

CHILDREN OF THE KNIGHT

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Published by
Harmony Ink Press
5032 Capital Circle SW
Ste 2, PMB# 279
Tallahassee, FL 32305-7886
USA
publisher@harmonyinkpress.com
<http://harmonyinkpress.com>

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Children of the Knight
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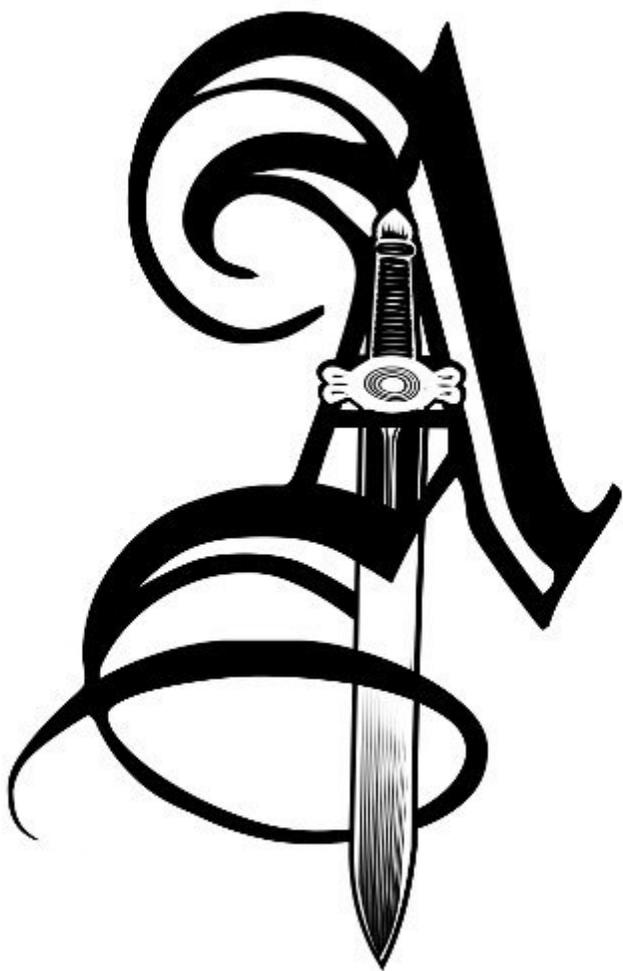
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publisher@harmonyinkpress.com

ISBN: 978-1-62380-655-2
Library ISBN: 978-1-62380-925-6
Digital ISBN: 978-1-62380-656-9

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
June 2013

Library Edition
June 2013

This book is respectfully dedicated to all the kids I've worked with over the years who have inspired me, most especially those incarcerated youth who shared with me their deepest, darkest secrets, who opened up to me the horrors of their upbringing and the degradations life had perpetrated upon them, and yet who never ceased to amaze me with their resilience, their undying hope for a better life, and their unlimited capacity to love. Specifically, to those of you who inspired the characters of Lance, and Jack, and Reyna, and Esteban, and most especially Mark—you remain in my heart and soul forever.



CHAPTER 1: ALL IS AS IT SHOULD BE

ONCE upon a time in the City of Angels, chaos was king, and carelessness ruled. Street gangs roamed the city. Politicians bettered their own lives, not those of the people they were elected to serve. Police corruption ran rampant through Rampart and other crime-ridden districts. Neighborhoods declined to slum-like conditions. The Los Angeles school system stumbled headlong down the road to total Armageddon. And the most victimized segment of the populace?

The children. The teens. The next generation.

Limited choices and often abusive or neglectful home lives forced hundreds, if not thousands of children, into the streets to join gangs, turn tricks, do drugs, sell drugs, drop out of school, get arrested and sent to prison for life, and in all ways subjugate their goodness in the name of survival.

All hope seemed lost. Until the mysterious “tag” appeared throughout the city, spray-painted on walls and over graffiti, obliterating gang markings without mercy, without favoritism, with impunity.

A “tag” that became the symbol of a revolution.

Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles had become a flashpoint for immigrant traffic and gang warfare as far back as anyone could recall. The gangs usually clashed over turf or drugs.

Tonight it was about disrespect.

LAPD officers fought to contain the brawling, screaming gang members, firing rubber bullets, banging heads with nightsticks, slapping cuffs on tattooed wrists. These rival Latino factions from different neighborhoods clashed often, especially on this street, a dividing line between the two 'hoods.

Scrawled on the wall behind the brawling youths and struggling cops were various gang monikers and names, indicating the back and forth struggle for control of the area. Above all these, written in beautifully articulated lettering and accompanied by the drawing of a dove flying over a rainbow and partially scribbled over by graffiti, was painted: “Pray for Peace in the Barrio.”

Anarchy reigned as cops in riot gear struggled to apprehend the fighting youths, while other gang members ran helter-skelter between numerous police

and local news media vehicles attempting to escape the police cordon. The news cameras rolled, taking in every violent moment while the flashing red lights of police and paramedic vehicles cast a dramatic strobe-light effect over the scene.

As the situation slowly settled into containment, with most gang members either restrained or dashing off into the darkness, the last two boys were roughly pulled apart by four cops. These two boys fought so furiously that two officers were required for each boy to keep them from killing one another.

Esteban Gallegos and Jaime Villalobos, for the present, at least, called the shots for their respective neighborhoods. The real power brokers seldom got their hands dirty, much like the generals, or presidents, in any war. Now nearly seventeen, Esteban had grown up in the streets, having been jumped into his gang at age eleven by holding his own in a three-on-one fight, the other three being older, stronger kids. As a boy, the strength and power of the local gang members had drawn him in like a magnet. Now a strong, buffed-up teen with unkempt facial hair and a nearly bald head, Esteban wore a torn wifebeater that revealed several gang tattoos on his naked, muscular arms.

Jaime was sixteen, clothed in a muscle shirt that revealed his own assorted tattoos, which included his name on his neck and Our Lady of Guadalupe on his right forearm. Jaime had been born into the gang. His father was a gang member who never grew out of the lifestyle and had been in and out of prison during Jaime's formative years, for often-violent crimes. Growing up, the boy seethed with pent-up rage over his inability to choose his own path in life.

As cops shoved these boys toward different police cruisers, their faces slashed by the flashing red lights, Jaime kicked and screamed, shrieking furiously at Esteban, his face red with rage, "You're dead, *Ese!* Dead!"

Esteban, calm and composed now that the fighting had ceased, merely gazed solemnly over his shoulder at his raging rival. "You ain't gonna touch me," he announced quietly before being forced into the backseat of a police car. The doors slammed and locked behind him. The other officers shoved Jaime violently into the back of another cruiser before the youth could shout a response. Suddenly, the bedlam ended, and the cleanup began.

The two men in charge of the operation observed the various police cruisers moving off with their captured warriors. Sergeant James Ryan, a veteran of the LAPD since college, wore his fifty-five years more like a weary sixty-five or seventy, his hair having turned almost completely gray, his craggy face worn and weathered by stress. Of medium height and build, he had been on the gang detail for over a decade, and he could no longer separate misguided children from hard-core gang members. In his view, the only good gang member was a dead or imprisoned gang member. Rehabilitation? Forget it. Tonight's episode was further proof—these kids were so far gone they'd kill each other over a stupid tag. Man, was he burned out on this shit!

As a black youth growing up in South Central, Sergeant Robert Gibson had no father in the home (nor did most of his friends), but he did have the blessing of

his domineeringly strong mother who'd kept her son in check. She'd felt nothing but contempt for the gang leaders who recruited children and brainwashed them into thinking they had power, that they were doing something great for themselves and their neighborhood, and she wasn't afraid to tell them so. Gibson had always been more afraid of her than the gangbangers.

Gibson became a cop right out of high school and had moved quickly up the ranks. He was now pushing forty, tall and imposing, with broad shoulders and a well-groomed mustache. As a young, intelligent, committed African-American officer, Gibson became a poster boy for the LAPD and willingly joined the Gang Task Force as a tribute to his mother, who'd sadly succumbed to a heart attack last year.

