

# Sonoma Quadrant



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C.H. Foertmeyer

To my good friend, Tim Jeffries, who has shown a great interest and participation in my work.

## Acknowledgements

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## Foreword

Although *Sonoma Quadrant* can be read and enjoyed on its own, there are references within it to characters from my previous novel, *The Cats' Lair*. To fully understand who these characters are and their backgrounds, it may help the reader to have first read *The Cats' Lair*.

If the reader finds Malic and Damon, or the concept of Ahveen and its Guardians to be interesting, reading *The Cats' Lair* after reading *Sonoma Quadrant* will not only be enlightening, but it will also make more clear certain events that take place in *Sonoma Quadrant*.

C.H. Foertmeyer

## Chapter One

### The Unlikely Encounter - July 5, 2003

"Oh, it's there boys," Griswald said, smiling at the two teenagers. "As sure as my daddy settled on this land-it's there."

Tom and John stared into the desert, shading their eyes with their hands and peering into the distorted landscape before them. The heat rising from Sonoma's dusty surface created waves before their eyes, and mirages, which changed every time they turned to look in a slightly different direction.

"I'm sorry, Griswald, but I don't see a thing other than salt bush and ocotillo," Tom stated.

"Me neither," John chimed in. "Where's it supposed to be?"

"Right in front of you, boys. Right in front of your faces. You have to *believe* in Melas before you can see it-and have one of these," Griswald said, pointing to the charm hanging around his neck. "But it's there sure enough," Griswald continued, his voice rising with excitement at the thought of seeing *again* what he had left behind so many years ago.

"Well it's kinda hard to believe that there is a whole city here in this wasteland that nobody but you can see," John said to Griswald. "Let me see that charm. Maybe if I wear it I can see it, too."

"And that's your problem, Johnny boy. You *don't* believe, and you don't need to wear the charm to see it. You simply need to be in its presence. If you believed you'd see it clear enough."

"How old is this city?" Tom asked, squinting at Griswald.

"I dunno-six, maybe seven hundred years old. I can't be certain of that, and it's not a city, just a small village of about fifty people."

"I thought you've been in there and talked with the folks that live there," John said, looking back at Griswald.

"I have been in there and I have talked with them. I even lived in there with them for almost two years. The problem is, they don't even know how long their village has been here or exactly how it came to be," Griswald explained. "They don't seem to keep records or the like."

"Are they Indians?" John asked.

"Some look to be, others not."

"Who then?" Tom asked, confused at who other than Indians would live here in these desolate surroundings.

"Beats the hell out of me, boys. Some look like you and me, others a little like Indians, others like Mexicans, and then there are a few-well, they are hard to describe," Griswald said, rubbing his brow with the back of his hand.

"What do you mean, 'hard to describe'?" Tom wanted to know.

"Strange looking, these others. It's nothing you can put your finger on, except that they're tall, but there is just something strange looking about them. I guess it's not so much that they look strange in and of itself, but that they all look alike. Not like twins or anything like that, but like brothers and sisters, maybe a dozen of them in all. You run into one of them in the cantina and then walk out the door and run into another in the street. It makes you take a double-take, like 'Oh, I thought I just saw you inside', or something like that."

"Huh-Well, you know, that's not so strange when you think about it," John said. "It's a closed community, right? I mean there's likely to be a lot of inbreeding, right?"

"I suppose there could be, but then again, I wasn't there long enough to know about that. Everyone I ever met was an adult, and very few old folks either. Just middle aged folks mostly."

"No children?" Tom asked.

"None that I ever saw."

"Did you get an explanation for that?" John asked.

"Nope," Griswald answered.

"What the hell did you do in there for two years, sleep?" Tom asked. "You don't seem to know much about them for having lived there and all."

"Nope-I was their prisoner for most of the time I was there."

"Prisoner?" Tom said, surprised at Griswald's revelation. "And you want to go back there?"

"Sure. I said I was their prisoner most of the time I was there, but not by the end of my stay. I left there sort of a hero to them. That's why they gave me the charm before I left, so I could come and go as I saw fit."

"What happened to change things for you there?" John asked. "What did you do to become a hero to them?"

"Well, they have about everything they could ever need in there except for water. The second year I was there it was a really bad drought year and their well went dry. They

don't need much in there, but water they do need and there was none to be found."

"So-What did you do?" Tom asked.

"I cut myself a divining rod and showed them how to douse, that's all, and I got lucky and found them a new well."

"Douse?" Tom asked, looking confused. "That doesn't really work does it?"

"It did that time," Griswald answered, smiling. "Lucky for me. If it weren't for this charm, I'd be long ago dead and buried."

"How do you figure that?" Tom asked, studying Griswald closely. "Do you think they'd have killed you if you hadn't been successful?"

"I don't know, maybe, but either way I'd be long gone by now. That was back in 1878 boys, when they captured me that is. One hundred and twenty-four years ago."

"Damn!" John shouted. "I knew this whole story was a pile of crap. There ain't no city or village out there at all and you're one big bullshitter, Griswald."

"Why the hell did you string us along like that, Griswald?" Tom asked, still studying him closely.

"It's all true, Tom. I was twenty years old when they captured me. I was crossing this valley on my way back to Fordyce from prospecting up on the Junto Plateau. I was riding along on my mule when they just rose up out of the ground and grabbed me down off of Old Bess. Scared the hell out of me 'cause I never saw it coming at all. One minute I was all alone on this desert, the next I was surrounded by six men. As soon as the first one touched me, the town materialized around us. *That* scared me even more, I'll tell ya."

"Yeah, right," John said, shaking his head. "What a crock."

"Tell ya what, John. It's near dark now, so we'll just go back to camp for now and then we'll come back in the morning and I'll take you in. How's that sound to ya?"

"It sounds like a big waste of time to me," Tom replied.

"Well, you can poohaw the story all you want and you'll never know for sure if you don't come back with me, now will ya?" Griswald asked.

"Suppose not, but it sounds like a fool's quest to me," Tom answered.

"Well, before I wandered into your camp that's what you were already on, wasn't it?"

"No! There's gold out here. That's not a fool's quest. We found a nugget in an arroyo and where there's one, there's bound to be more," John said.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Griswald said, smiling at John. "So, will you come see the village tomorrow or not?"

"How are we going to see it, if it's really even there?" Tom asked.

"Oh, there are ways. You'll see it sure enough, if you come along."

Tom turned to John and asked, "Well-What do you say, John? Should we?"

"Might as well humor Griswald. We can look for gold in our arroyo later on I guess."

"Okay, Griswald. We'll go along, but we're not wastin' the whole day out here. We came out here to find gold, not go on some wild goose chase," Tom informed him.

"Tom-If they give you one of these charms, like mine, you'll have better than gold to show for your trouble."

Tom thought about that for a minute and then turned back for camp. John fell in behind him leaving Griswald to bring up the rear. As he walked along the baked desert soil he began thinking about their unlikely meeting of Griswald who had wandered into their camp earlier in the late afternoon.

He and John had come out to the Sonoma for a four day weekend in search of gold. They weren't prospectors or anything like that, just a couple of guys who thought it would be neat to go prospecting over the long Fourth of July holiday.

