

MICHAEL J. BOWLER

CHILDREN

OF THE

KNIGHT

THE LANCE CHRONICLES 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- [Chapter 1: All Is As It Should Be](#)
- [Chapter 2: Children Of God](#)
- [Chapter 3: That Is Who You Are](#)
- [Chapter 4: Might For Right](#)
- [Chapter 5: We're Brothers Now, Aren't We?](#)
- [Chapter 6: How Else Can They Learn?](#)
- [Chapter 7: Speak The Oath Squire](#)
- [Chapter 8: The Fruits Of Thy Handiwork](#)
- [Chapter 9: Now Suddenly I Am Somebody](#)
- [Chapter 10: Is That What We've Become?](#)
- [Chapter 11: How Can I Face Him?](#)
- [Chapter 12: That Boy Is Special](#)
- [Chapter 13: It Be Your Choice](#)
- [Chapter 14: Be It Over?](#)
- [An Excerpt From Running Through A Dark Place](#)
- [The Lance Chronicles](#)

PRAISE FOR
CHILDREN OF THE KNIGHT
(BOOK 1 OF THE LANCE CHRONICLES):

“In *Children of the Knight*, Michael Bowler has created a work that is neither light-hearted nor consistently easy to read. But it is important and interesting, and maybe even mandatory. It is also very human and real, while still being somehow fanciful—and engaging to all ages. Highly recommended.”

—Mia Kerick, Young Adult Author

“At its heart, *Children of the Knight* was a social commentary wrapped in a fictional fantasy. At its core, this novel was also a warning. A clear message that we cannot continue to write off the poor and disenfranchised, the street gangs, the youth who prostitute themselves, for they are the future of this world. There were times when this novel simply broke my heart.”

—Sammy on Goodreads

“Author Michael Bowler did an excellent job of twisting a real historical character in to a modern day twist. He brought to light an age old problem of child neglect in many forms and also the way we humans treat each other.”

—Naila Moon

“I will make this short and straightforward. *Children of the Knight* is one of the most spell-binding, heart-stopping, inspiring books I have ever had the great pleasure to read. From beginning to end, the plot is complex, the characters three dimensional, the writing powerful and elegant. Indeed, Michael J Bowler is a powerful writer with a gift unparalleled. I can’t praise it enough.”

—Huston Piner, author

“What some children go through, no one should have to. It was interesting to see the fantasy mixed up with the real. I liked that the legend was used as a positive.

I felt great sadness as I read. I did cry, but I liked the hope that was given and I felt attached to all of the characters. I want to read more now.”

—Blaze on Goodreads

“Each individuals story will wrench your heart and have you cheering. I literally was brought to tears twice and not just a single tear, but all out gushing and sniffing. The ending is heart rending and triumphant all at once. I won’t tell you more than that because I would ruin the story for you.”

—V.A. Dold

“The story’s greatest strength is in its depiction of exploited youth, brave children finding their place in a system that’s rejected them, in a world that too freely abuses and condemns, needing approval, and learning to stand up for what they finally believe in.”

—Sheila on Goodreads

MICHAEL J. BOWLER

CHILDREN

OF THE

KNIGHT

THE LANCE CHRONICLES 1

Published by Michael J. Bowler, USA stuntshark2.0@gmail.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Children of the Knight
(The Lance Chronicles 1)
Second Edition Copyright © 2018 by Michael J. Bowler

Cover Art and Interior Formatting by

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and for all other inquiries, contact Michael J. Bowler at stuntshark2.0@gmail.com.

Print: ISBN: 978-0-9908711-6-3

Mobi: ISBN: 978-0-9908711-7-0

epub: ISBN: 978-0-9908711-8-7

Second Edition
July 2018

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. They opened up to me about the horrors of their upbringing and the degradations life had perpetrated upon them, and yet 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. Most politicians bettered their own lives, not those of the people they were elected to serve. Neighborhoods declined to slum-like conditions. The Los Angeles school system stumbled headlong toward 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.



The gangs of Boyle Heights often 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 clashed often, especially on this street, a dividing line between their 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.

Nearly seventeen, Esteban was a strong, buffed-up teen with unkempt facial hair and a nearly bald head. He wore a torn tank top undershirt that revealed several 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.

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 was over, gazed solemnly back at his raging rival.

“You ain’t gonna touch me, fool,” he announced quietly before being forced into the backseat of a police car. The doors slammed 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 clean-up began.

Sergeant James Ryan 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.

Forty-year-old Robert Gibson was African American, tall and imposing, with broad shoulders and a well-groomed mustache.

Ryan surveyed the mop-up operation and shook his head in disgust. “Hell, Gib, our tagger’s been here too!”

“We’ve got to nail this guy, Ry, before 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 numerous 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 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 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 Ryan was the obvious lack of parents checking on the health and welfare of their kids.

Chewing absently on a pencil, he 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 vivacious ambition shone through. She 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 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.

Ryan put down his pencil and leaned forward. “Look, the only reason you’re up here, Esteban, is because you’re probably the only one of these punks who has a brain.”

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 and your homies would’ve 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 fool.”

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

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

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

Regaining control, the frustrated Gibson stood and 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 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?



A small, lean 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 orphan, warily glanced around. Between avoiding gang members and cops, he lived a very cautious life.

The gang members liked to beat him up and the cops put him in juvy as a runaway. There was no place in Los Angeles for kids like him who *didn’t* commit crimes, so they had to bide their time in juvy to wait for yet *another* group home to take them.

A smart, clever boy with unusually green eyes—which drew derisive comments from other Latinos—Lance preferred the freedom of the streets, living for a time with this friend or that friend, having no ties to anyone. He wore a pair of baggy overalls with the straps hanging down and a gray hoodie flipped up to obscure his face, clothes given to him by one of his friends. He lugged a bulging,

ratty-looking backpack in one hand and an old skateboard in the other.

Lance continued warily down the alley. Tonight there were no unusual sounds save the occasional plane practically landing atop Lennox on its approach into LAX.

From the shadows around him loomed two large black youths. Lance was grabbed and spun around. The skateboard flew from his grasp and clattered to the concrete.

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 long hair to tumble about his shoulders, and then snatched the old backpack away so hard it tore open with a loud ripping sound, scattering clothes, candy, and junk food onto the ground.

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

Lance fought down his fear and glared at both boys, ignoring his hated nickname, "Pretty Boy." 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 muscular boy. "Mr. R. says he had a talk with you about workin' these streets for him."

"Yeah, he did, and I told him no. I don't want no part a that! I run myself."

"No problemo, Mexicano," Justin sneered, 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 for him."