Unlike Ryan, Gibson believed that most teen gang members, if given another alternative, would gladly ditch the gang and move forward in life. He'd seen ample evidence of this through Homeboy Industries, a program started by a Jesuit priest, Gregory Boyle. Homeboy Industries sought to rehabilitate and obtain lawful employment for gang members who wanted out, and had proven wildly successful in its twenty-five years.

But statewide, more and more punitive laws were passed each year against children, and fewer and fewer programs to help wayward kids get back on track were created or amplified, while failing schools and deteriorating home life had taken their toll. In some ways, Gibson felt older and more burned out than Ryan because he still cared.

Ryan surveyed the mop-up operation before him and shook his head in absolute disgust. "Shit, Gib, tagger's been here too!"

Gibson looked just as dismayed. "We've got to nail this guy, Ry, 'fore he ignites the whole city."

They gazed at the brick wall before them. Painted in bright purple paint or ink, was a simple, but unusual symbol. This symbol, having been painted over the gang logos and gang names, and appearing on walls and buildings throughout the city in recent days, had precipitated this and other outbreaks of gang-on-gang violence. Both sides in these clashes believed the other had disrespected them by placing this "tag" over their own.

The symbol, a large A with a sword thrust down through it, now adorned the wall, clearly asserting its dominion over what had previously been claimed.

Helen Schaeffer, a blonde, leggy, very attractive, and ambitious thirtysomething newswoman for a local TV station hurried over to Ryan and Gibson with her cameraman in tow. The bright light of the camera fell on the furious faces of the two officers, momentarily blinding them.

"Sergeant Ryan, any comment on this latest incident?" Helen asked with authority, her mic shoved professionally up under Ryan's chin.

Ryan shoved it away. "Yeah, it stinks!" He turned and strode back toward his car. Gibson shrugged as Helen swung her microphone toward him and quickly followed his partner.

Helen turned back to the camera, flashing her very expensive, perfect, television teeth. “As you just saw, the police still aren’t saying much about this latest outbreak of gang violence.”



WITHIN the Hollenbeck Station Gang Task Force Division, activity was at a premium due to this latest gang brawl. Paperwork was rushed through as gang members, some as young as twelve, were booked and carted off to juvenile hall while phones rang off the hook. No surprise to Gibson was the obvious lack of parents checking on the health and welfare of their kids. Nope, he’d noted upon entering the squad room, not a single one present and accounted for.

Ryan, chewing absently on a pencil, and Gibson sat watching a flat screen TV mounted on the wall above them. Other cops bustled past, a few stopping to glance at the broadcast before moving on.

On the screen, Helen’s blonde and curvaceous beauty shone through. Ryan figured she’d been hired for her looks, not her journalist talents, but he had to give her a smidgen of credit for being tenacious on this “tagger” case.

Helen spoke directly to the camera, the last of the police mop-up going on behind her. “This is the seventh large-scale gang fight in the past two weeks, and the police refuse to comment. The only connection seems to be this strange symbol.”

The camera cut to a close-up of the A symbol while she continued in that dispassionate newscaster tone, “or ‘tag’, as the graffiti artists call it. Is this—”

Gibson angrily clicked off the TV with a remote. Sitting in a straight-backed chair beside them, shackled at the wrists and ankles, Esteban chuckled.

“I think it’s you guys, Ryan,” the relaxed boy stated calmly.

Gibson leaned forward, right into Esteban’s face. “You think it’s us, huh, Gallegos?”

Esteban merely smirked. For a cop, Esteban knew, *this* guy wasn’t too bad, but Ryan was a real loser, like one of those old, burned out cops in movies who always get outsmarted by guys like him. He and Ryan had danced around the law for several years now, with Ryan usually losing. As far as Esteban was concerned, he was the smarter of the two, and Ryan would never nail him for anything serious.

Ryan put down his pencil and leaned forward. “Look, the only reason you’re up here, Esteban, is cuz you’re probably the only one a these punks who don’t got shit for brains.”

Esteban nodded. He and Ryan knew each other too well. “It all fits, man. You guys’re tryin’ ta get us ta wipe ourselves out. You makes us think each other’s doin’ it, we fight, and you win. End of story.”

Ryan sighed with exhaustion. “If it was that simple, kid, you an’ yer homies’d been dead long ago.”

Gibson tried the “good cop” routine. “You have any idea who’s doing this, Esteban?”

Esteban snorted derisively. “Like I’d say if I did? Don’t be a dumbshit.”

Gibson’s temper suddenly flared, and he made a grab for Esteban. “Watch yer mouth, punk!”

Ryan’s hand on his shoulder restrained him. Esteban merely continued smirking while Gibson pulled back his clenched fist.

“Not now!” Ryan barked. “Just get ’im outta here.”

Regaining control, the frustrated Gibson stood and roughly yanked Esteban to his feet, shoving him toward the exit, almost causing the boy to trip from the ankle shackles. “Back to the hall, Gallegos.”

Esteban retained his balance and just laughed. “Home sweet home.”

Ryan watched them exit, frustrated and angry. He snapped the pencil he’d been fiddling with and threw the pieces onto his desk. He reached for a sketchpad and picked it up, gazing in irritation at an artist’s rendering of the A symbol. What the hell was going on in his city?



LENNOX, a one-mile square unincorporated neighborhood between the cities of Inglewood and Hawthorne, much like Boyle Heights, seemed a magnet for Latino immigrants, both legal and illegal. Crime and poverty ran rampant in Lennox, with gunshots and police sirens practically a nightly ritual.

A small, lean Latino boy appeared at the mouth of an alley and darted quickly into the protective shadows behind a large dumpster. A sheriff’s car cruised slowly past the mouth of the alley and then continued on out of sight. The boy stepped from his hiding place and dusted himself off. Lance Sepulveda, a fourteen-year-old loner, warily glanced around him. Between avoiding gang members and cops, he lived a very cautious life.

The gang members liked to beat him up, and the cops just put him in juvy as a runaway. There was no place in Los Angeles for runaway kids like him who *didn’t* commit crimes, so they had to bide their time in juvy to wait for yet *another* group or foster home to take them. Since Lance was at that “difficult teenaged stage,” most foster parents wouldn’t touch him. So it was group homes—which sucked *big* time—or the streets.

A smart, clever boy with unusually green eyes—which drew derisive comments from other Hispanics—Lance preferred the freedom of the streets, living for a time with this friend or that friend, having no set rules or curfews, no ties to anyone. Getting close to people meant getting hurt. *Really* hurt. He’d been there, and done that. Not for him. He mostly went to school because he could get

food and use the bathroom, and it was something to do to kill time. He knew the high school would never drop him, no matter that his attendance was shaky, because it got money from the state every time he attended.

What a stupid-ass system, he'd often thought. Getting money just for a kid showing up. Didn't matter if he learned anything or not. And the classes? Everybody had to learn the same crap—no choices at all. Who the hell ever thought everyone was the same anyway? And who the hell ever decided that everybody should go to college? That's all he ever heard!

His plan was to be a pro skater and compete in the X Games. He had the gift, and he knew it. He was vastly superior to everyone he skated with, and he had the right "look," or so skaters at all the skate parks had told him. That's why he kept his hair long. His hair was his good luck charm. It gave him strength, like that Samson guy from an old Bible story he'd heard as a kid. Not physical strength, *survival* strength.

Derisively nicknamed "Pretty Boy," because of that long, flowing brown hair and soft facial features—not to mention the green eyes—Lance smirked at his easy evasion of the cops and strutted boldly along down the alley. Tonight there were no unusual sounds save the occasional plane practically landing atop Lennox on its approach into LAX.

Lance wore a pair of baggy overalls with the straps hanging down and a gray hoodie flipped up to obscure his face. He'd been given these relatively new clothes by a skater friend's mom, who felt sorry for him and often let him crash at their pad. He lugged a bulging, ratty-looking backpack in one hand and an old skateboard in the other.