The Sonoma was only twenty-five miles from their home in Fordyce and the closest primitive area to their homes. There had been tales they had heard growing up of gold in the Sonoma and it had seemed like a good adventure to go look for themselves. On their second day out in the desert they had found a nugget, which seemed to weigh about a half an ounce by their best guess. That one nugget would finance their whole expedition, but the thought of more nuggets had them eager to continue their search.

Griswald had hailed their camp late on that second afternoon, appearing out of nowhere at the perimeter. He had appeared to be a harmless old man of about sixty years of age, so they had invited him in for coffee and camp stew. The discussion that ensued had led to Griswald's reason for being out in the middle of nowhere and that is when he had told them of Melas.

To the boys, who had never heard of any city out in the Sonoma, it had seemed a neat enough place to go check

out, but that was before Griswald had turned out to be a crackpot, or so they now suspected.

"John," Tom said, after walking along in silence a few hundred yards. "I think Griswald has been out in the sun too long."

"Yeah, I think so."

"Think we should go back with him tomorrow, or just blow him off and tell him to hit the road?" Tom asked.

"Hell, I don't know. I guess it wouldn't hurt none to humor him a little further. He's a nice enough old coot."

"Yeah, but what's his reason for all this bull about Melas?" Tom asked his little brother.

"Beats me. Maybe he *has* been out here too long. Or- Maybe he's just lonely or something like that."

"Maybe."

They entered their camp, followed by Griswald, and stoked their fire, adding a few more mesquite branches to the glowing embers.

"Coffee, anyone?" John asked, looking from Tom to Griswald.

"Sure," Griswald answered. "There's always time for a good cup of coffee."

John smiled at the old man and began preparing a pot of coffee for him.

"So tell me, Griswald," John said, as he measured the grounds. "The way I see it from what you said earlier, you must have been born around 1858. Is that about right?"

"That's exactly right, John. 1858, February 20<sup>th</sup> to be exact."

"And you were out here prospecting when the Melas folks captured you?"

"Yep, traveling back from prospecting."

"So, why did they capture you and hold you prisoner all that time?" John asked, looking curiously at Griswald.

"Slave labor. I wasn't the only prisoner, not by a long shot. They apparently capture anyone who wanders unknowingly through their village or their territory. They put us all to work in their fields," Griswald explained. "Well, most of us, anyway. Others were put to work at various other tasks about town."

"Fields?" Tom asked.

"Sure-Corn fields. They grow corn mostly, in irrigated fields, when there's water to irrigate with that is. I was in charge of maintaining the irrigation system-you know, keeping the ditches open and running free. The fact that their well ran dry is what saved me, but I already mentioned that, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did," John answered.

"Anyway, that's what I did there until they released me."

"In 1880, right?" Tom asked.

"Yep. It was 1880 when they finally set me free. One hundred and twenty-two years ago. Amazing-Wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, to say the least," Tom replied.

"And you have no idea where these folks came from or who they are?" John asked again.

"I have my suspicions, but I'll keep them to myself until you see Melas for yourselves. I've already given you enough to doubt already. I know that. If I told you more about what I believe, it would just serve to make you doubt me more."

"Fair enough," John said. "We'll see Melas tomorrow and then you can explain the rest to us," he finished, smiling at Griswald and thinking, *Poor old fool*.

"So, Griswald. Why are you back out here now?" Tom asked. "Just to visit Melas again?"

"Well-Yes, and to see if my theory about them holds water. I've had a lot of time to think about it and as you may have noticed I have aged only about forty years or so in the past one hundred and twenty. I know it's the charm they gave me that's responsible for that, but I got to thinking, What about them? How have they held up? Like I said, there are no kids there-or old folks. There's just folks there between about thirty and fifty or so. I think I'm going to find the same folks there, unchanged over this past century plus. They don't seem to get sick and they don't seem to change with time, but then again, I was only there for a couple of years."

"But they do need water-right?" John asked.

"Yep, and food. Other than that, they just seem to go on and on, or at least I believe they do," Griswald answered. "That's one of the things I want to find out about them, that, and who they really are."

"So, Griswald. Why didn't they grab us when we were over there?" Tom asked, trying to throw a monkey wrench into Griswald's story.

"We didn't go into their territory. The village is the gateway to their domain. We didn't enter, and besides, I'm their friend, remember? I don't think they'd grab you boys up while you're with me. Least that's the way I see it."

"So what happens if they won't let us leave once we go in?" Tom asked, pressing Griswald for answers he really

didn't think the old man could answer and continuing to humor him.

"Well-It is a nice enough place to live I suppose," Griswald answered, grinning broadly.

"Then why didn't you just stay there?" John asked. "If it's such a nice place, I mean."

"Because, John, I didn't feel right about staying. I was from the outside like all their other captives and there was nothing I could do about setting them free along with me. It just didn't feel right, living there free and clear while the others were all still held as slaves."

"But you never went back to try to help them either, did you?-Why not? If you felt that way about them being enslaved, why didn't you go straight to the law and get help out there for them?" Tom questioned.

"What help?" Griswald answered, looking strangely at Tom. "Who'd have believed me-you don't-I can see that plain enough. Besides, if those folks in there don't want to be seen then they won't be seen. There is no help for their captives."

"Well, you're right about me not believing you, Griswald. It's a pretty far-fetched story," Tom said, honestly.

"But you will go with me tomorrow, right? To satisfy your curiosity, right?" Griswald asked, smiling a broad smile at Tom.

"Oh yeah-I wouldn't miss it for the world," Tom answered.

"Me either," John chimed in, snickering under his breath. "It should be interesting."

## Chapter Two

### The Revelation

Morning broke over the Sonoma with another rude awakening for the boys. It was hard to believe how cold the desert could get at night after such a blisteringly hot day before. Griswald, on the other hand, seemed to take it all in stride quite prepared for the morning, wrapped in several blankets.

The boys hadn't brought a tent to sleep in, as it never seemed to rain out here anyway. They hadn't planned on the cold mornings though and the temperature was well below their summer sleeping bags minimum comfort level.

John awakened first and stoked the fire, adding a few mesquite branches to it, the warmth very much welcomed as the fire came to life.

"Hey, Tom. Sun's coming up," John called to his sleeping brother.

"So?"

"So-Let's shake a leg. We promised Griswald we'd visit his town this morning and I'd like to have a little time left over to search for more gold."

"Yeah-Okay, you're right. I forgot about Griswald. Do we have to go on this lark with him?"

"We said we would," John replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Least we can do is go have a look with him. He ain't a bad guy, just a little sun baked."

"I heard that," Griswald mumbled from beneath his blankets. "You'll be humming a different tune by noon, young John."

"I hope so, Griswald. By noon I hope to be humming *Gold's in My Pocket*," John laughed.

"You'll have better than that in your pocket by noon. There's a good chance you'll have a free ticket to the next hundred and fifty years or so by then."

"Yeah, right, Griswald. Get serious," Tom said, rolling out of his sleeping bag. "Even if this Melas is for real, what makes you think those folks would give me and John one of those charms you claim has kept you so spry these past hundred years or more?"

"Because I'd ask them to, that's why. You don't seem to understand that without me they'd have more than likely all dried up and blown away years ago. I know it, and so do they. By the time I left there they'd have given me anything I might have asked for," Griswald explained. "Anything."

