do you have a fresh pair of clothes on that rolling Walmart of a cart?"

"Que?"

"Clothes," Sisquoc answered as he motioned his hand up and down at Jamal.

There was a moment of twisted confusion for Rodriquez before he understood the unbelievably out of character request from the drunk. "Ah, yes. Of course I have something for you," he said starting to dig deep into the pile. He pulled out a light blue striped shirt and plain tan pants and said, "These will be an improvement on what you've got on."

"Are they my size?" Jamal asked.

"Que?" Rodriguez asked in confusion. In the wilds of Alta California, there were only two sizes of clothes available for sale, children's and adult.

"Muchas gracias," Sisquoc said grabbing the clothes from the Rodriguez.

Jamal had tuned out Rodriguez and Siquoc. He was looking at the boy who had lifted his shirt to sooth some fresh welts on the small of his back. There wasn't a doctor on the face of the planet who hadn't seen the unmistakable signs of abuse before. Anger welled up from within.

"Ten reales," the merchant said putting himself between Jamal and the boy. He could tell the sober doctor was going to be trouble. He needed to finish his business and be on his way.

"Are you the one beating that boy," Jamal asked incensed.

Sisquoc stepped paid the merchant as he whispered harshly at Jamal, "Leave it Señor, you have a job to do."

Jamal was torn. He came from a time where he had the luxury of reporting this sort of thing and he could be sure justice would be done. He recognized this wasn't what would happen now. This was not the battle he was here to fight.

The merchant knew this was his cue to leave so hi called out, "Vamos!" The boy had been ready and he started pulling on the cart. His weight was too slight to get it going very fast at first.

Normally this would have elicited a smack from the merchant. Jamal held his contemptuous stare daring the merchant to do anything that would give him the excuse to forget what he had come for. The merchant was as good at understanding his customers as any salesman and he knew that any man who had sobered up from the long stupor the Doc had been in since arriving at La Purisima could not be trifled with. He gave the cart a good push from behind to get it rolling away from the crazy white man as quickly as possible.

It wasn't until Rodriguez felt he was a safe distance that he called back, "You should go back to being a drunk, gringo!"

Sisquoc handed Jamal the clothes and said, "Don't worry Señor. The pig is not long for

this world."

"Is there a place I can wash up?" Jamal asked while he watched the merchant cart disappear around a wisteria arbor.

"I can take you to the bath but this is a waste of time we don't have Señor."

Jamal looked up at the sun still hanging high in the sky and said, "I won't be allowed in anyone's house for a search unless I get clean."

Sisquoc shrugged his shoulders and led Jamal past the grand fountain on their way to the baths. While they walked Jamal asked, "What did you mean by the merchant not being long for this world anyway."

Sisquoc sighed and said, "Well, you know how it is Señor. The pig has a how you say," there was a pause while he waved his hands around his genitals. "A sickness he got from the prostitutas."

He looked at Jamal who nodded that he understood. Venereal disease was a leading cause of death before modern antibiotics.

"Señor Rodriquez does not trust you, the Doc that is. So he comes to me for my herbs. I could give him something that works, if he deserved it. Without anything to help, the rodent won't last past a few more months."

Jamal understood. He had once contemplated the implications to let someone go untreated during his internship in Los Angeles because he knew how vile the patient was in real life. But he had never acted on the impulse. He wasn't so sure he would have as much restraint in this world. It was no surprise that a native shaman like Sisquoc would choose to do nothing for such a man. He supposed that the old man might even be mixing something into the placebo herbs he gave the merchant to hasten his passing.

They reached the baths and Jamal cleaned and changed. A dirty mirror hung above the wash basin. Jamal studied the stranger in the glass for a moment. He wasn't too unattractive for a white boy. He had to have shaved in the past month because his goatee was much longer than the rest of the facial hair that was trying to catch up. The deep blue eyes were the most alien feature. He twisted his face about in amazement. Even though the man in the mirror mimicked his every move, it was still hard to accept that he was looking at his own image.

"So where do we start looking Señor," Sisquoc asked trying to pull Jamal out of his fascination with the Doc's face.

"You're not going to like it Señor," Sisquoc said hesitantly as they crossed the open space on their way to the soldier's barracks. "Señora Ruiz has been bringing Father Payeras meals she cooked herself up until he had stopped eating."