From the shadows around him suddenly loomed two large black youths. Dwayne and Justin were both sixteen-year-olds who ran the streets of neighboring cities slinging drugs for a pair of big-time dealers. Justin quickly snagged Lance from behind, gripping one strap of the overalls and spinning the much smaller boy around to face him. The skateboard flew from Lance's grasp and clattered to the concrete. He gasped in surprise and fear.

Broad-shouldered, muscular Justin sneered at the fear flitting over Lance's startled face. "What's the hurry, Pretty Boy? We got business wit' you."

Reaching out one arm, he slapped the hood off Lance's head, allowing the boy's signature locks to tumble about his shoulders, and then snatched the old backpack away so hard it tore open with a loud ripping sound, scattering old clothes, candy, and other wrapped junk food onto the ground.

Taller and built more for basketball than boxing, Dwayne sneered at the junk. "Shit, man, what a loser!"

Lance fought down his fear and glared at both boys. Justin grabbed him by the front of his shirt and practically lifted him off the ground. Lance fought and struggled, but he was no match for the incredibly strong boy. "Mr. R. says he had a talk with you about workin' these streets for him."

Lance struggled to maintain his composure. “Yeah, he did, and I told him no. I don’t want no part a that shit! I run myself.”

“No problemo, Mexicano,” Justin said mockingly, tossing Lance to the ground like a ragdoll. “’Cept Mr. R., he don’t like guys who know too much ’bout his business. Especially guys who *won’t* work fer him.”

Lance landed and rolled, leaping to his feet almost at once. Survival on these streets required the agility of a stuntman. He’d learned that early on. His heart thumped wildly, his green eyes blazing with equal parts fury and fear. “I don’t know nuthin’,” he spat angrily, visibly shaking with panic, “’cept you jerks slang that shit for ’im! Who would I tell? What could I say anyway?”

Dwayne whipped out and flipped open an evil-looking switchblade and pressed the razor-sharp point to Lance’s throat before the boy could even flinch. He chuckled.

“Ya could just say no—to life, ya little shit!” He began slowly pressing the knife into Lance’s throat, a wicked smile creasing his dark, tatted face.

A deep, harsh voice echoed from behind the three boys. “Unhand that lad, or forfeit thy lives!”

Dwayne whirled to look over his shoulder while Justin whipped his head around, mouth hanging open in startled surprise. Lance’s eyes bulged with incredulity.

In the shadows, slowly, but confidently approaching, was a man on horseback! The three youths merely gaped in astonishment. None of them had ever even seen a real horse before, much less one in this neighborhood. When the rider emerged from the darkness into a patch of streetlight, they gasped anew. He wore a full suit of knightly armor and carried a massive, gleaming sword that looked capable of slicing all three of them in half at the same time! The boys could not make out any facial features, as they were covered by a helm and mouthpiece.

The three stood frozen to the spot, Dwayne’s blade pressed against Lance’s throat as the knight halted his horse a few feet away.

Dwayne found his voice first. “Say what?” He couldn’t believe what he was seeing! He needed to stop sampling R’s stuff, that was *for sure*.

“I do believe my intent be clear,” calmly stated the knight in a strong voice tinged with something like a Southern accent. “Unhand the boy or forfeit thy lives.”

He swirled the massive sword up and around so fast it caught all three boys unawares, its point coming to rest squarely on Dwayne’s chest. The big youth could already feel the point pricking him. But Dwayne was no stranger to street fighting, and he hated being told what to do.

“Fuck you, asshole!” Dwayne screamed in fury, pulled the knife from Lance, and pointed it at the knight.

With speed seemingly impossible underneath all that armor, the knight flicked his sword downward and across, and Dwayne’s pants dropped to his feet.

Startled, the boy reached down to retrieve them, and the knight swung the sword again, this time slicing open the hand holding the knife, causing Dwayne to cry out in pain and fling the blade to the ground.

“Shit!” Dwayne exclaimed in furious surprise.

Without pause, the knight just as swiftly swung the sword deftly back up, letting the point rest against Justin’s throat. The muscular boy whimpered in terror.

“Okay, you win,” he muttered fearfully, the point of the sword already drawing blood. He quickly stepped away from Lance. The smaller boy leapt hurriedly away from Dwayne, who fought a losing battle with his falling pants while also failing to staunch the bleeding in his hand.

The mysterious knight looked down at Lance, who stood gaping up at him. “Shalt I kill these two for thee, lad?”

Lance sucked in a sharp breath. He didn’t know what to say. He must be going crazy, he thought, still speechless.

Justin began keening with fear. This wasn’t the way tonight was supposed to go. Track the little shit and kill him. Those were R’s orders. Nothing about some crazy-ass dude on a horse! “Hey, man, ya’ll can’t kill us cuz my dad’s a cop!”

Dwayne also shook with fear, but he was too hard-ass to show it front of Lance or this nut with the sword. “Shut up, fool!”

The knight ignored them, focusing his attention on Lance, who still gawked like a fish out of water. “Well, lad?”

Coming back to his senses, Lance realized that the man wanted an answer. *Shit, would he really kill these guys if I asked him to*, he thought? He didn’t think he wanted to find out. “Let ’em go.”

Without pause, the knight pulled his gleaming sword back from Justin’s throat but still gripped it firmly, ready to strike. He gazed down at the two black youths, who cowered before him. “Methinks we shalt meet again.”

Always the bolder of the two, Dwayne spat viciously on the ground in front of the horse, causing it to neigh in annoyance. “Like hell!”

Then he and Justin turned and bolted, Dwayne struggling to keep his pants from tripping him up. They quickly vanished from the mouth of the alley, swallowed by the night.

Lance gazed upward at the knight, still speechless, staring at the horse, the sword, and the armor. His breath caught in his throat. He didn’t do drugs, so it couldn’t be that. So what the hell was going on?

The knight sheathed his sword as he stared down at the boy, his eyes shimmering slightly within the helm. “Hast thou no manners, to not thank me for thy life?”

That helm and those hidden eyes creeped Lance out something fierce. He always wanted to see into the other guy’s eyes. That’s how you knew what was really up. “Oh yeah, sorry,” he stammered, his voice unsteady. “Yeah, uh,

thanks.” He paused a moment. “Would you, would you really have killed them guys for me?”

The knight shook his helm from side to side, causing the metal to creak and squeak. “No. Not unless my life or thine be at stake. I wished merely to discern something of thy character.”

“Huh? You talk weird, mister.”

The knight ignored Lance’s comment. “What beeth thy name, lad?”

Lance’s hackles instantly rose. On these streets you didn’t trust no one. “Uh, they call me, well, ‘Pretty Boy’. I don’t think I am, neither, but I guess it’s the hair.”

The knight nodded, his armor creaking as he gazed down at the boy, who stood beneath a sickly alley light attached to the wall above him. “Thou art a handsome youth, so the name appears to fit thee. Why doth thou dislike it?”

“Cuz they don’t mean it like a compliment,” Lance replied, still awed by the horse and the armor and that amazing sword. “They just do it to mock me.”

The knight nodded again. “If it displeases thee, I shalt not use it. Hast thou no Christian name?”

Lance didn’t normally share his true name with anyone. On these streets, knowing one’s true name could be dangerous. Yet somehow, this man’s commanding tone and presence rattled his usual composure and forced his guard down. “Huh? Oh, uh, Lance. Lance Sepulveda.” It was practically a whisper. Then he felt his old boldness return. “What’s it to you, anyways?”

The knight reacted with surprise. “Thy name doth be Lance?”

The boy grew more suspicious. “Yeah, so?”

He squinted through the helm, studying the boy’s shadowed face. He could not discern eye color, but the hair looked right.

“Of course that beeth thy name, lad,” he murmured, almost to himself, almost as if the boy wasn’t even there. “All is as it should be.”

Lance just stood warily gazing up at him, a shiver flitting up and down his spine at those mysterious words, as though everything really *was* as it should be. But that didn’t make sense. *None* of this made sense.