"But how can you be so sure the same folks still live there or that you'll be remembered?" John asked. "That was well over a hundred years ago."

"Like I think I explained before, I think they just exist there, never getting older and never adding to the population, except for those they capture on the desert. I think I'll find the very same folks there that I left behind."

"Well I sure as hell hope so," John said. "Because I'd hate to become one of their slaves and spend the rest of my days digging out irrigation ditches."

"Don't worry yourself, John. You'll be fine. You'll be with me and that will keep you safe enough," Griswald smiled.

"I'm sure it will," John replied, smiling at Tom, who returned the expression.

"Tell you what," Griswald said. "Why don't I fry us up some bacon and eggs for breakfast before we leave for Melas? I've got to use the eggs before they turn green on me anyway."

"Sure, Griswald. That sounds good," Tom answered.

"Yeah-Go ahead," John agreed, rubbing his empty stomach with his hand.

Griswald's breakfast turned out to be pretty good, which put the boys in a better frame of mind for the trek to Melas. They were both of the opinion that this was just a wasted morning, but they had grown to like Griswald over their short acquaintance, and what would a trip to the Sonoma be without seeing Melas?

The old prospector and the two young would-be prospectors headed east toward the *fabled* village of Melas. Griswald led the way, of course, whistling a strange tune as they walked. The desert was already beginning to heat up by nine o'clock and the boys found themselves shedding layers of clothing as they went.

Nine thirty found them at what Griswald described as the Gates of Melas.

"Well, there she is," he commented, as he came to a stop. "We're at the Gates of Melas."

John looked at Tom and smiled.

"If you say so, Griswald" Tom said, grinning.

"Oh indeed I do, Tom. Indeed I do. Are you boys ready to enter?" he asked.

"Ready," Tom said.

"Yep," replied John.

Griswald moved forward, looking from side to side as he walked, his mouth dropping open as he proceeded. Fifty feet into his march, he came to an abrupt halt.

"Well, we're here and it's just as I remembered it!" he exclaimed, looking rapidly about as if checking out each building in turn. "Nothing's changed at all, and lookie there, there's Quancho!" Griswald exclaimed, waving his hand in the air.

Tom looked at John with an expression of disbelief that John understood to mean *Oh boy! What's next?*

"Griswald-I don't see any damn village or anyone named Quancho or anything else," Tom said, shaking his head at the old man. "There's nothing here."

"Be patient," Griswald snapped. "Don't interrupt."

"Quancho! Over here!" Griswald hailed the empty air. "It's me, Griswald!"

There was a momentary pause while Griswald appeared to awaiting Quancho to approach. John and Tom watched the excitement grow on Griswald's face as the moment passed.

"Yes, I know I have grown older," he said, shaking his hand in the air in front of him. "But not anywhere near a hundred years older. You haven't changed a bit, Quancho." - "Yes. I've been fine. How's the water holding out in the new well?" - "Good. That's very good." - "And how is Maria?" - "Good to hear that. She's a sweet woman. Oh, excuse my manners, Quancho This is Tom," Griswald said, pointing to Tom. "And this is John," he said, motioning in John's direction. - "No, they're not my sons, just a couple of friends."

Griswald turned abruptly to Tom and said, "Where's your manners boy? He's offering you his hand."

"Oh, sorry, Griswald. I hadn't noticed," Tom replied, a smirk on his face.

Tom held out his hand to the air in front of him and smiled as he shook his empty hand up and down in a mock handshake gesture. Suddenly, something grabbed his hand and began shaking it heartily. As he was about to withdraw his hand from the unseen grip of whatever, a face began to materialize in front of him, then a figure.

"Shit," Tom gasped, looking over at John, whose expression was totally blank.

Tom looked back at the figure in front of him and smiled. He now noticed that the surrounding desert had vanished and had been replaced with a small village, Mexican in appearance-yet not.

"Hello," Tom greeted the *vision* timidly. "Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, too, Tom," Quancho said, warmly. John was dumbfounded and watched in disbelief as Tom talked to the wind. Then he realized that Tom was just doing a damn good job of humoring Griswald, and relaxed a bit.

Tom watched as Quancho moved toward John.

"Your turn, John. Shake hands with Quancho," Griswald instructed.

"Sure!" John said, holding his hand out eagerly, imitating Tom's act, and hoping he could play the part as well.

John looked briefly at Tom as he *felt* the distinct grasp of an unseen hand on his. John's eyes rolled back and he collapsed in a queer heap on the dusty desert floor, glancing up only momentarily at the materializing Quancho before drifting into unconsciousness.

"Weak constitution," Griswald commented dryly to Tom.

"Yeah, I guess," Tom answered, as he knelt down to help his brother.

Quancho, who up until now had been rather unemotional, let out a loud roaring laugh. "I love when that happens!" he roared, between gasps for air. "I haven't done that in years! So, Griswald. What brings you here?" Quancho asked.

"Curiosity, I guess. That and the need to reconnect with my past; to see if I really didn't dream all this."

"I believe your lack of normal aging should have suggested that you dreamt nothing and experienced what few others ever do," Quancho suggested.

"Yes-Of course you are right about that, Quancho. Still in all-I needed to see it all again," Griswald said, smiling at his old friend.

As Griswald and Quancho talked, Tom was tapping John's cheeks trying to bring him back to the here and now.

"So, Griswald. Why have you brought these boys along with you?" Quancho asked, squinting at Griswald in anticipation of his answer.

"We just ran into one another on the desert. It wasn't planned, but I got to thinking that for once I'd like to have someone to share this experience with. It's hard to bear the knowledge of Melas alone. I can't explain it, Quancho. I just got to thinking it would be nice if someone else knew about my experiences here. I guess I didn't want to take the secret to my grave with me," Griswald answered.

"Perhaps that's how we would have preferred it, Griswald. Did you give that any consideration?"

"Yes-Yes I did, but then again, what harm can their knowing do?" Griswald asked.

"None, I suppose. We are totally safe from detection or intervention here. I suppose there is no harm done."

"None intended," Griswald commented.

"I'm sure of that, Griswald," Quancho assured him.

"There is another reason I have come back," Griswald said, now that he had tested the waters at the shore.

"Oh-And what might that be?" Quancho asked.

"I've been noticing over the past few years that there are practically no new disappearances of people who venture out into this desert. Not like fifty years ago when there were quite a few each year. Are you still-ah-using captured wanderers for your labor force?"

"Ah. The true reason for your journey here emerges. No, Griswald. We are not. Labor has been provided without the need to waylay innocent travelers and adventurers who happen into this desert."

"Provided?" Griswald asked, confused at Quancho's comment.

"I see we have a lot of catching up to do, my friend. Come," Quancho said. "Let's retire to my home and I'll have Maria prepare you and the boys a fine meal. I'll explain over supper."

As Quancho and Griswald walked ahead, Tom and John marveled at the quaint little village they were passing through. It was definitely Mexican in appearance, but meticulously kept in a state of complete repair. It appeared almost to be a vision and not real at all, but as Tom sauntered over to a horse rail and reached out to touch it, he found it real enough, snagging a splinter into his middle finger.

