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The Knight of Sorrow

(an excerpt) By Anthony Romero

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The Knight of Sorrow (an excerpt)

By Anthony Romero

Wes thought he saw a small, dark woman kneeling over him through the haze of his hallucinatory state. She gave him water from an aluminum canteen. He tried to thank her, but his parched, cracked lips began to bleed when he started to speak. She lifted him into a sitting position and then urged him to stand. The water revived him enough for him to get to his feet. He leaned against the woman as she guided him toward a ramshackle camper in the distance. The sun was burning high in the clear, blue sky and there was nothing else in sight. There were no power lines, windmills, or border patrol facilities. The air was hot, unforgiving, and silent. “Thank you ma’am,” said Wes as they struggled the last few feet to the camper. She patted him on the back and nodded. “Are you Mexicana?” he asked her. She shook her head, no. “Are you Indian?” She nodded, yes. “Do you speak Spanish?” he asked. She rolled her hand from side to side. “Un poquito?” She smiled and nodded.

Wes sat down on a threadbare sofa and laid his head back. He felt a tap on his knee. He looked up and saw a boy holding out a bottle of water. Wes nodded and took the bottle. He drank it all and then laid his head back again, falling asleep, and wondering why he had been rescued when he deserved to die in the desert. He opened his eyes, and the woman was standing there, wringing her hands as if she wanted to tell him something.

“My name is Wes,” he pointed to the name on his uniform. “Wes Draper. I work for Customs and Border Protection.” She nodded and pointed to herself. “Ariché.”

“Ariché.” Wes repeated. “It’s a lovely name.” She offered him a hint of a smile, but then became serious again. “What is it?” he asked. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“Everywhere around us is danger.” she replied, making a circular motion above her head with her hand. “Danger. What kind of danger?” She was pensive, trying to think of what to say. Finally, she drew her thumb across her throat when she couldn’t determine how to communicate with words. “Oh, that kind of danger.” Wes replied. “Drugs and thugs out there in the desert. What a surprise. Did you find my duffle bag?” She nodded her head, reached under the sofa, and pulled out his pack. Wes glanced up and saw not one, but three small children peering at him from around the corner. He took the pack from her and looked it over. He smiled at the children and slid the duffle bag under the sofa. “I don’t need this right now,” said Wes, and then he sat on the sofa, laid his head back, and closed his eyes. “I need to sleep.” Ariché nodded and ushered the children into the bedroom.

The Knight of Sorrow knocked on the back door of the shelter. Liz slid the eyehole open, then opened the door. “Hurry up and get inside,” she ordered. The Knight followed her into the kitchen.

“Let me ask you something,” he said.

“Pull up a chair,” Liz replied.

He sat down with his arms across his lap. “Those thugs I got into it with earlier, were they Diego Mendes flunkies?”

“Yeah, they were bottom feeders in the Mendes gang,” said Liz. “They weren’t here for no stinkin’ groceries. They wanted to kidnap the mother and kids for free laborers.”

“Have you seen any of the Stearns crew lately?”

“Nope. Not their territory.”

“What about the legendary Willie Gibson and his band of merry addicts?”

“Nope,” replied Liz again. “They don’t like to come into town. Too much traffic for them.”

“Okay, Liz, thanks,” he replied. He stood to leave.

“You’ve got to eat, Knight. We can’t have you losing your ninth life to hunger.”

“Save the sandwiches for the families.” He put his hand on the backdoor handle.

“Wait,” Liz ordered. She tossed him a pack of cheese crackers. “At least take something to snack on, darn it, and take this too.” Next, she tossed him a bottle of water.

“Bottled water, nice. I appreciate the special treatment.” He went out the door into the night.

Ariché brought Wes a tortilla filled with beans. He thanked her and devoured it. He glanced at the camping stove on the kitchen counter. The expended Sterno can was lying next to it. She had also cooked rice and a small cut of meat.

“How did you end up here in the desert?” he asked her in Spanish.

“Hiding,” was all she said in return.

“Hiding from the narcos?” he asked.

“Yes. I escaped, but they still look for me,” she replied in Spanish.

“There’s nothing else around here for miles. So where do you get water?”

“Once a week, I take the children. We walk an hour south to the border patrol station. They give us a gallon, maybe two, and give us one or two flats of bottled water, and then we walk back.”

“That’s good of them to do that,” he replied.

“Most are kind,” she answered.

“Where did you get the canned food and the rice and that fresh piece of meat?”

“We brought it here with us,” she said, calculating with her fingertips against her temple, “about three months ago. We are running out. I did walk to town once to buy some canned food, but I had to leave the children here, so I don’t go again.”

“And the meat?”

She smiled. “My son hunts rabbits with a slingshot.”

Wes smiled in return. “Your son is a skilled hunter.”

“Yes, he is.”

“How far away is the nearest town?”

Ariché thought for a moment, tapping her temples with her fingertips. “For me, it takes all day to walk there and back, from the sunrise to the sunset. It is too hard for the children, so I haven’t gone back yet, but I will have to go soon.”

“You know that I must leave here. It’s better that way,” said Wes. “But before I do, I’ll go to town and get food for you and the children. Then, after that, I must go.”

“Gracias,” she replied. Her damp, dark brown eyes were shining up at him over her weathered cheeks. “Muchas gracias.”