The man noted Lance’s scattered clothes on the ground and pointed one gauntleted finger. “Tell me, young Lance, are these all your worldly belongings?” There was deep sadness in that voice, a sadness Lance was too nervous to notice.

His initial surprise and concern about the knight having run its course, Lance bristled at the man’s comment. “What about it? I move around a lot.” He set about picking up his stuff and shoving everything into the torn backpack.

The knight sat atop his horse and observed the boy carefully. “I see.”

Lance retrieved his skateboard and stood staring up at the knight, uncertain what to do next. His breathing had calmed, his heart subsiding, and he found himself deeply curious about this guy, even though curiosity on these streets often got you killed.

“Hast thou a place to lay thy head this night?” the knight inquired in a very nonthreatening tone.

Lance went rigid, his breath hitching in his throat, his heart pounding anew. He knew about grown men and what some of them liked to do to boys like him. He knew all too well. He stepped back, fighting for control.

“I always got places,” he announced firmly, his heart still racing, preparing to leap onto his board and jet out of there in a split second.

The knight made no threatening gestures, nor did the magnificent white horse even shuffle its feet with impatience. His body tight with tension, Lance still eyed the animal admiringly. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“Come with me,” the knight offered. “I doth have a bed for thee.”

Lance leapt back warily, eyeing the stranger with suspicion, and whipped a knife out of his pocket. It was small and wouldn’t do much damage, but even that short blade gave him a tiny sense of security. Sweat broke out on his face as he gazed upward and gulped. “You queer or somethin’?”

The knight merely shook his head. “How odd that after so many centuries, some words doth still retain their more common meanings.”

Lance knew he was a smart kid—teachers had told him that since the first grade. But he didn’t have a clue what this guy was talking about. What kind of English was he speaking, anyways?

“Huh?” was all he could muster in reply, his heart still thrumming with fear.

“Be at peace, young one,” the knight assured him. “The answer to thy question be nay.”

Lance continued to eye him with great uncertainty. “Nay” sounded like “no,” and that made him feel more at ease, slowing his heart a bit. “You got food at yer place?”

The knight nodded, his helm creaking and squeaking some more. “Yes, lad, all thou couldst possibly eat. Now, if you get up on mine horse, we shalt be away.”

Lance’s extreme hunger did the deciding for him. Sure, he had the junk food in his pack, but real food was always better. “Okay. But if you try anything I’ll cut yer throat.”

“Agreed. Up with you now. We have a long journey ahead.”

The knight reached down with a gauntleted hand. Lance eyed it cautiously for a moment then put away his pocketknife and reached up to do something he hadn’t done since he was six years old—he grasped the hand of a stranger.

With superior strength and ease, the knight easily hefted the boy up and onto the saddle behind him as though Lance weighed no more than a stuffed animal. He was caught off guard by the man’s physical power and shook his head in admiration.

“Man, you’re strong!”

The knight glanced back over his shoulder at the wide-eyed boy behind him. "As will you be, Lance Sepulveda."

The knight spurred his horse, and the large animal cantered softly and quietly down the alley, rounding the corner and disappearing into the dark streets of Lennox.



THE knight, with Lance clinging tightly to his back, stopped at the edge of the Los Angeles River, and the two of them gazed down into the dry, concrete riverbed. The river was really more of an aqueduct and, depending on rainfall totals, seldom had much water coursing through it. The horse neighed approvingly.

"You weren't shittin' me about a long journey!" Lance exclaimed, sitting up to get a better view.

"Hold on tightly," the knight intoned as he flicked the reins, and the muscular white mare began her descent to the riverbed below. Lance felt nervous and afraid atop such a large animal, but somehow the presence of this strong, confident man eased his fear.

"Does, uh, does your horse have a name?" he asked, trying to quell the nervousness in his voice. This descent was steep, and he wanted nothing more than to plant his feet firmly on cement. He was a street kid, after all.

"She hath been given the name Llamrei, after my first mount of long ago," the knight replied, his tone wistful, filled with longing.

Something about his melancholy tone silenced Lance. The mare reached bottom without even the slightest misstep and began trotting along the riverbed, halting at an enormous entrance to the storm drain system, which wound underground throughout the Los Angeles basin. This cavernous maw looked large enough to drive a van through without hitting the top.

A huge metal grill guarded the entrance to the drain, but Lance noted that the aged lock had recently been broken. The knight reached out and grabbed one side of the grill, backing his horse to slowly ease it open. The metal screamed with disuse, and the sound sent chills down Lance's back. The dark, gaping orifice threatened to envelope him, and his stomach pulled up into his throat.

"We, uh, we're goin' in there?" He fought to keep his quivering voice steady.

The knight turned as best he could to the boy behind him. "Have no fear, young Lance."

Lance instantly bristled, his pride winning out. "I ain't afraid! It just don't look like no home ta me."

The knight merely nodded. "It doth be mine at present." He gently spurred Llamrei forward into the dark, forbidding tunnel, pulling shut the grill as they entered, and sealing them within.

Lance watched warily as the knight extended a gloved hand outward, grasping an old, weathered torch from a small alcove. With his other gloved hand, he dug into a leather pouch hanging from the saddle and extracted a pinch of some kind of powder, sprinkling it atop the torch. Flames sprang instantly to life, causing Lance to gasp with surprise as its flickering glow cast weird shadows and reflections off the man's armor. He gazed in wonder. *That looked like something out of a movie! Who was this guy anyway?*

The knight noted the boy's wary look and smiled to put him at ease, forgetting for the moment that his helm obscured his features. "A mere trick, my boy, taught to me long ago by M—by an old friend."

He turned forward again and spurred his horse into the darkness of the tunnel. The man's quick change of subject was not lost on Lance. What had he been planning to say? All his street instincts told him to leap down from the horse and hightail it out of there and never look back. None of this made any sense, not here, not in his city, not in his sorry life. And yet he didn't jump. He didn't run. There was something about the guy.... Growing up as he had, Lance had a good gut when it came to people. No, this guy wasn't out to hurt him or kill him or....

No, don't even go there!

No, he decided as they trotted along the dark, dank underbelly of the city, this guy would not hurt him. But if he didn't want to hurt him, then what the hell *did* he want?

The two remained silent as Llamrei trotted fearlessly along the damp and drafty storm drain. There were no sounds save the clop, clop, clopping of her hooves against the lichen-covered concrete. It surprised Lance that the horse seemed so comfortable underground. He always thought most animals, himself included, preferred above ground to below. She must be used to it, he surmised, which meant the guy was telling the truth. He really *did* live here.

Suddenly, Llamrei stopped. Lance had been so lost in his musings that he hadn't realized they'd left the tunnel to enter an enormous chamber.

"We doth be here," the knight announced, drawing Lance back into reality. As the man deftly dismounted, Lance's eyes bulged wide with wonder at his surroundings.

The immensity of the underground chamber awed him. It appeared to be some sort of central hub from which a multitude of tunnels branched off, disappearing into darkness. Lit solely by the light of numerous torches imbedded within the concrete walls, Lance gazed in amazement at what appeared to be the central hall of an old castle, the kind he'd only ever seen in books. What the hell? There wasn't such things in LA!

He observed bedrolls lining the walls and disappearing down each branching tunnel, furniture like old tables and chairs, but all wooden and rough-

hewn and not like any modern stuff he'd ever seen. There was even a big-ass throne of some kind with huge arms and a really high back set against one wall, like right out of a frickin' old movie! What the...? And then his eyes fell upon the weapons, and his face lit up with wonder. Spread out before him were racks upon wooden racks of weapons—swords of all shapes and sizes, shields, short-handled dirks, knives, longbows and short bows, and arrows and quivers.

Carefully, eyes pinned to the armory before him, he dropped slowly off the horse, allowing his skateboard and backpack to fall to the ground unnoticed. Heart beating wildly with excitement, he stepped forward into this wonderland, gaping in astonishment at the sight before him. He slipped the hood down, allowing his long brown hair its freedom. He just shook his head in awe.

“Wow!” was all he could think to say, hurrying to the nearest of the weapons racks and gingerly touching some of the swords. He gripped the leather-bound hilt of a large broadsword and struggled vainly to heft it over his head. The blade alone was almost five feet in length.