John laughed as Tom withdrew his hand abruptly, and cursing profusely, tried to pull the splinter out with his teeth. Not able to locate the splinter with his teeth he looked again at his finger and the splinter was gone. Not only was the splinter gone, but so were the pain and any other sign that the mishap had even occurred.

"Damn, John-Look at that!" he exclaimed, holding his finger in John's face. "It's gone!"

"Damn-How do you figure that? This place is beginning to give me the creeps, Tom. I mean, look at it. Everything is in perfect order. Did you notice that?"

"Yeah, I noticed. It's meticulous-perfectly maintained, and you apparently can't even get a splinter in this place," Tom answered, looking around the town suspiciously.

By now, Griswald and Quancho had moved along up the street aways, engrossed in their conversation.

"What do you say we get the hell out of here," John suggested.

"Yeah. Let Griswald get a little further up the street and then we'll head back out of town. I'm not so sure I want to learn any more about this place than I already know," Tom said, quietly.

The brothers waited another minute or so as Griswald and Quancho continued to walk away. When they were a good fifty yards down the street Tom tapped John on the arm and said, "Okay-Let's go."

They were about three buildings deep into town and as they passed the second building John looked back over his shoulder and saw Griswald still moving away alongside Quancho.

"Looks like we're going to make it without them noticing," John said.

"Good-Just keep moving. I'm not sure if we are really *guests* here or if Griswald's intentions are something else entirely. Just keep moving."

They passed the first building and proceeded down the road to the edge of town where they had entered only minutes ago. John was the first to pass their point of entry and the first to walk into total blackness. He came to an abrupt halt and Tom walked right into the back of him just as he too noticed the all enveloping blackness; a total absence of any light whatsoever.

"What the hell?" John muttered, turning back to look at Tom.

Tom's expression was invisible in the pitch black, but behind Tom he could still see Melas, bathed in the bright desert sunlight. It was as if the light just stopped at the edge of town, no light at all filtering in to where they now stood.

John felt his way around Tom and reached his hand back across the *edge* of town and his hand became visible once again and he felt the warmth of the sunlight upon it. He noticed at once the temperature difference between the chill where he now stood and the warmth where his outstretched hand was in sunlight.

"What do you make of that, Tom?" John asked his brother, who hadn't uttered a word since entering this black and chilly place.

"I don't know. Which way should we go?"

"I don't think we can go anywhere but back into town. I can't see a thing in any other direction. Not a damn thing," John answered, looking back from the pitch

blackness to his hand, still bathed in sunlight. "If we go any other way we might get totally lost or step off..."

"Step off what?" Tom asked, interrupting John's thought.

"Hell-I don't know, but this is too much. We better get back into Melas while we still can and hook back up with Griswald. There's no telling what's out here in this blackness."

"Right, go then," Tom said, giving John a nudge. "Get back in there."

John hesitated only a moment, and then stepped back into town and into full light. Tom was glued to his heels and emerged from the black right behind him. They took several steps back into town and then turned and looked back to where they had just been. It was just as it had been before they had stepped across the threshold of town. There, before their eyes, was the endless expanse of desert just as it had appeared a few moments before. There was absolutely no sign of the blackness they had just exited.

"Huh," Tom muttered.

"I'll say. Where did it go?"

John, totally mesmerized by this illusion, or whatever it was, took several steps back away from town and found himself back in the chill and black of this unknown place. He turned and again could see Melas and his brother, standing there staring at him from the town. John walked back toward town and again emerged into the sunlight.

"Not there anymore?" Tom asked, curiously.

"Yeah, it's still there-total darkness and cold like before," he answered.

"But I could see you all the time. You never disappeared into the black. I could see you all the time," Tom said, now totally bewildered.

"Yeah, I could see you, too, standing here and watching me, but I was back into total blackness again."

"Shit. Come on, let's go find Griswald. I don't like this a bit. Maybe we had better stick with him or we may never get out of here," Tom suggested, motioning for John to follow him. "I don't like this place one little bit."

The boys headed back into Melas passing the first three buildings they had passed before. There was no sign of Griswald or Quancho and not knowing where to look, they stopped in the middle of the hard packed, Calle Grande, and surveyed the surrounding buildings. After a long moment a man emerged from a building and stood below its hanging sign, which read "Cantina". He stretched his arms above his

head and then he noticed Tom and John standing in the street and began walking toward them.

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"Maria!" Quancho called, as he entered the house.  
"Maria! Come! We have a guest!"

Griswald turned at the singular nature of Quancho's referring to having a 'guest' and noticed that the boys were no longer behind him.

*Now where'd those youngsters go to?* he thought to himself. "Quancho-The boys don't seem to be with us any longer."

"No, Griswald, they tried to leave a while ago."

"Leave Melas? But..."

"Yes, Melas, but you are right, they can not. They have discovered this already and are trying to find us as we speak," Quancho informed him.

It didn't come as a surprise to Griswald that Quancho knew exactly where the boys were or what they had been up to. He had lived here before, after all. He knew many of the strange talents the Melasians possessed, although he understood practically none of them. A look of concern filled his face as he thought back to his first visit to Melas and how he had been incarcerated here before he had come to their rescue.

"Don't worry yourself," Quancho spoke, almost as if reading Griswald's mind. "Your friends can come to no harm here."

"But what if they try to leave again and wander into the abyss? If they lose sight of Melas they may never find their way back. They'll be doomed to the blackness forever," Griswald worried, openly.

"They will not. They have seen the abyss and they are wary of it. They fear that darkness much more than they fear Melas. They will be along presently."

"What caused them to try to flee, Quancho? I saw nothing intimidating as we walked through town," Griswald wondered.

"A splinter-Maria! Where are you?" Quancho called again.

"A splinter?" Griswald asked, his lack of understanding written all over his face.

"Yes, a splinter, which Tom got in his finger from a horse rail. When the splinter disappeared and the wound healed immediately, the boys *freaked*, as I believe they would put it. They decided that they had learned all they

needed to know about Melas. Maria!" he called yet again. "Where is that woman?" Quancho mumbled.

As he finished speaking his last question, Maria entered the room, not through the door, but through a wall of an adjoining room. Again, Griswald was not surprised. He had seen this done before also.

"Griswald! Is that you?" she asked, obviously delighted to see the old man. "You've aged! How long has it been?"

"Over a hundred years I'm ashamed to say," Griswald answered, smiling warmly at Maria. "How have you been?"

"The same. Fine as usual, but you?"

"Oh, I'm okay, too. A little older and wiser, but fine just the same. You don't look a day older than when I was here last," Griswald said, complementing Maria's good looks. "And just as pretty, I might add."

"Well-Thank you, Griswald," she smiled.

"Maria. Will you fix us some supper, please? Something special for my friend and his guests?"

Maria looked over Griswald's shoulder and saw no one.

"Guests?" she asked.

"Yes, guests. They'll be along shortly. Two young boys Griswald found in the desert. He has brought them along as well-for a visit."

Maria looked concerned over this new information, her face wearing a bit of a frown, mingled with a bit of worry.

"It will be fine, Maria. Please, just do as I ask," Quancho instructed.

Maria turned and left the room by way of the door to the kitchen. At the doorway, she turned and glanced back at Griswald, still displaying her concern on her face.

"She worries too much," Quancho commented to Griswald.

"I can understand her point of view," Griswald said.