Lance landed and rolled, leaping to his feet almost at once. 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 crap for 'im! Who would I tell? What could I say anyway?"

Dwayne flipped open an evil-looking switchblade and pressed the razor-sharp point to Lance's throat before he could even flinch.

"You could just say no—to life, ya little runt!" 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 your lives!"

Dwayne whirled to look over his shoulder.

From the shadows, confidently approaching, rode 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 a *for sure*.

"I do believe my intent was clear," calmly stated the knight in a strong voice tinged with something like a Southern accent. "Unhand the boy or forfeit your lives."

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 curse and fling the blade to the ground.

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 tip of the sword already drawing blood. He stepped away from Lance.

The mysterious knight looked down at Lance. "Shall I kill these two for you, lad?"

Lance sucked in a sharp breath. He didn't know what to say.

Justin keened with fear. "Hey, man, ya'll can't kill us cuz my dad's a cop!"

Dwayne trembled, but he was too hard-ass to show it. "Shut up, fool!"

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

Coming back to his senses, Lance realized that the man wanted an answer. *Would he really kill these guys if I asked him to?* 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 older youths. "Methinks we shall 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.

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. "Have thou no manners, to not thank me for thy life?"

That helm and those hidden eyes crept Lance out something fierce. "Oh yeah, sorry," he stammered. "Yeah, uh, thanks." He paused a moment. "Would you, would you really have killed them guys for me?"

"No. Not unless my life or yours be at stake. I wished merely to discern something of your character."

"Huh? You talk weird, mister."

The knight ignored Lance's comment. "What be thy name, lad?"

Lance's hackles instantly rose. "Uh, they call me, well, 'Pretty Boy'. I don't think I am, neither, but I guess it's the hair."

"Thou art a handsome youth, so the name appears to fit thee. Why doth you dislike it?"

"Cause they don't mean it like a compliment," Lance replied sourly. "They just do it to mock me."

"If it displeases you, I shall not use it. Hast thou no Christian name?"

Lance never shared 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 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 be Lance?"

"Yeah, so?"

The knight squinted through the helm, studying Lance's shadowed face.

"Of course that be thy name, lad," he murmured, almost to himself, almost as if Lance wasn't even there. "All is as it should be."

Lance 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. "Tell me, young Lance, are these all your worldly belongings?" There was deep sadness in that voice.

Lance bristled. "What about it? I move around a lot." He set about picking up his stuff and shoving everything into the torn backpack.

"I see," the knight observed, his tone unreadable.

Lance retrieved his skateboard and stared at the knight, uncertain what to do next. His breathing had calmed, and he found himself deeply curious about this

guy, even though curiosity on these streets could get you killed.

“Have you a place to lay thy head this night?” the knight inquired in a conversational tone.

Lance went rigid, his breath hitching in his throat, his heart pounding anew. “I always got places,” he announced, prepared to leap onto his board and jet out of there.

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 have a bed for thee.”

Lance leapt back 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’?”

“How odd that after so many centuries, some words still retain their most 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, 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 your place?”

“Yes, lad, all you could 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 your throat.”

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

The knight reached down with a gauntleted hand. Lance eyed it for a long 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 strength and ease, the knight 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 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 Lance gazed down into the dry, concrete riverbed. More of an aqueduct, the river seldom had much water coursing through it. The horse neighed approvingly.

“You weren’t messin’ with me about a long journey!” Lance exclaimed, sitting up to get a better view.

“Hold on,” the knight intoned as he flicked the reins, and the muscular white mare began her descent to the riverbed below. Lance felt tight with fear 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.

“She hath been given the name Llamrei, after my first mount of long ago,” the knight replied, his tone wistful.

Something about his melancholy tone silenced Lance. The mare reached bottom without even the slightest misstep and trotted 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.

A 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 up his horse to 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 quavering voice steady.

“Have no fear, young Lance.”

Lance bristled, his pride winning out. “I ain’t afraid! It just don’ look like no home to me.”

“It doth be mine at present.” The knight spurred Llamrei forward into the dark, forbidding tunnel, pulling shut the grill and sealing them within.

Lance squinted in the dark as the knight extended a gloved hand to grasp 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 to flickering life, causing Lance to gasp with surprise as its warm glow cast weird reflections off the man's armor. He gazed in wonder.

That looked like something out of a movie! Who is this guy anyway?

"A mere trick, my boy, taught to me long ago by M—by an old friend."

The knight 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. 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....

Don't even go there!

No, he decided as they trotted along the 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 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 are 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, each swallowed up by 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, old tables and chairs, wooden and rough-

hewn and not like any 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 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 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.

“Each 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 open-mouthed, his hand still on the hilt of the sword.

“You’re 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 you require nourishment. There be much we must speak of this night if you are to understand.”

Lance grabbed one of the knives and held it in front of him, 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 studied him, but made not threatening moves. “T’were not by

chance you and I met this night, but by design.”

“Huh? You gotta start speakin’ English or Spanish or something cause I don’t know what you’re saying!”

“It was decreed that you and I should meet, 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 shall rebuild my Round Table and change the course of history. And thee, young Lance, shall be my First Knight. Are you 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 grinned.



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, to Lance’s eye, had 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.

Lance knew he took a big chance coming to school because he’d run away from the group home that enrolled him, but the school had never found out he was a runaway. That group home was so lame, he figured they didn’t even bother un-enrolling him. And since Arthur had given him an assignment, Lance figured Mark Twain was as good a place as any to start recruiting.

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 a literature undergrad and always wanted to teach English since she'd been in high school. 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 trade, a good skill so they could raise a family, but most didn't want or need a bachelor's degree. And yet that seemed to be their only choice. Electives were few and far between and even some of those were half-assed anyway. Jenny had only been teaching for seven years, and 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—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 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 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 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.

“No, Ms. McMullen.”

The bell screeched and signaled a mad scramble for the door.

Jenny quickly shouted, “Leave your papers on my desk!”

Two girls giggled and brushed up against Lance on their way out. Red-faced, 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, studying him. “It's nice to see you in school today.”

She'd taken a liking to him immediately, with his sharp wit and keen intellect. And what a beautiful boy, she'd often thought. His dark brown hair that fell loosely past his shoulder blades was silkier than hers! And those green eyes were striking. She'd seen many a girl trying to get close to him, like the two gigglers he'd just ignored, 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.

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's 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. "No one. Is he real, King Arthur?" He didn'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. 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. "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, looking like he'd been caught doing something wrong.

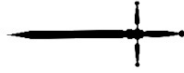
“Nothing. Just something I saw on TV. Gotta go, Ms. McMullen.”

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 sneered, “Oh look, Pretty Boy’s back!”