The knight turned to observe Lance grappling with the weight of the sword and smiled as he recalled his own first attempt ages ago. He couldst almost believe that time so long ago had been merely a dream, or that perhaps *this* time beeth the dream. Yet he knew the truth—he'd known it the moment he'd awakened in this foreign land—*both* time periods were real, and once again he had a crusade to mount, one greater and more significant than his first. And this small, longhaired boy battling the weight of a sword nearly as large as himself... well, *this* boy was the key.

“Each doth be forged of solid iron, lad, and honed to a fine edge. One day soon, thou shalt be hefting the largest of them with ease.”

Lance fought the broadsword back into its place on the rack, watching curiously as the knight removed his gauntlets and laid them on an ancient-looking table. He then slipped the helm and face guard up over his head, revealing his face for the first time. His appearance surprised Lance, for he was a young man, probably not even thirty, with long brown hair cascading past his shoulders and a small, well-trimmed beard and moustache. Lance gazed at him openmouthed, his hand still on the hilt of the sword.

“You be younger than I thought. How old are you, anyways?”

The knight smiled, a pleasant, reassuring sort of smile. “Much older than I look, I'm afraid.”

Lance spread his arms wide at the myriad weapons with an enormous grin breaching his normally stoic young face. “This place is bitchin', man! What's all this stuff for?”

“A crusade, young Lance. Wouldst thou learn the use of these weapons?”

Lance's face lit up as he grabbed for a smaller sword and cut the air with it.

“Hell yeah, but—” His smile dropped, his face clouding with suspicion. “Why me?”

“Methinks, young Lance, that thou doth require nourishment. There be much we must speak of this night if thou art to understand.”

Lance grabbed one of the knives and held it in front of him for protection, sword in one hand, knife in the other. “Why *me*?” he repeated, hoping the hardness of his tone effectively masked the relentless pounding of his heart.

The young man sighed heavily. “’Twere not by chance thou and I met this night, my boy, but by design.”

“Huh? You gotta start speakin’ real English or Spanish or something cuz I don’t know what yer saying!”

“It was decreed that thou and I should meet this night, for I didst see thee in a vision, young Lance, a vision for the future.”

Lance lowered the weapons, but kept them at the ready. “Who the hell are you anyways?”

The young man unsheathed his own large, gleaming sword, gazed regally down at the boy, gripped the ornately jeweled hilt, and raised the sword aloft.

“I am Arthur, once and future King of Great Britain, and this be Excalibur. Yours is a time and place of immense need, and thus, as ’twas foretold centuries past, have I returned to right the wrongs that plague thy homeland. Amidst the squalor and barbarism of this city, I shalt rebuild my Round Table and change the course of history. And thee, young Lance, shalt be my First Knight. Art thou game?”

Lance’s lower jaw dropped open, and his wide green eyes bulged with amazement. For the first time in his life he understood the meaning of the word “dumbstruck.”

“Huh?” was all he could muster.

Arthur merely grinned in response.



MARK TWAIN High School, usually just called MTS for short, or what was currently left of it, sat on the corner of Birch Ave and Tercero Blvd in the city of Hawthorne. It was a neighborhood high school, serving kids from Lennox and Hawthorne and occasionally neighboring Lawndale.

The school, at present, was undergoing major reconstruction and had thus become even more chaotic than usual. The entire Tercero side was inaccessible due to new office building construction, so everyone had to enter and exit the campus from Birch Ave. The school had always been unorganized, but the construction crews with their daily chorus of hammering and sawing and pounding and ripping added a whole new level to the usual unruly atmosphere of the place.

Students, mostly Latino, pushed and hustled and flirted and texted their way between classes, darting in and around and under yellow caution tape strung

about the place like a senior prank gone viral. Lance zipped in and out of the crowd and stopped briefly at the side of sixteen-year-old Enrique. He paused long enough to whisper something in the other boy's ear before Enrique nodded in understanding and moved off. Lance ducked beneath the caution tape to bob up alongside fifteen-year-old Luis and hurriedly followed him around Building Eleven toward the parking lot by the pool.

Jenny McMullen, blonde and attractive, intelligent, but not brilliant, in her late-twenties, had been teaching English at MTS for seven years now, ever since she'd gotten her credential from Cal State Dominguez Hills. She'd been a literature undergrad and had always wanted to teach English since she'd been in high school herself. But the difference, she'd discovered, between the private school she'd attended and the public school where she now worked, was literally night and day. None of her credentialing classes had prepared her for the level of apathy she'd encountered amongst the students, or the level of disorganization from the school board on down.

It seemed like every decision was made in a vacuum, without thought or recourse as to how those decisions would affect the kids. She knew too well the overreaching power of the unions, both certificated and classified, and had come to recognize that the needs of the students were not foremost in either of their agendas. Still, weren't they all here to educate the kids, to bring them to a better place than where they'd found them? Even this construction was an enigma. They managed to get money for rebuilding the entire school, but there wasn't any to reduce class size or buy newer computers or new software or books or supplies or even athletic uniforms. The kids had to raise their own money to pay for a uniform, for crying out loud!

Ever since she'd begun teaching at MTS, all Jenny ever heard from the top was how they had to shove every kid into college. But she knew full well—because she actually talked with the kids—that many of them didn't *want* to go to college. They wanted a good trade, a good skill so they could raise a family, but most didn't want or need a standard bachelor's degree. And yet that seemed to be their only choice here. Electives were few and far between and even some of those were half-assed anyway. Jenny had been teaching for seven years, and yet the system was already burning her out.

Her freshman English class, as all of her classes, bulged at the seams with forty-two rambunctious, often ill-mannered and completely uninterested ninth graders. Knowing the neighborhood kids fairly well by now—reading was disdained, but they liked photos and visuals a lot—Jenny had adorned her classroom with pictures of famous writers and poets, like Shakespeare and Byron. She'd posted school and classroom rules, not that it did much good. Teachers at this school were left pretty much to their own devices when it came to discipline. There was a dean, but unless a kid committed murder on camera, suspensions were kept to a minimum. *Wouldn't want to lose that ADA money, would we?*

Jenny also loved movies, and knew the kids liked them too, so she'd displayed numerous posters of popular films, mostly recent ones the kids would know. On display were several movie posters depicting King Arthur, most too old for her students to have ever seen except maybe on television. Jenny loved Arthurian legends and stories and attempted to incorporate them whenever possible—not much these days with the rigid curriculum and fixation on the state standardized testing. She'd also put up pictures of castles and a large map of medieval Britain.

At the moment, she had her back to the class as she quickly wrote page numbers on the whiteboard. As she turned back to the class, she observed Lance Sepulveda whispering to another boy seated beside him. *Ah, Lance*, she sighed inwardly. Probably the smartest kid in the class, when he chose to show up, that is.

“Ahem. Lance, something you'd like to share with the rest of us?” she asked with a raise of her well-groomed eyebrows.

Lance looked at her, a bit startled, but immediately regained his aplomb. He smiled sweetly. “No, Ms. McMullen.”

He suddenly noticed two cute girls sitting a few rows over giggling and smiling his way. He blushed and quickly looked down at his graffitied desk in red-faced embarrassment.

The bell screeched and signaled a mad scramble for the door. Jenny quickly shouted, “Leave your papers on my desk!”

The two girls sighed and brushed up against Lance on their way out. He refused to look up until they were gone.

Pushing and shoving their way loudly toward the door, the students tossed their papers haphazardly atop Jenny's desk as they whizzed on past.

“Neatly!” Jenny added, knowing it was fruitless. Within seconds, the room had emptied, and the papers were a shambles. Lance hung back, skateboard in hand, as always, and paused to straighten the pile, much to her amazement.

“Thank you, Lance,” she said, gratefully. “It's nice to see you in school today.”