"Well, I can not. There is no reason for concern, especially now that the Nomeds have returned. This is what I wanted to tell you of over supper, Griswald."

"What are the Nomeds?"

"You mean, *who* are the Nomeds?"

"Well, yes then, *who*?"

"They are the founders of the settlement of Melas. You must understand, Griswald, that Melas was once an ordinary Mexican village by the name of Mazatlan. This was, of course, hundreds of years ago, perhaps as many as five hundred years ago. Life in Mazatlan was like life in any other small desert village; a lot of hard, hot work for little reward. Then, the Nomeds arrived and changed everything. I remember the day well. I myself was a farmer,

trying to scratch out enough food from the baked earth to feed Maria and myself. It was a hard and bitter existence."

"And you were there when they arrived, five hundred years ago?" Griswald asked, amazed at the revelation.

"Oh yes, I was there. They settled in amongst us in the village and showed us new ways to grow crops and harvest them. They gave us special fertilizers and chemicals to produce bounty. We took our over-abundance of produce to the larger cities and sold it to the markets in those cities. With the spare time we now had and money in our pockets we fixed up our homes and property. For the first time, life was good and bountiful. Then, after several years, the Nomeds came to us and announced their departure for their homeland. It was time, they said, for them to return home."

"And now they've returned? But, who are they, these Nomeds?" Griswald questioned.

Quancho just smiled and continued with his story.

"Before they left us, Griswald, they made us an offer."

"An offer?" Griswald asked.

"Yes, an offer we found hard to refuse, and subsequently, did not. We all gathered in the cantina at the Nomeds' request and they made their offer, which we in turn voted upon. The outcome was nearly unanimous. We accepted."

Quancho paused, as if reflecting back upon the day.

"What sort of offer was it?"

"They offered us colonization and all the benefits that go along with it."

"Colonization?"

"Yes. We were to become a colony of theirs, a place where they could always find safe haven in their travels. An outpost, if you will," Quancho explained. "The benefits of our agreeing were too inviting to say no. Nearly perpetual life for all citizens of the colony, each individual aging only about one year for every hundred that passed on the outside. Excellent health, as you have witnessed, there being no sickness or injury here, and complete and total isolation from outside influences that might wish to bring harm to us. It was all too good to pass up."

"But how is the isolation from the outside world a good thing? Doesn't that get-old-after a while?" Griswald asked, coming out with the first question of many swimming around in his head.

"It would 'get old' if we could not go forth and visit the outside world, but we can, when wearing a charm like the one I gave you. The charm empowers one to 'see through' the black nothing that encapsulates Melas. You see-Melas is not where it appears to be. That is why when you first cross the threshold it takes time for the village to appear. You are actually in transport to it. Conversely, when you leave it takes a short time for the blackness to fade. You, Griswald, left at night so you may not have noticed."

"Yes-I do remember that. I looked up and saw no moon or stars for several minutes, then they appeared in a few short moments. I do remember that."

"So-Where is Melas then?" Griswald asked, quite curiously.

"That, I do not have an answer to. I only know that the area on the Sonoma where it appears to be is only the portal to Melas, the one area on Earth where access may be gained."

Quancho smiled at Griswald and said, "You know my friend, had you stayed with us these past one hundred years or so, you'd have aged barely a month."

"Well, as it is, I'm doing pretty good for a hundred and forty-five years," Griswald stated, smiling broadly.

"Yes, the charm helped you while away. It slows down your aging, but it can't do for you what staying here can do for you. That is the one reason why we do not venture out into the outside world very often, or for extended periods of time. Even though we have extended lifetimes, we are just as greedy about the number of years we have as anyone else."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before I left, Quancho?" Griswald wanted to know.

"Because it was an unprecedented event. No one had ever actually left before, certainly not an outsider like yourself. We did not know how the Nomeds would have felt about it. We were taking a chance as it was by allowing your freedom and an even larger gamble was taken in presenting you with the charm. We simply did not know how the Nomeds would feel about providing you with complete knowledge of our situation."

"And now?"

"Now? Ha! The Nomeds laughed at our quandary. They were not the least bit concerned about your knowing whatever we might have told you. In fact, they wish to reward you for helping save their colony."

"Reward me? How?" Griswald asked. "And-Who are the Nomeds, Quancho? You still have told me nothing about them or where they come from."

"As to how they wish to reward you, Griswald, I have no idea. They didn't say, even when I asked them directly. As to who they are, there will be plenty of time to discuss that over supper."

Almost as if Quancho had sensed it, Maria called them to supper. Quancho led Griswald into the dining room and seated him at the head of the table. Quancho took a seat to Griswald's right as Maria entered the room carrying the main entrée, a large roast beef.

"Where are the boys?" Maria asked, seeing only the two men at the table.

"They'll be along shortly, Maria. They are talking with Pablo Nieve in front of the cantina," Quancho replied. "He will direct them here soon enough."

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"He's headed this way, Tom. What should we do now?" John asked, worried over an encounter with one of Melas's residents without Griswald present.

"He's already seen us so there's no point in trying to avoid him. We'll just see what he has to say," Tom answered, trying to hide his concern for the situation from his brother. "We'll just talk to him and see what's on his mind and maybe he can direct us to Quancho's house."

The approaching man appeared to be about forty years of age, Mexican in appearance and stood about five foot six. He was wiry in build and deeply tanned from a life in the desert sunlight. As he drew to within a few feet he smiled and held up his right hand in a waving gesture.

"Hola. My name is Pablo, Pablo Nieve," he greeted. "Who might you strangers be?"

"I'm Tom, and this is my brother, John. We're friends of Griswald's," Tom mentioned immediately, hoping the name might gain them favor. "Happy to meet you, Pablo."

"Griswald? Is he here?" Pablo asked, smiling even more broadly now.

"Yes, he's with Quancho. We sort of-ah-got lost," Tom said, glad to have found a way to drop Quancho's name.

"I see," Pablo said, rubbing his chin and staring directly into Tom's eyes. "Tried to leave, did you? Can't do that without a charm," he said. "You must have one of the charms to leave Melas. Otherwise you'll wander for eternity in the abyss-if you lose sight of town that is."

"Yeah, we found that out already," Tom said, sensing that Pablo meant them no harm. "How do you go about getting one of those charms, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not at all, mi amigo. You get the charm from Quancho. He is the only one who can give you one, being the Keeper of the Colony and all."

"Colony?" John asked, finally getting up the gumption to speak.

"Sí, pero no hay no más que puedo decir. There is nothing more I can say. You must talk with Quancho of these matters."

"Okay, Pablo. We will, when we find him. Do you know where Quancho lives?" John asked.

"Sí. His casa is the last casero on the left," Pablo answered, pointing down the street. "Esa dirección-that way."

"Thanks, Pablo. Maybe we'll see you again before we leave. Thanks again for the help," Tom said, looking down the street toward Quancho's home.

"Sí-You can find me in the cantina on most days. It is my cantina. You are welcome there anytime you wish to have a drink or a meal."

"Thanks, Pablo. Maybe we'll stop by before we go," Tom replied.

Tom and John headed down the street in the direction Pablo had indicated. They were each feeling more relaxed now, at least at the apparent friendliness of at least one of Melas's residents. *One resident* was the thought that was troubling Tom, however.