"Why am I supposed to not like that," Jamal asked. "Sounds like a good place to start."

"Because Señora Ruiz is the wife of Lieutenant Jose Ruiz, which means that you will have to go through him to question her," Sisquoc said with his voice trailing off as he imagined the encounter.

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There was an electric tension in the air as the drunkard doctor and his shaman sidekick approached the simple adobe building. The soldiers were near the barracks gathered in a small group circled around a crude mortar launcher while one man was giving instructions on its use. They stopped their lesson as the outsiders approached the adobe. They looked like they were ready to attack the pair at the slightest misstep. Jamal felt like the prey of pack animals. He concentrated on the the adobe to keep from feeling stalked.

The soldier's barracks was nearly as large as the priest's long house, but this building did not have the deep arched portico of the main building. The entry was protected by a small gabled porch roof with rustic wood trunk columns supporting it. Lieutenant Ruiz was waiting there to bar their entry into the barracks. He wore his deep blue uniform loosely with the front lapel wide open to expose his chest to the cooling breeze in the warm afternoon. The Lieutenant had a shaved head and pointed goatee. He stood with a foot up on an emptied powder keg and on hand resting dangerously on his sword hilt. Jamal couldn't stop imagining the man as a pirate more than as an officer in the Spanish army.

Jamal tried faking his best Spanish saying, "Hola muchacho," while offering his hand.

The soldier looked dumbfounded for a moment and then he addressed Sisquoc in better English than Jamal would have guessed possible saying, "Is this guy for real."

Sisquoc bowed his head in respect and said, "The gringo has finally sobered up enough to find out what has been wrong with the Padre. He would like to ask your wife some

questions."

The Lieutenant's amusement was over in a flash. His attention turned to Jamal with a murderous intensity as he said, "Is this true? Do you think my wife has been poisoning the Padre?" His hand moved from resting on the hilt of the sword to gripping it.

Holding both hands up and taking a weary step back Jamal said, "Hey, whoa big fella. I'm not trying to accuse your wife of anything. I just need to talk to everyone who's been close to the Padre since he fell ill."

"Then why don't you go talk to your girlfriend, gringo? You know she's let no one near the Padre today. My sweet Anarosa tried to bring some lunch to the Padre just now and Christiana took the food and sent her away. It was like my wife was nothing more than a servant girl."

The Lieutenant had been too focused on Jamal and Sisquoc to realize that the Comandante had come from around the corner while he spoke.

"And just what is it you are accusing my Christiana of?" the Comandante asked in what seemed to be a permanent state of anger.

The soldier immediately snapped to attention. He thrust his sword hand up to his forehead and said, "I was accusing no one of anything El Comandante!"

The Comandante gave Jamal an appreciable inspection and said, "Well, Doctor, I almost didn't recognize you without the layer of filth you normally wear." His mockery turned to bitter cynicism as he turned the near compliment around by saying, "You look even whiter now. I didn't think you could revolt me more."

The Lieutenant relaxed and laughed lightly. Jamal was impressed that despite the Comandante's insult, the man's look upon him had actually lost its icy chill.

He turned back on the Lieutenant and said, "Your wife should have nothing to hide. Let the gringo go ask his questions. I want you to take your men to Santa Ines. There is a new Padre coming from Santa Barbara and you will escort him here." Then turning back to Jamal the Comandante said, "You will not find anything with the Lieutenant's wife so I expect you to treat her with the respect she deserves."

Lieutenant Ruiz had not moved from his place. Jamal and Sisquoc had to slide between

him and the Comandante to go through the doorway into the dark interior. The guardroom inside was a large open space with an small cooking station in a corner with a long wooden table with benches flanking either side. It was uncomfortably cooler inside. While the afternoon had been warming up outside, the thick adobe walls had retained the cold of the nights and the fall sun was too low to heat the mass of the building.

The soldier's bunks lined the walls with their horse tack and other equipment hung neatly above. The dirt floor was covered with heavy reed mats in the main walk paths. Jamal and Sisquoc stood on a clay tile walk leading from the entry to the opposite side of the room where another arched opening led to the officer's rooms.

Sisquoc quickly lead Jamal through the officer's parlor back to a small chapel. The small chamber was warmly lit with candles burning at the feet of a statue of the Holy Mother. The Lieutenant's wife was kneeling on a padded stool at the foot of the shrine. She was crossing herself as the pair entered the chapel.