She'd taken a liking to the boy immediately, with his sharp wit and keen intellect. And what a beautiful boy, she'd often thought. His hair was silkier than hers! And those green eyes were striking. She'd seen many a girl this year trying to get close to him, but he seemed to shy away from all the kids. She'd occasionally see him during lunch chatting with one of the other skaters, but more often than not he'd be sitting by himself staring off into space. She didn't know what was troubling him, but she liked him enough to want to find out. However, his attendance was spotty, and he so seldom spoke up in class that it was hard to get to know him. She'd tried calling home, but could never seem to get hold of a parent or guardian at any of the numbers in the school's computer database.

“Ms. McMullen, do you know anything about King Arthur?” Those green eyes were open and expectant.

Jenny's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and she smiled wryly. "Look around you, Lance, then take a guess."

Lance looked around at the posters and photos of castles as though seeing them for the first time. In fact, he never *had* paid much attention. But he'd always had a good feeling about the pretty young maestra and felt she might be the only one around here he could trust. To a point, anyway.

Jenny pushed a strand of light-blond hair back from her face. "If you showed up to class more often, you'd know that Arthurian stories are among my favorites."

Lance heard her, but her sarcasm didn't even register. His gaze remained riveted to one of the King Arthur movie posters, transfixed by the artist's rendering of Arthur. Pushing his flowing hair back away from his eyes, he shook his head.

"He don't look like that."

That caught Jenny off guard. "Who?"

Lance sighed heavily. "No one. Is he real, King Arthur?" He couldn't take his eyes off that poster.

"He was, yes," Jenny replied evenly, slipping into her "teacher" voice. "But where facts end and legend begins no one really knows."

Lance pulled his gaze from the poster and looked the pretty young woman in the eye. He was easily as tall as she. "Did he ever die?"

Jenny was truly mystified. Why the sudden fascination with King Arthur? And those eyes looked so intense, so uncertain. "Well," she went on, "he was supposedly wounded at the Battle of Salisbury Plain, and then taken to a mystical place called Avalon. There he was to wait out the years, to return one day when Britain needed him most."

Lance looked at her in confusion. "What's 'Britain'?"

Jenny pointed to her map of Britain. "England, Lance. You know, the country?"

Lance shook his head in confusion. None of this added up. "But this ain't England."

Jenny laughed nervously. The boy wasn't just asking random questions. She knew his style well enough. Something was going on. "Now I'm totally lost. What are we talking about here?"

Lance stopped then, realizing he'd probably said too much already. "Nothing. Just something I saw on TV. Gotta go, Ms. McMullen."

He glanced one final time at the King Arthur poster, then turned and hurried to the door, as Jenny's fourth period students pushed past him aggressively. One burly boy leered and sneered, "Oh look, Pretty Boy's back!"

"Eat shit and die," Lance muttered as he shoved his way out the door, leaving Jenny gazing after him in consternation. *These kids!*



LANCE had not only agreed to Arthur's plan, but had also accepted the job of teacher to this strange man who seemed to know little or nothing about twenty-first century Los Angeles. *Hell, he'd never even seen a cell phone!* The whole plan sounded nutty, yeah, but there was something so unusual about Arthur, something so rare that Lance felt, against all his street-born instincts, compelled to trust him. Arthur was genuinely *sincere*. And that was a quality Lance had never known in anyone, except maybe Ms. McMullen. Could they actually accomplish what Arthur had proposed? Lance wanted to believe they could, and in believing, finally become someone important in this sorry world. Someone worthy. Right now, he was nothing, and nothing was all he'd ever been.

He told his skater friend's mom he had somewhere else to stay, and moved underground with Arthur. He had a decent bedroll to sleep on and plenty of empty tunnels to sleep in. Arthur never got too close, though Lance remained wary, nonetheless. His instincts told him Arthur was not to be feared, and yet caution always won out, and he remained ever on the alert.

Arthur didn't have money, but he did have jewels and gold and other fancy stuff he'd called "the crown jewels," so over the next few days Lance had shown him places where he could sell this stuff. Lance had a cell phone his skater friend gave him to use, and he'd tried to teach Arthur about using the Internet to sell things, but the man was mystified by the technology, so that option was out. Besides, the guy didn't even know what a credit card was!

In any case, they seemed to be making enough money through jewelers and pawnshops to get by, and that's all Lance had ever done anyway. There was enough money to buy food for the two of them, and after a few nights Lance had gotten accustomed to living underground with the rats and the dank smells and the drip, drip, drip of water. Hell, he'd lived worse than this before. He *did* manage to convince Arthur to buy battery-powered lanterns to use within the storm drains instead of the nasty-smelling torches that stung his nose and burned his eyes, and the king readily agreed.

They also purchased a first aid kit, nonperishable food, and a waterless toilet for use within the tunnels, even though Lance was accustomed to just using the bathrooms at school or at the skate park. But he figured the toilet would be handy to have for emergencies. As for Llamrei, Lance told Arthur to *make sure* she "did her thing" outside or they'd never get the smell out of those tunnels. And those tunnels smelled bad enough already!

Arthur recounted stories of "the old days," which, if Lance believed him, happened hundreds of years ago. *Hundreds* of years? Lance knew the guy had to be making that part up, yet he loved the stories, nonetheless. Most importantly, Arthur taught him how to wield a sword, how to rapidly string a bow and fire the arrow before his intended target—usually a rat—even knew it was being stalked.

In a matter of days, Lance already felt his upper-body strength increasing, his quickness and agility improving, his hand-eye coordination vastly better.

He was usually sore as hell, but he still got up most days and hopped the Metro to school as Arthur had instructed. The word had to be spread, after all. His conversation with Ms. McMullen had confused him because her version of the story didn't seem to fit all the aspects of *this* Arthur. But rather than challenge the man, Lance did what he always did best—kept his eyes open, his guard up, and his taut young body ready for flight at a moment's notice.

After the first few days of training and gathering supplies, Arthur wished to see as much of Los Angeles as possible, to learn “the lay of the land,” as he'd put it. So each night the two of them toured various parts of the vastness of LA, with Lance acting as teacher and guide. Sometimes they rode Llamrei if the neighborhood was quiet enough and they could keep to the shadows. At other times, they rode the Metrolink train or hopped onto a city bus.

Arthur, at first, balked at riding these “astonishing inventions,” as he'd called them, preferring the safety of horseback or his own feet planted firmly on the ground. When Lance finally convinced him that the city was too vast to see by horseback or by walking, only then did Arthur gingerly agree. After his initial trepidation wore off, he delighted in the speed of the train and even the ease of using the bus system.

“Such inventions 'twere not even dreamed of in my time, Lance,” he remarked as the Metrolink train sped through the night. His eyes roamed everywhere, at the dark windows, the other passengers, the advertisements papering the interior walls of their train car. “Methinks even Merlin had not foreseen such marvels.”

Despite Lance's admonition that Arthur's medieval-style clothing would make them stick out “like sore thumbs,” Arthur insisted on standard attire for these excursions: heavy leather pants, knee-high leather boots, and a billowy long-sleeved tunic. He'd wanted to carry Excalibur with him at all times, but Lance assured him they'd be arrested for carrying a weapon before they got five blocks.

“Hell,” he told Arthur, “I could get busted for carrying my little-ass pocketknife on the street, even though I could get killed without it. This city sucks!”

Arthur frowned at Lance's use of language, not entirely understanding the boy's modern slang, but sensing just by the words and tone that his speech was not appropriate for a knight. *Ah well*, he thought, *the boy shalt learn*. And, in point of fact, Lance had been incorrect—almost no one even noticed Arthur's odd attire when they were out and about, except maybe some businessman-types aboard the Metrolink. This *was* Los Angeles, after all.

On one particular night, Arthur and Lance cantered through a bleak, ghetto area on Llamrei's back. The storm drain system allowed them easy entrance and egress to and from many of the more troubled neighborhoods in the city. Lance

had begun adopting a clothing style similar to Arthur's. The man seemed to possess an endless store of clothing of varying sizes, but all of a type worn in his own time, the time of knights and squires.