"John-This town seems almost completely deserted. Except for Pablo, we haven't seen one living being since we got here, unless you count Quancho. Where the hell is everybody?"

"I don't know-Siesta, maybe? It is pretty hot out here. Maybe they are all napping," John speculated.

"Maybe, but it still seems weird to me that no one is on the streets."

No more than the words were out of Tom's mouth the boardwalks in front of the businesses and houses began to fill with people, emerging from every doorway and seemingly going about their daily business. No one paid the boys any mind at all as they walked up the center of the road, but they noticed the quick glances they were given occasionally and it made them uneasy once again.

"That's just too weird," John commented. "It's like you made them all come out just by thinking about their absence."

"Yeah-weird," Tom agreed. "I wonder..."

"Wonder what?" John asked, cocking his head and looking at Tom inquisitively.

"John, I've got an idea. Listen-Close your eyes. Now, when I say, start thinking about Quancho's house."

"What?"

"Just do it, okay?"

"Okay, but I've never seen Quancho's house. How can I think about it?" John asked.

"Just think about Quancho and then picture him sitting at a table in his house. Just do it, John. Humor me."

John closed his eyes and Tom did likewise.

"Okay, now think about Quancho's house."

The boys began thinking about Quancho. John did as Tom suggested and thought about Quancho sitting at a table in his home. Tom was thinking about Quancho sitting on a couch watching television, not that he believed they had television here, but that was what he began thinking about when he had closed his eyes.

Tom was trying to concentrate on his mental vision when he felt a very strange sensation, like as if he was sitting down while standing there in the street.

"Are you doing it, John?" Tom asked, his eyes still tightly closed.

There was no answer.

"John-Are you thinking about Quancho?" he asked again.

Receiving no response from his brother Tom opened his eyes and found himself sitting on a sofa in a strange room. His head whipped around from one corner of the room to the next trying to get a grip on the situation. *What the hell?* he thought. *Where the hell am I?*

He noticed a door on one wall and stood, moving toward the door in one swift motion, nearly knocking over a floor lamp as he did. He started to turn the knob, then hesitated, deciding to put his ear to the door and listen first. He heard muffled voices through the door, one sounding strangely like his brother John's voice. He slowly turned the knob and opened the door a crack and stuck his head through the narrow opening.

"Tom! Come join us, Quancho said, smiling at Tom with a touch of laughter to his voice. "I see you are learning your way around Melas already. Impressive."

Tom peered at Quancho, still not believing what had just happened, but at a loss to deny it had. He opened the door further and stepped into the room.

"Hey, Tom," John greeted. "Pretty slick, huh?" his brother asked, sitting at the table alongside Griswald.

"Yes, Tom, do come in and join us," Griswald said, laughing. Meet Maria, Quancho's wife," he said, motioning to the pretty woman across from him.

Tom walked over to the table and pulled out the remaining empty chair and seated himself. He didn't utter a word as he studied Griswald's face and then let his gaze travel to Quancho and then Maria.

"Hola, Tom. Please help yourself to some supper. We've been expecting you," Maria said, warmly. "Although we thought you'd walk in the front door," she said, trying unsuccessfully to restrain her laughter.

Tom smiled at Maria and then looked at the spread on the table before him. What caught his attention was that John's plate was half full, the other half showing signs of having once contained the first portion of his meal.

"John-How long have you been here?" Tom asked his brother.

"About twenty minutes. Where the he..." he hesitated, glancing quickly at Maria, "...heck have you been?"

"I-I don't know..."

"John's concentration was deeper," Quancho answered. "You can do most anything in Melas simply by concentrating on it in your mind. The deeper your concentration, the faster you accomplish your goal. It has been that way since the return of the Nomeds. And, that, Griswald is what I wanted to talk to you about in answer to your earlier question."

"Which question? I've only got about a million of them that need answers."

"The question about why we no longer abduct wanderers into the Sonoma for our labor force," Quancho answered.

"Oh, yes. *That* question. Well..." Griswald said, leaving the floor to Quancho for his explanation.

"If you recall, I told you that obtaining outside help was no longer necessary. That the Nomeds had provided that for us now. First, you need to understand why we began that practice in the first place. It was not the intention of the Nomeds that we do so. That was something that we discovered was possible and slipped into the practice of doing of our own choice. You must understand that the Nomeds are benevolent beings. They are here only to rest and prepare for their further journeys. What we did in abducting innocent travelers was frowned upon by the Nomeds when they returned and discovered our practice.

When the Nomeds left five hundred years ago after we had agreed to become a colony, they left us with the knowledge to provide a great life for ourselves here in

Melas. In return, they received a safe haven here on Earth from which they could operate upon their return in the future, the future being now.

One day when Juan Ortiz was working in his fields a burro wandered up to him. The burro did not see him, he knew that because that is the way of the portal on the Sonoma. It appears to be only empty desert, as you know. Anyway, Juan walked over to the burro and placed his hand upon its neck, petting it and speaking to it as one does a lost animal. At first the burro did not react, but then after a moment, the burro turned its head and gently nudged Juan. Juan was amazed and threw a length of rope around the burro's neck and rode it home. That was the very first time we discovered that we could transport things here from within the portal. Prior to that we only believed that we could come and go using the charms the Nomeds left for us. This was a great discovery for us."

Quancho paused briefly, as if to collect his thoughts. "You see, Griswald. This was probably three hundred years after the Nomeds had left us. We had grown lazy using the technologies and techniques the Nomeds had left us with. Our lives were bountiful, yet we had grown complacent. We no longer had the desire to work in the fields like before, preferring to lounge around as much as we possibly could and play games and read books and make love to our wives. We had grown very lazy and our fields, despite the Nomeds' benevolence, had begun to go to weed and produce less and less each year.

"So you decided to create a labor force to do your work for you then," Griswald interjected.

"Yes. I am afraid we did. It was so easy. You see, all we had to do was approach any traveler who wandered into the portal and touch them. They could not see us coming and once we touched them they were transported to Melas. Once that had occurred, there was no escape for them. They could not harm us for there is no injury here in Melas, another benefit the Nomeds left us with, which I believe I have already mentioned. You, Griswald, were but one of many to be abducted."

"What has become of the others?" Griswald asked.

"Once the Nomeds returned they were given their freedom."

"You let them leave Melas like you did me?"

"No, I'm afraid not, but they do not mind. They were given full citizenship here by the Nomeds and when explained the benefits, they were not opposed to it really.

Not once we told them that if they still had loved ones on the outside we would bring them here to them."

"And you did that?" Griswald asked, somewhat amazed.

"Yes, we did. There were only three or four who needed to take advantage of the offer, but we did bring their loved ones to them and they are now citizens as well."

"So why did you let me leave? How was I different from the others?" Griswald asked.

"You, Griswald, are a solitary being, spending your time on the desert in search of gold. Who would you likely ever come in contact with more than once? Who would notice that for years and years you remain the same old Griswald, never appearing to age?"

Griswald thought about what Quancho had just said, and answered, "Clemente."

"Oh yes, Clemente, at the trading post on the outskirts of Loomis," Quancho replied.

"You know him?" Griswald asked, surprised at Quancho's comment.

"Yes, Griswald, and his father as well."