The Comandante was right. The Lieutenant's wife had nothing to hide. With the exception of Sisquoc, Anarosa Ruiz was the first person Jamal had met at the mission who genuinely welcomed his presence. She wore a large St. Ignacio medallion on a silver necklace around her neck. A rosary draped ornately from the braided belt around her hips. The belt pulled an otherwise simple cotton dress to her narrow waist. It reminded Jamal of the dress his wife's surrogate body wore, only Mrs. Ruiz's dress was impeccably clean. That thought led Jamal to wonder how his wife was doing in the long house. He was leaving her alone too long.

With a welcoming nod Mrs. Ruiz said, "You are looking exceptionally well today Dr. Hayes. Sobriety suits you."

Sisquoc removed the bandanna around his head and wrung it nervously as he said, "Pardon the intrusion senorita. Senor Hayes has come to ask you about Prefecto Payeras."

"I am glad to hear you think you have found what has been ailing his Holiness," Mrs. Ruiz said offering to have the pair join her at the wooden pew in the chapel.

Curious, Jamal asked, "How did you know I might have found a way to help the Padre?"

"This is a small mission, doctor. News travels quickly. I was told by Father Cedillo that Christiana was the only one allowed to stay with his Holiness for now. I suspected you might be

coming to see me soon about what you have found."

More to himself Jamal mused, "That explains our welcoming committee."

"You must forgive my husband doctor," Mrs. Ruiz said kindly. "He has been very anxious with his Holiness's illness. You see, if something were to happen to Prefecto Payeras, our little missions might be closed and his unit might be moved back to Spain. We have been much happier here in the New World. But I suppose you know about that more than anyone."

"And why is that?" Jamal asked intrigued.

With a quick look about, Mrs. Ruiz dropped her voice to a conspirator's whisper and said, "I know about you and Christiana, doctor. She has told me about the baby."

Mrs. Ruiz stood to leave, feeling guilty for engaging in gossip in a place of the Lord. Jamal and Sisquoc rose too while Mrs. Ruiz quickly stepped into the parlor where she felt safer to say, "An expecting woman has an unstoppable instinct to return to her mother, doctor. You need to make peace with the Comandante and take her back to Spain." Then she crossed herself again and disappeared back into her private bedchamber.

After a shocked moment Jamal looked at Sisquoc and said, "Take me to the Comandante's quarters."

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Sisquoc led Jamal out of a rear doorway to the barracks. They peeked around the corner and were relieved to see that the Comandante was overseeing the soldiers as they readied their horses for a ride to the nearby Santa Ines Mission. They would have to finish preparing soon to make the trip over the coastal mountains before it was dark. The pair used the cover of a grape arbor to pass between the barracks and the long house. Jamal wanted to check on his wife now, but he knew they didn't have much time left.

While they quietly hopped up into the cover of the long house portico, Jamal whispered, "Why didn't you tell me the Comandante's daughter is pregnant with the doctors' baby?"

"I thought you knew, Senor," Sisquoc said with a shrug. "Eagle could only bring back the spirits of those who matched the you and Christiana. That is why he had to fly very high to find you in the right place to carry your spirits here."

They had reached the Comandante's apartment. Jamal stopped Sisquoc from going inside and said, "You go back to Jeniece and make sure she's alright. Get her ready to go. If I find what I'm looking for in here, we're going to need to get back to that cross and it will be up to you to make sure the doctor stays sober long enough to get Christiana back to Spain."

Sisquoc put a hand on Jamal's shoulder and said, "Your a good gringo, Senor. I'll hate to see you go."

Jamal nodded and then went inside while Sisquoc left. The Comandante lived quite well in his quarters. He entered into a large parlor with a tile floor covered with richly colored throw rugs. He had to remind himself that the antique furnishings looked so good because they were not antiques yet. The bright vermilion velvet on the sofa and matching chairs almost shimmered in the late afternoon sun that beamed through the high narrow windows above. The room was a place of refinement that Jamal hadn't seen in the restored version of the mission he had visited in his own time. He could tell that the Comandante had tried very hard to provide the kind of place his daughter probably missed from Spain. He could also see that this small apartment was probably more of a prison cell to the young lady more than it was a place of refuge. He had no idea of what she saw in the drunkard who lived next to the pigsty, but he suspected their affair had as more to do with lashing out at her father than it had to do with real feelings for the man.