“Drop dead,” Lance muttered as he shoved his way out the door.

Jenny gazed 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 *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 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 he remained on the alert.

Arthur didn’t have money, but he did have jewels and gold and other fancy stuff he 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 a 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, non-perishable 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 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—kept his eyes open, his guard up, and his 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 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 initially 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 the ease of 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. 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.

And, in 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 did know *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, 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 shoes, approached Llamrei with caution, but 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 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 be about more than fun, young ones,” Arthur assured them. “It 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 has a gift with children.”

Lance blushed and looked down. “Oh, uh, thanks.”

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.

“Are 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 him. “I believe thou just did explain it, Lance,” he said. “Alas, t’would seem humanity has not changed in all these centuries. When I did first achieve the High Kingship of Britain by pulling Excalibur from the stone, the initial dilemma I faced was to unite the various warring tribes. The Gaels hated the Galls who hated the Normans, and warfare ruled the land.”

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

“I did then what we shall do now—I gave them all a purpose in life other than hating one another.” He smiled and spurred Llamrei on down the street.

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

Arthur paused his mount at a shadowy intersection, keeping her within the darkness of a non-functioning 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.

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 a package. The cars 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.

Lance 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 worthless piece of garbage!” she hollered, loud enough for the drug dealers and prostitutes to take notice. “Get your 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.

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, and then fixed his eyes on the horse. He broke into a wide grin. “Wow,” he murmured, eyes huge with wonder, “I ain’t never seen a real horse before.”

“Me, neither,” agreed Lance. “Not before this one. Her name’s Llamrei. I’m Lance, and this is Arthur. What’s your name, kid?”

“Lavern,” the boy answered, adding shyly, “Can I pet her?”

“Of course,” replied Arthur. “You can do more than pet her. You can 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.

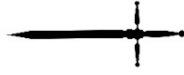
The boy soaked up every word, and smiled broadly when Lance had finished.

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; 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, Lance decided to show Arthur the pantheon of glitz, glamour, and sleaze in Los Angeles—Hollywood Boulevard. They set out that night in 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 commemorating some celebrity, to the seething faces bobbing in and around them from all sides.

Whenever they came to a fire hydrant or other obstacle, Lance deftly ollied over it, much to Arthur's enjoyment. He found 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 you promised to explain."

Lance turned in the indicated direction. A drug dealer was 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 tank top undershirt.

"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. They mess up your head, make ya act all crazy. Meth is hot these days. Always weed. So’s smack. It ain’t for me. Gotta keep my head clear for skating.”

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

Lance 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 could only see the marvels of this world! Thine own wizardry should 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, the third presented some teens smoking pot, and fourth displayed images of people who did not look quite real holding guns and stealing a motor vehicle.

“What be these images, Lance?”

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

“Oh, just TV,” Lance said matter-of-factly. “And that’s a video game.” He pointed at the images of people who did not quite look real. “It’s mostly for kids, to keep us busy. It’s all cool, I guess. Me, I’d rather skate, you know?”

“These images doth be for your entertainment? For the entertainment of youth?”

Lance shrugged. “Yeah, so?”

“And if you or other children do these things the images be doing, are you punished by thine elders or the authorities?”

Lance’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “Yeah, we are. I never thought about it like that before. They either punish us or put us in jail.”

Arthur noted the thoughtful expression on Lance’s young face as they moved away from the window and continued up the boulevard toward the Chinese Theatre. As they walked, Arthur watched Lance, and knew his First Knight was looking at this world with different eyes than he had but moments before. *Perhaps, Arthur thought, he’s seeing what I see – a world of emptiness.*



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 was endless. He always landed clean, always completed his moves with ease. Arthur clapped with joy.

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.

“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. You 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.”

“I’ve no doubt, my boy.”

Lance smiled again, his eyes wide with gratitude.

“Lance, what 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 reached out and clapped the boy on the shoulder.

Lance leapt to his feet. “What you doing, man?”

Arthur looked at him in bewilderment. “I did merely intend to congratulate you 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. "Okay."

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

Arthur shook his head. "Of course not. Thou hast been a blessing to me. I be eternally grateful for your help and your presence."

Lance smiled again, his racing heart drawing down. "I'm sorry. It's just..."

Arthur held up a hand to silence the boy. "There 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 looked sad as he noted 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 'cause of the skate park, neither."

Arthur stopped beside him. "Why is that?"

"You won't think me no girly-boy if I tell ya, will you?"

"I do 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?"

"Show me."

Lance glanced furtively around again, then eagerly, almost like a small child, leaped onto the nearest swing. 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.

"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.

Lance laughed with delight at Arthur's puzzlement. "Kick out wit' your 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 it. Soon, a big smile breached his

bearded face as they swung side by side, Arthur soaring nearly as high as his protégé.

Lance chortled, “Great, huh?”

Arthur grinned. “It makes me feel so free.”

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

Filled with joy, the two friends swung back and forth. Freedom had no time limit. They simply *were*, together, just being. And that was enough.

CHAPTER 2: CHILDREN OF GOD

WITHIN THE HOLLENBECK STATION, RYAN and Gibson stood before a large map of Los Angeles. Placed at various points were pushpins of various colors. Both men noted the locations of the pins, attempting to triangulate from where the mysterious tagger might be coming.

“The guy’s gotta live someplace, Gib,” Ryan grumbled, chewing on a pencil, “and it’s likely somewhere centralized. How else could he be hitting these different ’hoods and vanishing without a trace?”

Gibson shook his head, slightly loosening his tie and collar. He always wore a tie to work, ever since his promotion to detective. He believed the look made him more respectable in the eyes of superiors and perps alike. Ryan, on the other hand, preferred the ruffled look: open collar, wrinkled brown or beige jackets, khaki Dockers, ratty sneakers. He’d been with the department so long he didn’t give a rip what anyone thought. Truth be told, that was what Gibson liked most about him.

“If he does, and anyone knows where, they’re not talking,” Gibson remarked. “My gut tells me this guy’s a loner. Got his own private agenda going on out there.”

Ryan turned from the map to face his partner, talking around the pencil between his teeth. “I agree. Which will make him that much more of a bitch to apprehend.” He snapped the pencil in two with his teeth and spat the pieces onto his desk. “Hell, we don’t even have a description! This guy’s a freakin’ shadow man.”

Ryan hated weird cases like this one, and Gibson knew that about his partner. Ryan liked cases nice and clean. Murder for hire. Drive-by. Domestic abuse. Murder-suicide. Standard-issue stuff. But this case, hell, it was going nowhere and the mayor’s office had begun riding them for a quick resolution.

“Any brilliant ideas, Gib?” Ryan asked, grabbing another pencil and absently gnawing on the eraser.