Griswald studied the smile on Quancho's face.

"Clemente is one of your own?" Griswald asked, hesitantly, thinking back to the two generations of Clementes who had run the outpost over the years he had been supplying there.

"Yes, Griswald. The Clemente family has sacrificed many years of their lives to provide us with a means of supply and exchange at that outpost. We were certainly not worried about your regular visits there."

"Well I'll be go to hell..." Griswald mumbled.

"And now that you hold no more slaves," Tom said, trying to get into the conversation. "Who tends to your fields?"

"Yes, who?" Griswald repeated Tom's question.

"No one. We have only to think about what needs to be done and it gets done. Don't ask me how, but this is the remedy the Nomedes came up with."

"Someone has to be doing it," Tom said. "Things don't just 'get done', like by magic or something."

"And how would you define how you got from the middle of Calle Grande into my living room?" Quancho asked.

"Magic-perhaps?"

"Well-I don't know, but that's one thing. Keeping the fields in good shape is something different. Someone has to be doing the work, don't they?"

"Are you finished with your meal?" Quancho asked Tom.

"Yes, why?"

"What needs to be done with your dirty plate?" Quancho continued.

"It needs to be washed, I suppose," Tom answered, looking queerly at Quancho.

"Very well. Close your eyes and imagine it clean. Try to picture it that way, clean as a whistle."

Tom looked at Quancho with a certain measure of uncertainty and a large measure of doubt. He closed his eyes and did as he was instructed.

"What now?" he asked, his eyes still tightly shut.

"Is the plate clean? In your mind I mean?" Quancho asked.

"Yes, I suppose it is—in my mind anyway."

"Then open your eyes and look at what you have accomplished," Quancho said, the tone of his voice rising in anticipation of what Tom would discover.

Tom opened his eyes.

"Wow! I did *that*?" he exclaimed. "—Or—did you switch it on me?" Tom asked, wary of being tricked by his host.

"Switched? No, Tom, you did that yourself. Ask you brother."

Tom looked at John who was starring at the pristine plate in disbelief.

"Well?" he asked John.

John looked up from the plate and his eyes, wide as saucers, met Tom's.

"Geez..." he said.

"Geez, what?" Tom asked.

"One minute your plate was all messed up with food and then it all just faded away. It all just disappeared..."

"Cool," Tom said. "That's really neat!"

"So, shall we all retire to the living room and get comfortable? I'm sure you each have many questions to ask," Quancho suggested.

"Sounds fine," Griswald replied. "I know I still have questions, and—you still haven't really addressed my biggest question of just who the Nomedes are or just where exactly they come from."

"I haven't?" Quancho smiled. "Well, I must correct that oversight shortly. Come. Let's retire to the living room and continue this conversation there."

## Chapter Three

### Gone Missing

Walter hung up the phone and stared out the window of his office. The Sonoma, usually a vast expanse of tan and brown, glowed an eerie red hue under the light of the setting sun.

"Damn," he muttered. "Here we go again."

It had been at least seven years since he had received a phone call like the one he had just received. After all this time he had hoped that perhaps the Sonoma Quadrant had become just a bad memory; an unsolved mystery from the past. Now, it appeared that the past had little to do with the Quadrant, or everything to do with it, depending on how you chose to look at it. The only thing Walter could be sure of now—was that it apparently hadn't gone away.

He looked away from the window and began rummaging through his desk. *Here it is*, he thought as he pulled a file from his drawer. *August, 1995. Darrel Spikes*. Darrel Spikes was the last person he had received such a phone call about, seven years ago, like he had thought. Walter opened the old folder and studied the first page. *Camped at County Road 6 and Valdez Arroyo. Missing three days past his planned return home*. Walter closed the folder and dropped it on the desktop.

"Damn," he muttered again. "I better go find Scott."

Walter started to rise from his desk chair as Scott Berliner entered his office. Chief Cordes settled back into his chair and smiled a faint smile at his deputy.

"Evening Wally," Scott greeted, noticing the folder on the chief's desk. "What's that out for?" he asked, a worried look coming over his face.

"It's happening again I'm afraid, Scott. Well—Maybe, anyway. Tom and John Fischer are overdue home by about twenty-four hours. I just got a call from their mom," Wally explained. "They were camping out on the Sonoma, looking for gold, believe it or not. They were due home for supper last night, but didn't show up. Ed Fischer went out looking for them this morning and found their camp and Tom's pickup, but no sign of the boys."

"Were they near the Quadrant then?" Scott asked, very concerned now.

"Close by, yes—less than a mile," Wally answered.

"Damn. I thought after all this time that the Quadrant had gone away or whatever. Guess not."

"Well, we don't know that yet, Scott. There are other explanations that might play out when all's said and done," Wally advised. "We'll just have to go out there and see what we can find."

"Want me to get the Jeep?" Scott asked.

"Not now, Scott. It'll be dark before we can get out there. We'll leave at first light. There's nothing we can do out there tonight."

"Maybe I should go down to Tilly's and see if any of their friends have heard from them," Scott suggested.

"I doubt if it will do any good, what with their dad having found their camp and truck out there and all, but go ahead. Ask around and see if their friends know anything. Let me know," Wally finished.

"Will do. Hell, Wally. Maybe they got lost and wandered back to town on foot," Scott suggested, not really believing his own words.

"Yeah-Maybe-But not likely. That's a twenty-five mile hike if it's a foot. I don't think that happened, but check it out anyway. Ask around Tilly's. I'm going over to the Fischer's house and talk with Ed and Ellie. I'll let them know that we'll be leaving first thing in the morning to search for their boys."

"Do you think they're thinking *Quadrant*, too, Wally?" Scott wondered.

"I don't know. They've lived here only five years or so, but I'm sure they must have heard the stories by now. But, they didn't live through the previous searches like we did, so maybe they haven't put that together quite yet. I'm sure not going to mention it until after we've searched the area. If we come up empty I guess I'll have to throw it out to them as a possibility."

"How many people have we lost out there?" Scott asked.

"Nine from town counting Tom and John Fischer, but then there was also that helicopter crew from Fort Bliss that crashed out there. We never found them either."

"So-Thirteen in all then. Damn, that's a bad track record for our watch, Wally. Well, I'll get over to Tilly's and get started asking around."

"You know, Scott-On second thought, maybe you better not. You know as well as I do that you'll come up empty. If you talk with those kids they may take it upon themselves to go out looking for their friends and mess up whatever evidence there may be out there for us to go on."

"Well I'll just tell them *not* to go out there," Scott said, with authority.

"Yeah-Right. You do that and when we get out there in the morning we'll find them sleeping in Tom and John's sleeping bags. No-You go out to the Sonoma and find their camp, build a fire, a big one, just in case they are simply lost in the desert. If that's the case they may spot your fire and head for it. I'll swing by Ed Fischer's house and talk with the boys' folks and then I'll join you. That way, if they don't show during the night, we'll be right there come daybreak to start looking."

"Are you going to drive over to Loomis and get Clemente first?" Scott asked.

"Yeah, that's a good idea. Nobody knows the Sonoma as well as he does, not that it's ever helped in the past," Wally commented, dryly.

"Well, we have to give them every chance," Scott stated.