He'd told Lance he didn't exactly know how all these things, including the weapons, had ended up with him in this present time, but he knew *why* they had appeared, and that was what mattered. Lance wouldn't wear the leather boots. He lived and would probably die a skater and always wore his skating shoes, in part because he'd often bring his board and skate alongside Arthur when they were walking. But he'd taken a liking to the billowy tunics and baggy leather pants, and the leather overcoats kept him very warm at night.

They kept to the shadows and mostly just observed life for these disenfranchised peoples. Arthur shook his head in dismay at the sight of homeless people dumpster-diving for food or other needed items, at the run-down, graffiti-covered, dilapidated homes and apartment complexes, at the prison-like housing projects. Small children running unattended in the streets at night disturbed him.

Tonight, several children, dressed shabbily, most without even shoes, approached Llamrei with caution, but mostly with delight painted across their dirty faces. Arthur smiled down at the children and encouraged them to pet the mare.

"It's okay," Lance assured them. "She don't bite."

The children gathered round and happily petted the silky white coat. Llamrei whinnied with approval.

"What's his name, mister?" one little girl asked, giggling with delight at the horse's reaction to her touch.

"It doth be a 'she'," Arthur replied, "and her name doth be Llamrei."

"You talk funny," a small boy, probably no more than ten years old, stated flatly, causing the others to laugh and Arthur to smile.

"That I do, lad," Arthur agreed. Then he glanced back at Lance and nodded. Lance told the children about Arthur's crusade, outlining in basic terms what they hoped to accomplish. They listened in wide-eyed wonder, in the end agreeing to spread the word. It sounded like great fun, they all agreed.

"It doth be about more than fun, young ones," Arthur assured them. "It doth be about thy future and that of all the children in this city."

The children nodded solemnly, then skittered off into the darkness to spread the news. Arthur looked at Lance.

"Well done, my boy," he said reassuringly. "Thou hast a gift with children."

Lance blushed and looked down. "Oh, uh, thanks."

In silence, always alert for potential trouble, Arthur spurred Llamrei on into a different neighborhood that looked similar to the last, but peopled with African-Americans, rather than Latinos or Caucasians. Lance attempted to explain about the races and how some of them liked to be called.

“Art not all of these people we encounter ‘Americans?’” he asked as they trotted slowly down a dark and gloomy street.

“Yeah, I guess,” replied Lance. “They just—” He paused, uncertain how to continue. “They just want to separate themselves out, I guess, so, you know, every group gets to feel special. I don’t know how to explain it.”

Arthur glanced at the boy and smiled. “I doth believe thou just did explain it, Lance,” he said. “Alas, ’twould seem humanity hath not changed in all these centuries. When I didst first achieve the High Kingship of Britain by pulling Excalibur from the stone, the initial dilemma I faced was to unite the various warring groups. The Gaels didst hate the Galls who didst hate the Normans, and warfare ruled the land.”

“What did you do, Arthur?” Lance asked, finding himself really interested in the answer.

Arthur stopped Llamrei and turned to look at the boy. Lance’s eyes were wide with curiosity. “I didst do then what we shalt attempt to do now—I gave them all a purpose in life other than hating one another.” He smiled and turned around, spurring Llamrei on down the street.

Lance considered this response, having been given a vague blueprint of Arthur’s overall intent. He suddenly realized that the man had not yet told him how that intent was to be realized.

As though reading his mind, Arthur said, “All in good time, lad.”

Arthur paused his mount at a shadowy intersection, keeping her within the darkness of a nonfunctioning street light. They watched as women, obviously prostitutes, strutted seductively up and down the street in their short skirts and stiletto heels, signaling to passing cars their intentions.

Young men and teen boys lurked in the shadows here and there, waiting. Cars would pull up, and one of the young men would approach. Money was handed out the window in exchange for some kind of package. The cars quickly vanished into the night. After a couple of these exchanges, Arthur glanced at Lance quizzically.

“I’ll explain later,” Lance whispered. “Don’t want ’em to see us.”

Arthur nodded and then noticed a woman and a boy of about twelve meeting in front of a shabby, run-down single-story house with a dead front lawn and a battered shopping cart in the driveway. The boy handed his mother some change from his dirty pants pocket. The mother counted the money, frowned, and then slapped the boy hard across the face, almost knocking him to the ground.

“This is all you got, you little shit!” she hollered, loud enough for the drug dealers and prostitutes to take notice. “Get yer ass back out there and get me some real money or else no supper!” The young boy, hand to the cheek that was slapped, backed away from his mother and turned to run down the street. The prostitutes laughed and returned their attention to lighting each other’s cigarettes.

Before Arthur could react, the young boy had run straight in their direction. Lance touched Arthur's shoulder nervously. "Let's go," he whispered, "before he sees us."

But it was too late. The boy rushed into their shadowed hollow and stopped short upon seeing the horse and her riders. Afraid he would call out, Lance hurriedly said, "It's okay, kid. We won't hurt you."

The boy looked anxiously up at man and boy, both with long hair, both dressed strangely, and then fixed his eyes on the horse. Gazing up at Arthur, the boy saw him smile kindly, and broke into a wide grin. "Wow," he murmured, eyes huge with wonder, "I ain't never seen a horse before."

"Me, neither," assured Lance, to calm the boy. "Not before this one. Her name's Llamrei. I'm Lance, and this is Arthur. What's yer name, kid?"

"Lavern," the boy answered immediately, adding shyly, "Can I pet her?"

"Of course," replied Arthur. "Ye canst do more than pet her. Ye canst join our crusade."

Lavern turned his wide eyes from Arthur to Lance. "It's cool," Lance assured him. "Want to hear about it?"

Lavern ceased petting Llamrei's soft coat and nodded. So Lance told him. The boy soaked up every word and smiled broadly when Lance had finished.

After leaving Lavern, Arthur and Lance rode on in this same fashion for several more hours before returning to Arthur's "castle," as Lance had dubbed it, to sleep.

Lance chose not to go to school the next day so he could practice his swordplay and archery skills with Arthur. He enjoyed these times more than anything in his whole life. It wasn't just the strength and power he was gaining with his growing expertise; it was Arthur, himself. Lance had never met anyone like him.

Of course, if Arthur's story about being from another time was true, there really *hadn't* ever been anyone like him before. But it was more than that. He felt relaxed around Arthur, more than he'd ever felt around any grownup. Arthur was just... well... real.

After resting that afternoon, he decided to show Arthur the pantheon of glitz, glamour, and sleaze in Los Angeles—Hollywood Boulevard. They set out that night in similar tunics and leather pants, and both sported a leather strap tied around the head to keep their hair in place. To the casual passerby, they likely appeared as father and son, despite Lance's skin being of a browner shade than Arthur's.

Hollywood Boulevard, as always, teemed with nightlife, and it wasn't even a weekend. Arthur walked alongside Lance, who rode his skateboard, and they navigated their way along the sidewalk against the press of bodies streaming in both directions, while the king's eyes shifted rapidly from the endless sidewalk stars celebrating some celebrity, to the seething faces bobbing in and out of his field of vision from all sides.

Whenever they came to a fire hydrant or other obstacle, Lance deftly oiled over it, much to Arthur's enjoyment. He found much less enjoyment in the odd mix of people they passed on the street, from punkers and heavy metal rockers, to a large number of tattooed and facially pierced teens and younger kids hustling and bustling, likely homeless or runaways. But despite all these people slithering about, no one even glanced at their odd attire.

"See," Lance said, rolling up to Arthur and deftly flipping his board up and into his hand with ease, "I knew no one'd pay any attention to us here."

Arthur, nodded, appalled and fascinated at the same time. He gazed open-mouthed at the steady stream of honking cars, the eclectic variety of people, the flashing traffic lights, and blasting music from passing cars or open storefronts. He could never in his wildest nightmares have conjured such a world!

The astounding progress of man on the one hand, and the astonishing degradation of human life on the other confounded him. How, he wondered, could humanity have come so far in its inventiveness, and yet place so little value on the human soul, on the human being in general? "Things" seemed in this world to be of much greater value than people.