Gibson took the pencil from his partner and tossed it on the desk. “Yeah, Ry, we go home. Look around you, partner. It’s late, and there’s nobody here but us. I gotta call my son, and you’ve gotta get some rest before you eat every pencil

we have.” He tried a smile, but fatigue turned it into a grimace.

Ryan sighed, reaching for his rumpled tweed jacket hanging from his chair. “You’re right. Ain’t gonna accomplish anymore tonight. Maybe a new day will give us new ideas, or there’ll be another riot to put down.”

“Let’s hope not. Last two weeks have been quiet. If we’re really lucky, this guy’s left to pick on some other city, like New York.”

Ryan chuckled. “Doubt we’d get that lucky.”

The two men trudged from the station, leaving the night skeleton crew to take care of business.



The following night, Arthur and Lance rode Llamrei many miles through twisting and turning storm drains to the very end of the line in Long Beach. The river itself, when water churned through it, emptied into the Pacific Ocean at the Port of Long Beach, but the storm drain exited on San Francisco Avenue at the Long Beach Tree Department.

As always, the hour was late when they arrived, and stillness reigned. On exiting the storm drain, they found themselves in what looked to be an abandoned parking lot. They had to break the padlock on the storm drain gate, but that was, by this time, a simple task with the crowbar Lance had found in a dumpster. Working their way toward the waterfront with only the *clop, clop* sound of Llamrei’s hooves as accompaniment, Arthur and Lance glanced around at the water and the ships and the factory smoke stacks spewing pollution and the ghetto surrounding them. The houses and apartment buildings looked battered and dilapidated, with dead or overgrown lawns and trash littering the streets.

“I never been here before,” Lance whispered. “Man, this looks worse than Lennox by a mile.”

Arthur nodded, sadness welling up within him at the poverty. How could there be so much obvious grandeur in this country and yet this pervasive poverty? As High King, his responsibility was to care for his people, to maintain such order that prosperity could be had by all. Did not this government feel a similar responsibility?

From what he understood of the American Constitution, which he’d studied upon awakening from his deep slumber, the government’s primary duty, besides protection of the people, was to provide any and all opportunities for commerce and prosperity. What had happened in the intervening years to change that ever-so-excellent ideal?

Suddenly Lance tapped Arthur on the shoulder and pointed to a vacant lot just up the block. Arthur stopped Llamrei in the shadows so they could watch without being spotted. Up ahead two thuggish-looking teen boys dressed in baggy jeans and brown hoodies harassed a very small boy, who appeared to be about five or six years old. The little boy's unkempt blond hair was dirty, as were his face and clothes, and Arthur surmised at once the child was likely homeless.

The teens had a tattered and worn old coat they kept waving in front of the little boy as though they were matadors and he the bull. The small, skinny boy, clad only in shorts and an old tank top, chased after the mocking youths, who danced away and waved the coat up out of reach. Each time the boy lunged for it, one teen would snatch it back and toss it to the other.

The taller of the two sneered. "You don' need this, little white boy. It's too big for ya, anyway." He laughed.

The shorter, stockier teen chimed in, "'Sides, now ya can show off all them muscles."

Both teens laughed uproariously, high-fiving each other, dancing around the little boy, and tossing the coat back and forth until the child began to cry.

"Give it back, give it back!" the little one snuffled. "It's all I got."

The tall boy snorted like a pig. "Aaaah, too bad. It's mine, now, ya little twerp."

Lance leapt from the horse's back, right onto his skateboard in one fluid motion, surged forward into the empty lot and plowed into the taller teen.

Blindsided, the teen could barely grunt out "Son of a—" before he flew a few feet and crumpled to the ground in a tangled heap. Whizzing past, Lance snatched the coat from the boy's startled grasp. The stockier of the two, caught off guard by Lance's sudden arrival, made a lunge for the newcomer. Lance whirled around on his board and leapt off it, simultaneously whipping out a small, short-handled dirk he'd borrowed from Arthur.

"Ya wanna take on somebody your own size, huh?" Lance screamed. His venomous fury startled even Arthur, who watched the scene appraisingly from the street. "Well, here I am, come an' git me!"

The two teens eyed the waving knife blade uncertainly, exchanging a look between them as the tall one regained his feet, rubbing his arm and shoulder. They held back, obviously reluctant to take on someone with a weapon.

Lance sensed their hesitation and lunged dramatically with the blade, causing both teens to turn and bolt out of sight down the dark, empty street. Satisfied, he returned the blade to the small scabbard around his waist and held out the coat to the little boy. The boy gingerly took the coat, his tear-stained face shining with gratitude, and a bit of fear.

“Thanks,” he said, his voice shaky.

Arthur approached on Llamrei, and the boy gasped aloud in surprise.

“It’s okay, kid,” Lance said, his tone even and reassuring “He’s King Arthur. He’ll take care of you.” Lance’s easy smile seemed to relax the boy. Arthur again noted the calming effect Lance had on younger children.

“What be thy name, lad?” asked Arthur.

“Uh, Chris, sir,” the boy stammered, staring in awe at the magnificent white horse and the man atop her.

“Have no fear, Chris,” Arthur assured him. “Thou art amongst friends.”

Lance nodded at the little boy. Without warning, Chris grabbed him in a tight hug. Lance stiffened, his smile twisting into an expression of fear.

Arthur eyed the boys carefully to see what would transpire.

“Thank you so much! You saved my life.” Chris bubbled gratefully into Lance’s leather jerkin. “What’s your name?”

Lance hesitantly returned the hug. “I’m, uh, I’m Lance.”

Chris continued clutching, as though afraid to let go. “Thanks, Lance.”

Arthur looked down at the two boys, and Lance gazed up at him. Arthur noted the beads of nervous sweat hugging Lance’s brow, sweat he surmised came more from the small boy touching him than from the encounter with the two teens. He smiled supportively.

“That be a brave and noble act on thy part, young Lance. It gives me pride to see you do what be right, rather than what be easy.”

Lance blushed again and glanced down. “I jus’ don’ like see’n little kids git punked. It ain’t right, ya know?”

“I know indeed,” Arthur replied knowingly, once more secure in the knowledge that Lance was truly the chosen one of his vision. “Come, lads, up on Llamrei, and let us fly this place.”

Lance separated himself from Chris, who only let go with reluctance. “You ever been on a horse?” he asked the boy with a tight smile.

The small boy shook his head.

“Well, you will now.” Lance hoisted the smaller child up to Arthur, who snagged the thin arm and swung Chris around behind him in the saddle. Then he looked approvingly at Lance, who bent to retrieve his board.

“Thy strength has considerably increased, Lance, have you not noticed?”