Jamal went to the first door, which opened to a small room that looked more like the great room of the soldier's barracks than it seemed to belong attached to the parlor he stood in. The room was bare with the exception of a small cot and a soldier's footlocker. The Comandante may have tried to recreate Spanish refinement for his daughter in the parlor, but he would have been more at home living with his soldiers.

He closed the door and opened the only other door besides that of the apartment's entry. This room was more of the bedchamber he expected to be attached to the luxurious parlor. The room was modest in size, but brightly lit by the afternoon sun beaming thorough high windows. The floor was entirely covered by a custom fitted and tightly woven area carpet. The room was dominated by a four poster double bed with a delicate white net enclosure. Unlike the cots Jamal had seen so far, this bed had a tall straw filled mattress topped with a thick

down comforter and large down pillows. There were matching painted nightstands on either side of the bed with fresh roses in a vase on one and a tall oil lamp on the other. On the wall opposite of the bed stood a large combination bureau and dressing table. The dressing table was covered with brushes, pots of makeup, jars of cremes and bottles of perfume.

Jamal went to the dressing table and looked for anything that might be what he was looking for. At first it seemed impossible to decide on a place to start, but then he noticed something out of place. The pots of makeup were grouped neatly together, as were the creams and soaps and perfumes. Everything was neat and orderly with the exception of one half empty perfume bottle sitting on its own next to a small beaded clutch. Jamal picked up the vile and uncorked it for a testing whiff. Sure enough the contents had only the very slightest hint of an almond scent. He slipped it into the clutch and hastily left the room.

He had his back turned while he shut the bedroom door when he felt as if he was being watched. He turned and gasped.

The Comandante filled the doorway to the apartment baring Jamal's escape. His eyes focused on Jamal and then on his daughter's purse in the cabrón's hand. The Comandante reached first for his pistol and then a torturous gleam blazed in his narrowing eyes. His hand moved from the pistol to the hilt of his sword. He slowly pulled his blade from its scabbard, promising to use it equally as slow on the shrinking thief. The man had been assaulting his daughter, corrupting her against him, shaming their family. Now the violator had sunk to the depths of petty bandit. The Comandante would hate to soil his parlor with the pig's blood, but he would enjoy ridding himself of the man once and for all.

Jamal clutched the purse closer. The vial of arsenic inside would be all the evidence that was needed to prove that Christiana had been the one poisoning the Padre. The Comandante might kill Jamal in rage now, but eventually he would have to look at what Jamal was apparently stealing. When the Comandante realized too late why the doctor was stealing the purse, there was no telling what would happen. He had to find a way to stop the soldier from acting on his lust for vengeance.

He held up his hand and implored, "Comandante, please, before you do what you think you must do, I have news for you."

The Comandante's pointed his sword at Jamal's throat and said, "Speak your last words Eldin Hays, and then prepare to die."

"Your daughter is pregnant Sir. Please don't tell my child that you killed his father. Tell him I died saving the Padre. Let your grandson know that his father loved his boy as much as you love your daughter."

For the first time Jamal saw an emotion on the Comandante's face that did not hold pure contempt for the him. The sword that had been held as steady as if it had been mounted to the wall now began to tremble.

"Dominica has a baby?" the Comandante asked in astonishment.

Jamal nodded yes.

"A boy?"

Jamal smiled and said, "Yes, a boy."

The Comandante lowered his sword and then dropped it on the floor. He staggered and sat on the nearby sofa.

He waved at the Jamal who was too stunned to move and said, "I cannot kill my grandson's papa. I will have to learn to live with the shame you will bring to my family." Then the Comandante looked up to Jamal with compassion for the first time and he asked, "Can you become a man if I let you live?"

Jamal nearly collapsed from relief. Then he realized things were far from being repaired. The sun dipped down past the high windows and the room darkened slightly.

"I am not myself right now, Comandante. You may have to be man enough for the both of us."

The Comandante laughed before saying, "You think I don't know what that heathen has done with you?"

"Sisquoc?" Jamal asked confused.

"Si, that crazy savage," the Comandante said incredulous. "I know he has put one of his barbarian spells on you, gringo. I only want to know now what I can do to keep his spell working on you. I might be able to stand you if you could stay sober."