Suddenly, he stopped and pointed across the street. "What doth they be doing? It be similar to last night, and ye promised to explain."

Lance turned in the indicated direction. He saw a drug dealer selling a bag of something to a skinny blond boy with long, shaggy hair, who looked to be around fifteen, wearing dirty jeans and a wifebeater.

"He's a pusher, man, same as those guys we saw last night."

"A 'pusher'?" Arthur repeated questioningly.

"Yeah, ya know, dope?" When Arthur gazed blankly at him, Lance tried again. "Drugs, man. Ya know, they mess up yer head, make ya act crazy and shit. Meth is hot these days. Always weed. So's smack. It ain't fer me. Gotta keep my head clear for skating."

Arthur stared at Lance in horror. "Why hath no one stopped this?"

Lance merely shrugged. "How? It's everywhere, man."

Arthur turned and observed the dealer melt into the shadows of an alley as the shaggy-haired blond pocketed his purchase and sauntered off down the street, disappearing into the crowd. He shook his head in dismay, realizing anew the enormity of the task before him. How had humanity come to such a state?

They continued walking until Arthur stopped at an electronics shop with several flat-screen TVs on display in the window. The TVs were running different movies and stations. Arthur's lower jaw dropped open at the images. *What manner of sorcery is this?* he thought. *Merlin, my old friend, if thou couldst only see the marvels of this world! Thine own magic shouldst seem quaint by comparison!*

Unable to pull his gaze away, he noted that one screen displayed a young couple preparing to have sex, while another showed a violent program with fighting and shooting, and the third presented some teens having fun smoking pot.

Finally finding his voice, Arthur asked, "What be these images, Lance?"

Lance finished a flip on his board and stepped to the window beside Arthur.

"Oh, that's just TV," Lance said matter-of-factly. "It's mostly for kids, to keep us busy. It's cool, I guess. Me, I'd rather skate, you know?"

Arthur looked askance at Lance and indicated the TV sets, his brow furrowed with dismay. "These images doth be for thine entertainment? For the entertainment of youth?"

Lance shrugged. "Yeah, so?" He looked at Arthur in confusion.

Arthur frowned and spoke his thoughts. "And if thou or other children do these things the images doth be doing, art thou punished by thine elders or the authorities?"

Lance considered a moment, and then realized what Arthur was saying. His mouth dropped open in surprise. "Yeah, we are," he said, shaking his head. "I never thought about it like that before. They either punish us or put us in jail."

Now it was his turn to look thoughtful as they moved away from the window and continued up the boulevard toward the Chinese Theatre. But now, as they walked, Lance began to see the world around him, *his* world, through Arthur's very-foreign eyes, and suddenly it didn't look so great anymore, all that street life and freedom he'd embraced for so long. Now, suddenly, it all looked pretty sad and sorry and... empty.



THEY ended up at Eucalyptus Park in Hawthorne later that night because Lance wanted to show Arthur some of his skating moves. Even though the skate park was closed, Lance knew how to sneak in, as did all the neighborhood kids. It was well after midnight, and the area was deserted. It was a small skate park, no really big or daring ramps, but it was good enough to hone his skills on, and Lance had used it often.

He regaled the delighted Arthur with a series of flips and spins and ollies, ups and downs on the various ramps, high-flying stunts, heel flips, calf wraps, space walks—Lance's repertoire seemed endless. He always landed clean, always completed his moves with ease. Arthur found himself clapping with joy, much as he had as a child when Merlin used to do magic for him.

Finally tired and sweaty, Lance skated over to Arthur and plopped down beside him. "What'd ya think?" he asked, breathless, pushing matted hair off his face.

Arthur grinned at him. "I think ye be a marvel, young Lance. In my day we had jousts and swordplay and feats of strength, but nothing to equal the grandeur of thy movements. Ye soared like a majestic hawk."

Lance beamed with pride and flushed with embarrassment. “Thanks, Arthur. Nobody believes me, but I’m gonna be in the X Games one day. And I’m gonna win.”

Arthur grinned again. “I’ve no doubt, my boy.”

Lance smiled again, his eyes wide with gratitude.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Lance, what doth be ‘The X Games’?”

Lance threw back his head and laughed. He hadn’t laughed in so long it almost hurt his stomach. “I forgot you come from back in the day. *Way* back! Dude, the X Games is only the biggest skate competition in the world. They got ramps ninety-six feet straight down! And I’m gonna get me a gold medal.”

Arthur nodded with a smile, thanking God, and no doubt Merlin, for leading him to such an amazing boy. *Lance is the perfect First Knight*, he thought to himself as he reached out and clapped the boy on the shoulder.

Lance’s smile suddenly vanished, and he leapt to his feet. “What you doing, man?”

Caught off guard, Arthur looked up at him in bewilderment. “I didst merely intend to congratulate thee on thine achievements.”

Lance backed away and gripped his board in a defensive posture, as though he might use it as a weapon. His breaths came in short gasps, almost hyperventilating.

“Lance, what doth be troubling thee?”

Lance forced calm into his voice, forced air into his lungs.

Breathe, Lance, breathe... it’s okay... it’s okay...

“Sorry, Arthur,” he weakly muttered, his stomach churning, his nerves fraying. “I just... I just don’t like no one touching me. Okay?”

Arthur nodded, not moving nor doing anything to further rattle the boy. “Okay,” he said.

Lance looked at Arthur, uncertainty dancing across those poignant green eyes. “Are you mad at me?”

Arthur shook his head but remained unmoving. “Of course not. Thou hast been a blessing to me. I doth be eternally grateful for thy help and thy presence.”

Lance smiled again, his racing heart drawing down, his breathing returning to normal. “I’m sorry. It’s just...”

Arthur held up a hand to silence the boy. “There doth be no explanation required, my boy.”

Lance blushed, glad of the darkness to obscure it, and glanced down at his prized skating shoes. “Thanks, Arthur.”

He dropped the board to his side as Arthur stood, and they walked quietly for a time further into the park proper. They approached a well-worn swing set and rusted-out jungle gym, Arthur sadly noting the graffiti scrawled all over the benches and play area.

Lance halted near the rusty swings. “This be one of my favorite places, Arthur, not just cuz of the skate park, neither.”

Arthur stopped beside him, cautiously eyeing the boy for fear of frightening him again. “Why is that?”

“You won’t think me no girly-boy if I tell ya, will you?”

“I doth not know what a ‘girly-boy’ is.” He smiled to reassure Lance that no derision would be forthcoming.

Lance glanced at the man shyly. “Sometimes, late at night like now, when there ain’t nobody around, I like to do the swings, ya know?”

Arthur nodded. “Show me.”

Lance glanced furtively around again, then eagerly, almost like a small child, leapt onto the nearest swing and started it moving. Kicking off with his legs, he soon had the swing soaring like a bird, almost at a ninety-degree angle to the ground, his long hair flying back like a cape. The chains creaked and groaned ever more loudly with pain the higher Lance flew.

Arthur gaped at him in wide-eyed amazement, his own sense of childlike wonder coming to the fore.

“C’mon,” Lance called from way up high. “Try it. It’s awesome!”

Arthur hesitantly stepped to the swing next to Lance’s and sat down gingerly within the soft, curved seat. He attempted to move the swing, but scrunched his face in confusion when nothing much happened.

Wildly swinging, Lance laughed with delight at Arthur’s puzzlement. “Kick out wit’ yer feet, Arthur!” he called. “Push against the ground and kick up when you start moving.”

Arthur followed the boy’s instructions, and the swing began to move haltingly. After a few moments he got the hang of this simple, yet delightful, invention. Soon, a big smile breached his bearded face as they swung side by side, Arthur soaring nearly as high as his protégé.

Lance could not help but laugh with joy. “Great, huh?”

Arthur joined him in laughter. “It doth make me feel so free.”

Lance laughed even harder. Next to skating, this was his favorite thing to do. “I know!”

Filled with joy, the two friends swung back and forth for neither knew how long. Freedom had no time limit. They simply *were*, together, just being. And that was enough.