“Yeah.” He grinned up at Arthur. “Yeah, I have.”

Smiling, Arthur reached out a hand, and Lance clasped it firmly, flipping himself up and behind Chris onto the saddle. Nervously, Chris turned his head toward Lance. “Don’t let me fall, Lance!”

Lance flashed his most reassuring grin. “Don’t worry, little man, you’ll be

fine.” With obvious reluctance, he warily slipped his arms around Chris to hold the boy in place, but Chris gripped his hands tightly and pulled them all the way around him, forcing them to press against each other snugly. Lance tensed up a moment at the closeness, but appeared to relax as Arthur spurred Llamrei forward, and the three of them melted into the shadows.



Central Juvenile Hall—the largest juvenile facility in the United States—occupied a sprawling expanse of land east of downtown Los Angeles and near County USC Medical Center. At one time, as Esteban well knew, this facility housed those juveniles considered the most violent and dangerous, but that task had now fallen to Barney J. Nelson Juvenile Hall in Sylmar. At that facility, there was a barbed-wire-surrounded enclosure known as The Compound, which housed those children, some as young as fourteen, whose cases had been sent to the adult court system.

The state of California had decided some years back that children as young as fourteen could think like adults when caught up within some potential criminal act, but could not think enough like adults to be able to vote or sit on the juries that were called upon to hear their cases.

As he sat in the very familiar dayroom in Unit K/L, Esteban again considered the idiocy of these laws. One of his homies, a small kid called Shadow, had been sentenced to two hundred fifty-five years plus eight months for killing the guy who murdered his brother. What adult wouldn't go off on the guy who murdered a family member? Most would, he knew, despite all their dumbass speeches about “taking the law into your own hands!” Especially if, like with Shadow, the kid brother had died right there in his arms! Who wouldn't “overreact” as the judge called it, especially considering Shadow was only *fifteen* at the time? *Oh yeah*. Esteban chuckled inwardly. *He was an “adult” at that moment!*

He, himself, had never killed anyone, but he'd sure as hell tried more than once. He knew he'd go down for life in prison if he got nailed for those “attempts,” but on these streets, it was kill or be killed. What the idiot DAs and judges didn't want to admit was the war mentality of gang life, how it was no different than any dumbass war this country got itself into. Who the hell would fight a war and not try to win any way they could? These guys didn't give a rat's ass about reality. They'd love to put him in prison for life and feel they'd gotten a “dangerous predator” off the streets.

But he knew, and they knew, that the real power guys were still out there. Much as his pride hated the notion, Esteban knew well enough he was just small

fry, easily replaceable, very expendable. That's why all the children in prison these days didn't put a dent in the "gang problem." They just became the hardened thugs everybody already thought they were.

However, what he'd told Ryan was untrue. Sure, the cops'd love to get every gangster battling his enemies so's to wipe each other out, and then all the authorities would have to do would be to clean up the mess. But that wasn't what was happening. No, something else was going on with this tagger. It wasn't the cops. And it wasn't Jaime's 'hood, neither. He shook his head in amazement. He and Jaime had been best buds when they were kids, until the other boy moved to an enemy neighborhood. Now all they could do was try and kill one another. Crazy ass life, he knew.

He glanced around the dayroom, careful never to give the impression he was staring at anyone. He sat in a cheap-ass plastic chair at one of the several metal tables used for meals. About thirty other boys, aged fifteen to seventeen, wearing county-issued pants and white T-shirts, sat at the other tables. Some were writing letters while others played cards, arm wrestled, or watched the basketball game on TV.

He had quietly moved among them ever since he'd gotten here, even talking with the black kids, normally against the gang code. But he needed to know what they knew about this tagger-guy, and all their stories struck a similar chord. The guy had tagged up their markings with that crazy "A" thing, but no one saw him.

Esteban had always been smart in school, maybe too smart. By middle school he'd taken to barely showing up at all, except he got A's anyway. He'd find out the homework from some nerdy kid, get it all done, and have one of his friends turn it in. When it was test day, he'd show up, take the test, ace it, and not show up until the next one. How the hell useful was school anyway when he could get straight "A's" just by doing that?

No, the lure of the streets was more compelling. He'd worked his way up the ladder, and there weren't many kids his age out there who were smarter. That's why he knew it fell to him to solve this mystery. He'd be back out on his next court date—juvy was too crowded to keep him very long for street fighting—and when he hit the streets he *would* find this tagger. And then, there'd be hell to pay!



There were now fifty boys, all sixteen years or younger within Arthur's underground "castle," practicing the use of his various weapons. These kids were those Arthur and Lance had encountered during their nightly excursions, as well

as a few MTS students recruited by Lance. They wore protective armor of varying types—including helms to guard against head injuries—and sparred with one another under Arthur’s watchful eye. Some fired arrows at makeshift targets, missing most shots and laughing at their awkwardness, while the majority of boys parried at one another with the swords, attempting to dance around their opponent to get in the “fatal” thrust.

Arthur moved among them with ease, adjusting this one’s bow arm or that one’s stance, showing another how to hold a shield and a sword simultaneously. He stopped to observe Lance and Enrique, a sixteen-year-old from MTS, having at each other with broadswords. Arthur nodded approvingly at Lance’s great improvement in the use of the weapon. His small size still made hefting the weighty sword difficult, but he held his own against the bigger and stronger Enrique. Chris sat on the sidelines near Lance, obviously not wanting to stray too far from the boy who had rescued him. Lance and Enrique paused to rest, panting and sweaty, Lance’s flowing brown hair pasted to his face as though glued.

“Excellent, Lance,” Arthur commended the boy. “And you, as well, Enrique. You remind me of the youthful vigor of the first Camelot.”

“What’s ‘Camelot’?”

“Camelot be the name of my kingdom long ago, Enrique,” Arthur answered, handing the boy a bottle of water, which Enrique gulped with gusto.

“Is that where all this stuff came from?” Enrique asked after taking another swig.

Arthur frowned suddenly, the question once again catching him off guard.

“I suppose so,” he answered uncertainly, almost to himself. “When I did find myself here, in this time and place, all that you see had accompanied me.” He trailed off, lost in thought, struggling to remember.

Was Merlin responsible?

He’d awakened here, in this underground place, with the knowledge planted deep within him of his purpose, and the image of his First Knight at the forefront of his vision. He’d even found several books on the history of this country, the progeny of Britain. But who or what had set all of this into motion?

“I thought youse s’posed to come back to Britain or England or some other place,” Lance put in, “not America.”

“Do you not know the history of thine own country, Lance?”

The other boys laughed as Lance flushed red with embarrassment. “I don’t give a crap about history,” he sullenly retorted.