"You're right. I'll swing by the outpost and see if he'll join us. We'll see you out there, Scott. It'll probably be about eleven then before we can get there. We'll look for your fire so build it big and build it bright."

Scott nodded his affirmation and left the room, leaving Wally to come up with a way to tell the Fischers about the possibility that their boys may have become the latest statistics of the Sonoma Quadrant. He'd been down this road before, but in the past, the victims' families had been locals who had already known of the Quadrant's existence. He wasn't sure that the Fischers even knew of the stories, having been in town only five years. There had been no disappearances out there since two years before their arrival. They hadn't lived through the experience-yet.

Wally turned and looked out his window again to his all too familiar view of the Sonoma. *Well*, he thought. *I have until we come up empty to find a way of breaking the news to them.* "Damn it all. Sometimes I hate this job!" he murmured.

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Chief Cordes left the Fischer residence at nine p.m., leaving behind two very distraught parents. He had stuck to his original plan and had not mentioned the Quadrant to either parent. They, in turn, had not made mention of it either, which made Wally's job a lot easier.

He assured them that they would do everything possible to locate their boys and that Scott was already out there

building a signal fire to guide them back to their camp. He informed them that he was on his way to pick up Clemente, explaining to them that no one knew the Sonoma Desert better than Clemente and that they would be out at the boys' camp by eleven that evening, preparing for their search.

Wally didn't know how much he had been able to alleviate the Fischers' fears, but he had given it his best shot. He spent the next forty-five minutes driving to the outskirts of Loomis, all the while trying to decide on the best procedure to follow in the morning. As he passed the sign reading "Loomis - Pop. 327" he pulled off the highway onto the deeply rutted dirt road that led to Clemente's Trading Post.

Pulling up in front of the ramshackle, wooden structure, Wally observed that the building was completely dark. *Guess I'll have to wake the old codger*, he thought to himself. *I hope he's in a good mood, or at least not in a foul one.*

Clemente lived in the back of the trading post for one very practical reason. It was the only way to prevent being ripped off each night by the locals in Loomis. This presented a small problem for Wally as Clemente would most certainly arm himself when he heard him start banging on the door. A nervous shop-keep, half asleep and toting a Winchester .30-30 was no one to take casually. Wally took a deep breath and exited his Jeep.

His nerves grated as he climbed the rickety three steps to the front stoop, each step producing a crescendo of squeaks and creaks, which seemed amplified in the quiet, night desert air. *I hope I get the chance to knock*, he thought, pausing after a particularly loud squeak.

He decided that a verbal announcement of his presence was in order and yelled out, "Hey Clemente! It's Chief Cordes from Fordyce! Don't shoot! Okay?"

From behind him he heard Clemente's reply.

"Damn, Chief. Can't even take a shit around here in peace."

Wally spun on his heels to see Clemente standing behind him just below the first step, lantern in hand, and smiling largely at him.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Wally asked, in total amazement that he had been snuck up on so effectively.

"The outhouse," Clemente replied, smiling still. "What are you doing out here?"

"Came to get your help-again," Wally replied.

"Help? With what, Chief?"

"We've got two brothers from Fordyce gone missing on the Sonoma," Wally informed Clemente.

"What? That's... ah-No one's gone missing out there in years, Chief," Clemente stuttered.

"Yeah, I know, seven to be exact, until now. I've just come from their parents and they are definitely missing and they had been out looking for gold on a lark on the Sonoma. Their dad found their camp, but no sign of them," Wally explained.

"Then I'm sure they are simply lost out there-not-like the other times when we found no trace whatsoever."

"I sure hope you're right about that, Clemente. So, are you up to leaving with me now? Scott is already out at their camp building a signal fire to hopefully guide them back. If that doesn't work though, we may need your help out there."

"Certainly, my friend. Let me get a few items together and we will leave. Do you know where their camp is located?" Clemente asked.

"Mr. Fischer told me this evening that it is near Valdez Arroyo on County Road 6. That's all I know for sure right now," Wally replied.

"Sounds familiar," Clemente answered, flatly.

"Yes, it should. Darrel Spikes, remember?"

"Oh yes, now I do remember why that sounds familiar. Okay, I'll get some gear together and we'll leave shortly."

Wally sat down on the front stoop and looked at the black sky above. He noticed right away the gibbous moon, nearly full and framed in the Milky Way and thought, *That'll help*. But would it really? Nothing had helped in the past cases, not a full moon or full daylight. The previous persons gone missing on the Sonoma had vanished totally and completely. He could only pray, and that is exactly what he began doing.

Clemente took only six or seven minutes to put his things together and joined Wally on the stoop before Wally had finished his prayer.

"Ready?" Clemente asked, quietly, realizing what Wally was doing.

"Yep, ready," Wally whispered.

As they drove out the lane to the highway, Clemente was confident that they would locate the missing boys. His only concern was for their well-being. After all, it had been seven years since the colony had had need to abduct workers. He firmly believed that this was just an unfortunate incident where two greenhorns had gotten

themselves turned around out on the Sonoma. He knew that was easy enough to do, even for an experienced desert traveler.

"Clemente—What do you make of the Quadrant?" Wally asked, as they turned onto the highway.

"The Quadrant?" Clemente asked. "I don't know. Perhaps it has never been anything more than a convenient explanation for some unfortunate mishaps. Perhaps it is more, but I don't personally believe that," he lied.

"You don't? Then how do you explain that we never find any of the missing persons' remains?"

"Animals, shifting sands, maybe just bad luck."

"You think so?" Wally asked.

"Yes. How else do you explain Griswald?" Clemente asked, thinking better of it too late.

"Griswald? Who's Griswald?" Wally asked.

"An old prospector who has been scouring the Sonoma in search of gold for years. He comes to the trading post for provisions several times a year. If there were anything to the legend of the Quadrant, don't you think Griswald would have fallen prey to it by now?"

"He lives out there?" Wally asked, amazed.

"Yes. He never leaves, except to come to the trading post from time to time and every now and then he visits the Crossroads Saloon in Loomis. Other than that, he is always on the Sonoma," Clemente explained.

"Well, that does shed a slightly different light on things, now doesn't it?" Wally commented, more to himself than to Clemente. Looking at Clemente he repeated, "Doesn't it?"

"I would say so. He seems to be fine out there, and that is my point. He is a very experienced desert traveler who knows the landmarks well. Were any of your missing persons of the past experienced desert dwellers?" Clemente asked, still weaving his deception.

"No, I suppose not. Just occasional visitors I would say."

"Who became disoriented and hopelessly lost in the red sands of the Sonoma. It is the only explanation that makes any sense at all, Chief."

Wally wanted to believe what Clemente seemed to believe, but it was his nature to question anything that wasn't firmly anchored in fact. Perhaps that is why he had become a lawman.

He and Clemente had had this conversation before, but it still needed an ending, which still eluded him even now.

He turned onto County Road 6 and looked at his watch, *ten forty*, he thought. *Good, right on time.*

Another ten minutes found them cresting a small rise in the dirt road and off to the left and a half-mile or so ahead, was the glow of Scott's signal fire. Clemente spotted it first and pointed to it, Wally looking out his window in the direction Clemente was indicating.

"Good," Wally said, aloud. *Please, Lord, let this time be different*, he prayed.