

ASCENSION

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The car reached the top of the hill and coasted to a stop. The engine died, heat dissipating with a ticking sound.

Two men stepped out.

One was tall and angular. The other was stocky with tanned features. They moved towards a ridge, the breeze tousling their hair.

The city was stretched out below, under the orange glow of the setting sun. Glass and steel sparkled. Traffic surged like tiny blurs.

“It’s beautiful up here,” the tanned man said.

“It sure is,” the angular man nodded. “When I was little, I used to play on this hill with Samuel and other kids. Things were so much simpler back then. Friends laughed together, cried together, tumbled together. Not anymore.”

“The world has changed.”

“Samuel is the only true friend I have left. I can always count on him.”

Samuel daubed his clammy palms against his pants. His throat grew tight.

The five men had surrounded him.

One of them—the leader—shuffled closer, his nostrils flaring, his breath washing over Samuel.

“Where is the package, Pastor? We know he gave it to you. Where is it?”

Samuel averted his eyes, gazing at the big arched window close by. A mural was etched into the colored glass, a group of angels ascending to the heavens. Dying sunlight filtered through their forms, bathing the church’s pews in an afterglow.

Samuel said nothing.

“Let’s loosen your tongue.”

The leader pushed him. Samuel reeled into the waiting arms of two gangsters. They pinned him against the altar. He squirmed, his eyes widening.

The punch impacted.

Samuel’s head snapped back, knocking a silver cross to the floor, his nose spraying blood on the altar’s white linen cloth.

Sunflowers were blooming on a grassy knoll close by. A butterfly settled on one, its wings moving gently as it fed on the nectar.

“What if Samuel betrays you?”

“I will still accept him. He has always been good to me. I will never forget the times he protected me from the bullies at school.”

“Fair enough,” the tanned man said. “Are all thieves as honorable as you are?”

The angular man smiled sadly. “Hardly. Our world is changing so fast. Honor has become a dirty word.”

Samuel was walloped in the stomach. He doubled over and wheezed.

“Pastor, you are making this difficult.”

A blow pummeled his jaw. Sweat and blood streaked the air. He crashed to the floor, trembling badly, ooze dripping from his chin.

Craning his neck, he stared at the largest figure on the window. It was Gabriel, the mighty archangel with a glowing sword, his wings outstretched.

A foot stomped down on Samuel’s head, squashing his face against the floor.

Gabriel paid silent witness, staring down on the violence, his luminous face filled with compassion.

“If you could live life all over again, what kind of person would you like to be?” the tanned man asked.

“A doctor. Healing people instead of hurting them. Or—” the angular man paused for a moment. “—maybe a minister of God. The straight and narrow path is the noblest. I want to be just like Samuel.”

Samuel was kicked.

He somersaulted against a wall.

His eyes were so puffy that he could barely see. Welts and bruises covered his misshapen face.

A gangster hurled a fist. Samuel grimaced and ducked. The gangster’s knuckles crunched against the wall.

Samuel tackled him.

They flipped over the altar and smashed into a desk. It overturned, spilling religious leaflets.

One of them glided towards Samuel.

'Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.'

A blow bashed him in the shoulder. There was a sickening crack and a jolt of agony. He crumpled to the floor, gasping, his vision dimming.

"Pastor, you are like a dog. You are so loyal to your friend, it is almost pitiful."

Samuel's lips quivered, straining. "Sometimes, dogs are better than men."

"Uh huh."

A gunshot exploded with an extended echo.

Samuel went still, a smile frozen on his bloodied face. His grip on the leaflet never loosened.

The breeze ruffled the sunflowers, causing them to sway them in one direction. The butterfly took flight.

"Samuel sounds like quite a friend. He must have stashed the package someplace safe. Someplace no one would ever think to look."

"Oh, he did. He taped it right under a pew."

“Really? Which one?”

“The column to the left, on the second row.”

“Why, thank you.”

A silenced pistol coughed.

The angular man clutched his chest, red seeping through his shirt. He sank in disbelief.

The tanned man grinned. “Please give my regards to Samuel when you see him. Goodbye.”

The pistol coughed again.