Now the boys laughed with him, nodding their agreement.

Arthur frowned in annoyance and confusion at Lance’s petulant attitude.

“Thy first lessons as future knights of the Round Table shall be in the use of chivalrous language. And in the elimination of ignorance.” He glared slightly at Lance, who looked away. “Britain be the sire of America. Merlin called me the once and future king because I had been destined to return when Britain did need me most. Tell me now, young Lance, what could be a greater need than the salvation of Britain’s best and most promising child?”

Lance looked up at the man, and their eyes met, but he gave no answer, and the other boys remained silent. Arthur slipped Excalibur easily into its sheath and announced to the boys at large, “Come, lads, it be time for food.”

As the boys cheered, Arthur glanced at Lance once again, but the boy refused to meet his gaze.

What had just happened?



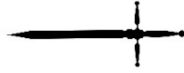
Over the ensuing days and nights, these initial recruits fanned out to their various neighborhoods to seek new candidates for Arthur’s crusade. Runaways and homeless youth were targeted first, for obvious reasons—they had nothing else. But since most of the initial fifty boys had homes of their own, they sought out friends within their schools or communities, whether or not those friends were poor or rich. They pitched Arthur’s plan, and many of these joined up. Why not? It sounded like fun. And maybe, finally, the kids in this city would get the last word.

Some stayed the night within Arthur’s underground lair, while others preferred to visit only for meetings and weapons instruction. There were girls as well, though not as many as there were boys. Even the runaway girls, however, felt uncomfortable sleeping within the storm drains amongst numerous unfamiliar boys. Yet they’d show up each day for training, often surprising Arthur with their energy and vigorous attention to detail.

Lance instructed them in proper bow and arrow technique, as Arthur had instructed him: how to almost instantly whip an arrow from a quiver, fit it to the bow, and fire with strength and accuracy. He had become an expert marksman, which pleased Arthur immensely. He observed a number of the girls obviously flirting with Lance during their training sessions, but the boy purposely pretended not to notice.

Such forwardness on the part of young ladies, as well as their willingness to fight, made him realize anew just how much times had changed since his day and age. Still, he looked on with a combination of hope and sadness as the ranks of his knightly “army” began to swell. So many disenfranchised youth, he’d

noted as each day more and more appeared. How did such a once great country come to such a shameful place?



On one evening, Arthur and Llamrei set back out into the Hollywood area, sadly, a mecca for lost and abandoned kids. He had a small entourage following him, to fan out and bring in strays they found loitering on the streets. Lance, for once, did not accompany them. Little Chris had taken ill and would have no one but Lance care for him.

Arthur assured his First Knight that the boys he was taking could handle themselves, but Lance looked deeply troubled when Arthur rode off without him. Preoccupied with the growing number of children he'd begun to acquire, Arthur failed to notice Lance's uncertain state of mind.

As the group sidled down a side street—mostly to keep Arthur and Llamrei out of sight—they rounded a corner, and Santa Monica Boulevard came into view ahead. It was late on a weeknight, and there was no heavy traffic. Arthur surveyed the boulevard before approaching. There were boys standing singly or in pairs, usually beside light posts or on corners, particularly in the vicinity of liquor stores. The situation struck Arthur as most peculiar. What would youngsters be doing so late at night in such an unsavory area?

His gaze finally settled on two such boys wearing tight wife beaters and very tight pants, one sturdy, muscular, and dark-haired, the other delicate, thin, and shaggy blond. Arthur eyed the blond one a moment. Had he seen this boy prior? And then he recalled. This was the youth he and Lance had witnessed purchasing drugs on Hollywood Boulevard. Arthur spurred Llamrei forward, his squires flanking him on either side. They quietly approached the two boys.

As they drew near, he heard the blond tell the other, "Looks like no business tonight, Jacky."

"Yeah, which means nowhere to go unless Marcus lets us crash," replied the dark-haired one.

Suddenly, both boys gasped, stepping back in startled fright when, out of the shadows, trotted Arthur on his horse, dressed in his tunic and cloak, and sporting an armor chest plate that gleamed brightly under the streetlights. His shield hung from the saddle at his left side, Excalibur in its sheath at his right. The boys recoiled.

"Crap!" exclaimed the muscular one.

Arthur reigned in Llamrei and gazed down reassuringly at the two boys. "Do not fear me, lads, for I have come to help thee."

The long-haired blond leaned closer to his friend and whispered, "Great, another freako. What'll we do, Jack?"

The dark-haired one rose to his full height, easily six feet, and thrust out his sizable chest. "Just hang tight, ole Jacky's got it covered." Then he looked at Arthur with as much courage as he could muster. "So, big guy, you lookin' for some action tonight?"

Arthur scrunched up his face in confusion. "Action?"

"Yeah, you know, you pay us money, and we do whatever you want."

Arthur eyed both boys appraisingly. Then he looked around the street at the other boys lounging indolently by light posts and corners. All eyes were upon him. And suddenly Arthur understood what was happening here. His eyes widened in horror. "This be thy work, selling thy most private parts to strangers?"

Now the delicate-featured blond spoke up, stepping in front of his much bigger friend boldly. "Our privates is all we got, mister, if we wanna eat."

Arthur's boys kept their hands at their blades, in case trouble erupted.

The king frowned at the blond, whose soft features and striking blue eyes displayed pain, rather than anger. "If you didst not spend thy money on drugs, young one, you may not have to degrade thyself in this way."

The boy leapt back a step, clearly shocked, and he and Jack exchanged a quick look of surprise. "He's a cop!"

Jack shook his head. "Dressed like that? Hell, he's just got your number."

Jack stretched out his friend's bare arm to draw the boy's attention to the rows of needle marks, tracks that revealed his serious addiction. The blond yanked his arm away and glared up at Arthur, while Jack nervously eyed Arthur's armed followers.

Arthur opened his hands to demonstrate his nonthreatening intent. "Now tell me, lads, how art thou called?"

Jack scrunched up his face. "Huh? Oh, our names?"

Arthur nodded, and the two boys exchanged a look before deciding. The blond spoke first. "I'm Mark."

"Jack," the other added uncertainly.

Arthur gazed at them sympathetically. "Mark and Jack, do you enjoy this empty and fruitless life you lead?"

Jack snorted with disgust. "Lettin' these creeps have at us every night? You kiddin' me? Hell, no, man!"

Mark nodded sadly, his shaggy blond hair falling in front of his eyes. "We don't got nobody 'cept each other." His voice was barely a whisper.

Arthur sat high in the saddle. "If you wish, ye shall have me and mine from

this moment forward. There be food and shelter and a way of life far more noble and worthy than that which has been thrust upon thee.”