"I don't think that old shaman has enough magic for that, sir. But you need to find a way

to keep me from getting drunk again. I think I need to be sent away from the demons that seem to haunt me in the Americas."

A little of the old anger flashed on the face of the Comandante before he focused on his daughter's purse. He pointed at it and said, "I've heard what people have started saying was happening to the Padre. I suppose you have come to take it away and save my Christiana from prison."

"Forgive me for saying so sir, but your daughter is already imprisoned here," he said gesturing at the room. "She wants to be with her mother when she delivers your grandson."

"Will you marry her before you take her back to Spain? I don't want my grandson to be born a bastard," the Comandante said getting up and picking up his sword.

"I will if you do me a favor," Jamal said smiling.

"Careful gringo," the Comandante said playfully raising his sword back at him.

"Burn down that hovel I live in while I take Christiana up to the cross. Don't save a thing in there, just burn it down and find me a bunk somewhere else."

"Maybe I should make that savage take you in," the Comandante replied amused in the way bullies sound amused when they taunt their victims. "He might find a way to keep you under his spell then."

At that moment Jeniece burst into the parlor to find the Comandante laughing with his sword ready for the kill. "Oh my god! Jamal, no!" She dashed over to put herself between the blade and her husband.

The Comandante slipped his sword back into its scabbard and said, "Don't worry Christiana. Your lover is safe for now. Go with him and don't disappoint me when you return."

Jeniece looked at Jamal with an appropriately confused face. He shrugged and said, "Come on and let's go before he changes his mind."

They collected Sisquoc before hurrying up the hill to the cross. The sun was setting fast over the western hills of the valley. On the way Jamal told them about what had happened and what the Comandante expected to happen when they went back. The trio was gasping from the climb when they reached the cross and looked back down on the mission below.

The bells of the mission reverberated in the valley as the parishioners were leaving from

early evening mass. A sudden brightness pulled their attention to the livestock area where Dr. Hayes' hovel was disappearing in a brilliant column of flames. The Comandante stood there with a torch in his hand.

"Oh my god he's going to kill the doctor whey he goes back, isn't he," Janice said putting a hand to her open mouth.

"No, he's keeping his promise," Jamal said. Then turning to Sisquoc he said, "You are going to have a new bunkmate."

The old man's face dropped and he said, "No, Senor, say it isn't true."

"I'm afraid it's going to have to be. At least until you can convince the doctor to man up and take Christiana back to Spain. I let the Comandante think you have the doctor under a spell to keep him sober. You wouldn't happen to know any herbs that could make sick if he tries to go back to the bottle, would you?"

"Maybe I should just ask Eagle to not take you back," Sisquoc said menacingly.

"You don't want me to stay and put you out of business, do you?" Jamal said. "Now what do we do to get back?"

Sisquoc took a step back and said, "Just do what you were doing before."

That would be the easiest thing the couple had done all day. Jamal took his wife in his arms and just before kissing he looked at Sisquoc and said, "Oh, don't forget to tell Dr. Hayes that he has just asked Christiana to marry him."

The old man protested while Jamal closed his eyes and kissed his wife. He didn't care about the loss of control and the pulling on his shoulders. The sparks that flew past seemed to dance more delightfully this time. As he felt himself rising, he could see the same face of the man in the mirror glass, only this time it did not respond to his will. Jamal thought out, "Don't screw up the chance I've given you."

His mind was filled with a confused answer before the pulling stopped and the sparks drifted away. Jamal slowly opened his eyes and looked into the eyes of his wife again. She cried out and kissed him back in surprise.

"We're back," she happily said easing up on her hug.

Jamal gave her an extra hug before releasing just enough to look down on the valley

again. The mission was back to its empty shell again. The school kids had left and there were no rangers to be seen roaming the grounds. It was quiet again, too quiet. The couple already missed the bustle and activity of the living mission.

"Do you think the doctor and Christiana will be alright?" Jeniece asked.

Jamal put a hand on his wife's belly and said, "I know we will."

CHAPTER TWO

Old

Setting Hook:

The oak studded hills surrounding Mission La Purisima preserve the buildings and grounds as if the mission is frozen in time.

Character Hook:

Dr. Washington delighted in the way the weatherbeaten adobe buildings, the quiet of the valley and the bright fall morning transported him from his normal life under harsh fluorescent hospital lights, to much simpler place and time.

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