“Who the hell are you, anyways?” Jack asked, keeping himself between Arthur and Mark.

“I am King Arthur. Have thou heard of me?”

Mark and Jack exchanged another look of disbelief.

“Yeah, in made-up stories, when I’s a little kid,” Mark snorted. “My mom used to read ’em to me. But they’s just *stories*, man.”

Arthur tilted his head and eyed the boys earnestly. “They be true stories, lad. I am seeking youths with whom to rebuild my Round Table. If thy life does not please thee, come and join me on my quest for justice and peace.”

Mark and Jack exchanged yet another look, this one of bewilderment. Arthur’s sincerity obviously touched them both.

“You messing with us?” Jack asked, his brows knitted with confusion.

“A knight always speaks the truth, lad. It be his solemn oath,” Arthur assured them. The boys in his entourage nodded, confirming Arthur’s words. “Now, there be others like you in this area?”

Mark and Jack looked at Arthur uncertainly, and both spread their arms wide, taking in the whole of the street.



Deep within Arthur’s underground lair, those children with nowhere to go, or whose homes were worse than the streets, had elected to stay the night. Arthur possessed numerous bedrolls and blankets, and the children quickly adapted to the dripping, echoing sounds that permeated the drain system. The damp, rotting smell took more getting used to, but it was still better than what they’d left behind. Most were fast asleep. A few practiced their sparring under lantern light but did it quietly so as not to disturb the sleepers. Some were busily hanging wet clothing on several makeshift clotheslines strung from wall to wall across the tunnels.

Lance and Chris sat off to one side. The small boy, clothed in a billowy tunic three sizes too big and equally large leather pants tied around his waist with a leather drawstring, now had his blond hair washed and combed, and he was clean and comfortable. He sneezed, and Lance handed the boy some tissue.

“Thanks, Lance,” he snuffled. “Thanks for staying with me. I know you wanted to go with Arthur.”

Lance nodded, watching the swordplay, but not really seeing it. “It’s cool, Chris.”

“You’re the best, Lance,” replied the smaller boy, snuggling up against him as though afraid to let him go. Lance squirmed with discomfort. He knew Chris saw him as a hero, but he was a loner. He didn’t like being close to people, and he hated having people touching him. Even little kids like Chris. Getting close to people always ended up... hurting.

What he’d just told Chris was not the truth, however. He *had* accepted Arthur’s request to be First Knight, and he knew that meant he was in charge whenever Arthur was not present. But did it mean that now he’d not go out with Arthur again because these other kids needed someone in charge? He didn’t think he could handle that.

“When’s Arthur coming back?” Chris asked sleepily, pulling Lance out of his reverie.

“Don’t know, little man. Soon.” At least he hoped so.

Chris smiled as he drifted off to sleep in Lance’s arms. Lance gazed absently at the practicing boys, but his mind and heart were out there with Arthur.



Arthur trotted along on Llamrei, who’d grown very comfortable in the presence of cars and honking horns and other odd, loud noises. His armed squires, dressed in their medieval finery, marched by his side, followed by Mark, Jack, and four other teen boys who chose Arthur’s crusade over street hustling. Had there been serious traffic on Santa Monica that night, there would’ve been gridlock for all the rubbernecking. Arthur appeared especially majestic, perched atop the dazzlingly beautiful mare, a rag-tag group of boys in tow. The newcomers were chatting and laughing amongst themselves, obviously enjoying this grand new adventure, despite not knowing its eventual outcome. As Jack had told them, anything was better than what they were doing before.

Some distance down the boulevard, a police car approached, cruising slowly, obviously on patrol.

Mark’s eyes widened with fear. “Crap, the cops! We gotta jet, man.”

Arthur calmly reined in his horse and turned back to the boys. “Halt and stand without fear. Thou art under my protection.”



Within the police cruiser, the two officers reacted with startled amazement as Arthur and his entourage became visible through their windshield.

“Holy crap, Mel, look at that!” exclaimed the rookie riding shotgun.

The driver shook his head in disgust. “Call it in. We’ll need backup. Damn, I

hate West Hollywood.”



As the police cruiser slowed to a stop in front of Arthur and his boys, some pedestrians across the street stopped to observe. Both had their cell phones instantly up and recording.

Llamrei neighed nervously as the two cops exited the vehicle and approached the group with caution. The new boys fidgeted nervously, ready to bolt, but Arthur’s squires stood their ground, hands to their waists in case blades should be required.

“Hold it right there, mister!” said the older of the two officers.

Arthur smiled with amusement. “Methinks we be already stopped, sir.”

Nervous laughter floated up from the boys in the rear. The other cop, a young man, suddenly noticed Arthur’s sword, which he’d begun carrying despite Lance’s admonitions to the contrary.

“He’s got a sword!”

He drew his service pistol, and the older followed suit. The new boys jumped back a step at the appearance of the guns, but Arthur’s boys stood fast. His training was paying off.

“Okay, mister,” the older cop began, waving the barrel of his gun at Arthur, “down off the horse and put the sword on the ground.”

Arthur shook his head, his long hair catching the light of the street lamps and almost glowing. “Nay. King Arthur answers to no one but God and his own conscience.”

“King Arthur?”

“Aye, and I shalt allow no harm to befall my noble squires.”

The cop nervously eyed the boys flanking Arthur, and then jerked his head toward the ones in back. “I don’t know anything about these kids in front, mister, but those *squires* of yours in the rear, and I do mean *rear*, are prostitutes, which happens to be a crime in this city.”

Arthur cocked his head to gaze down at these men of the law in astonishment. “You, the adult establishment of this city have cast these children into the streets to live as animals. Why would you now lay claim to that which you previously discarded?”

Now the rookie piped up. “Because they’re breaking the law, pal, just like you are. This area’s not even zoned for horses.”

“Do not force me to use Excalibur, for I have no wish to harm thee.”

He gripped Excalibur’s hilt, and the nervous rookie fired his gun. The bullet

ricocheted off Arthur's armor with a harmless *ping*, to the open-mouthed amazement of the boys and the cops. Still clutching Excalibur's hilt, Arthur whipped out a small dirk with his other hand and flung it expertly at the rookie, cutting the man's hand and knocking the gun from his grasp. Gun and dagger skittered out of reach under the police car as the rookie's hand gushed blood.

As the older cop raised his firearm, Arthur unsheathed Excalibur and swung it down hard so that the flat of the blade struck him with an audible crunch on the forearm, sending his gun clattering out of reach. The cop gripped his injured arm and grimaced with pain.

"Hell, I think you broke my arm!"

Arthur sheathed Excalibur and fixed his potent brown eyes upon the two injured officers. "Let this be a warning to all who abuse justice— corruption hath a new enemy, and his name be Arthur Pendragon."

The far distant sound of approaching sirens cut through the night, and Mark leaped forward to Arthur's side. "There's more coming, Arthur. We gotta bounce, now!"

Arthur grabbed Llamrei's reins. "Godspeed, lads. We're away!" He spurred the horse into a fast trot down a side street as the boys hurriedly ran after him.

The two officers watched them escape with a mixture of anger and wonder.

"What the hell was all that?"

The rookie shrugged and fought to staunch his bleeding hand.

The pedestrians with their cell phones ceased filming and jumped into the air with glee, high-fiving one another.



All the children slept soundly within the dank underbelly of the city. Chris lay curled in a ball, wrapped tightly in his blanket in a quiet corner. The only one awake was Lance. He paced nervously back and forth like a caged tiger, flipping his skateboard from hand to hand. Drawn to the commotion of voices, his gaze spun quickly in that direction. Excited, animated voices headed toward him from one of the tunnels. He also heard the echoing *clop, clop* of Llamrei. Relief flooded his heart. At last!

He stood still, facing the tunnel from which emanated the chatter. Then Arthur appeared, sitting astride Llamrei and looking rock solid and secure. Lance let out the breath he'd been holding. He'd let his imagination run away again, had considered all manner of accidents that could have befallen his—

No! Don't think like that. He's my king, that's all.

"Uh, what happened out there, Arthur?" Lance eyed the tight clothes of Mark

and Jack and the other newbies, and a chill ran through his body. “Everything all right?” he asked, trying for strength and confidence, but knowing he sounded weak.

Some of the sleeping boys awoke from the commotion and gaped sleepily at the newcomers.

Mark lurched forward and blurted, “It was great, man! Arthur took out these two cops with that big-ass sword of his!”

He waved his skinny arms in imitation of Arthur’s movements, momentarily distracting Lance at the sight of the needle tracks.

Lance pulled his attention back to Arthur. “You killed ’em?”

Arthur shook his head and dismounted, deftly removing his chest plate and handing it to one of the boys who’d set out with him, then gazed at Lance with surprise. “Nay, Lance, you know better.”

Lance looked away, feeling small and stupid. He *did* know better. Arthur’d never kill anyone, not less he really had to.

Now Jack stepped up beside Mark and gushed, “The cop shot ’im, and the bullet bounced off, just like Superman! It was awesome, wasn’t it, Mark?” He threw his muscular arm around Mark and hugged him, and the shaggy blond nodded.

Lance’s eyes went wide with horror, and a chill traveled up his back into his throat.

Jack turned back to Arthur. “How much does that sword weigh, anyways?”

Arthur placed one gauntleted hand on his shoulder. “Enough, Jack. Thou shalt all have time to learn of our ways. Lavern, attend please.”

The small wiry boy, bleary eyed from sleep, quickly shook himself awake and stepped forward to stand before Arthur. He’d decided living with Arthur was preferable to being slapped around by his mother every day.

“Yes, Arthur?” Lavern asked expectantly, looking a bit comical in the oversized tunic that dropped past his bony knees.

Arthur indicated the new boys with a wave of his hand. “Take our new recruits. Give them food and beds to rest their heads.”

Lance continued to gape at Jack’s arm draped around Mark. There was something about those two that unnerved him. Jack caught Lance staring and blew a kiss his way when Arthur’s back was turned. Lance bristled with indignation.

“Yes, sire,” agreed Lavern, and he turned to the newcomers. “Come wit’ me.”

As the new recruits, still buzzing with excitement, followed the small boy back into the tunnels behind the throne, Mark and Jack sauntered past Lance, who stepped forward to block them. He asked quietly, “You guys fags or what?”

Mark prickled instantly. “So what if we are, beaner!”

“Why?” Jack chimed in with a wink and a leer. “You one of us, pretty boy?”

Rage engulfed Lance, and he reared back to slug Jack, but his upraised fist was grabbed by Arthur and held in an iron grip.

“Mark, Jack, follow thy fellows,” Arthur instructed them. “We shall talk when you have rested.”

Both Mark and Jack smirked at Lance as they pushed on past to catch up with the others. Arthur loosened his grip, and Lance yanked his hand away.

Arthur gazed at him with concern, but Lance refused to meet his eye. “You and I must needs speak, Lance.”

Lance roughly pulled away from Arthur and moved sullenly down one of the side tunnels. Arthur followed. They moved past several round tubs they’d bought at Home Depot that were used for bathing and entered a darker area deep within the tunnel, lit only by a single lantern.

There were some ancient-looking chairs strewn against the wall beneath the lantern, and Lance plopped himself down on one, ignoring Arthur, refusing to look at him. Arthur carefully sat on a chair beside Lance, but not too close.

He sighed, but his voice remained gentle. “Lance, you are my First Knight. It be up to thee above all others to set a right and proper example. Fighting amongst ourselves be the greatest of evils, for it—”

Lance jerked his head up. “They’re queer, Arthur!”

“And?”

“And what? We can’t have them here!”

“Have they not been cast aside by thy society, just as you and these others?”

Lance threw his skateboard across his lap. “Yeah, I guess.”

“But what if they...”

Arthur eyed him so intently that Lance squirmed. “If they what?” he asked gently.

Lance shook his head. How could he explain, when he didn’t want to face it? “They said I was one of ’em, Arthur! You can’t let guys dis you like that.”

“Perhaps not. But saying a thing does not make it the truth.”

“I know what our goal is, Arthur, and I want so much to be like you, but I don’t think I can....” His voice dropped to an embarrassed whisper. “I don’t know if I can work with them.”

Arthur bent his head so he could look into Lance’s eyes. “They be lost children, Lance, like unto these others we have found. To reject them, to forbid them our love and fellowship shall make us no better than those whom we oppose. Do thou understand?”

“I do,” Lance stated quietly, feeling shame. “I just don’t know....”

“Lance,” Arthur began, his voice firm, yet understanding, “you are my chosen one, you are my First Knight, he who shalt command in my stead. Do you mean to say you cannot share our ideals and goals with *all* who need us? These boys be different in one way, yes, but they be human first and foremost. Like you and I and all these others, they are children of God and thus deserve our love and fealty. I truly need thee, my Lance, by my side. More than you can know. May I count upon thy service, not just to me, but to all who find themselves in need?”

Lance couldn't say no. This man meant so much to him. He could do it. He *would* do it. He'd just avoid the... those guys... as much as possible. He pushed his hair back from his eyes. “Yes, sire.”

“Good. Now tell me, how many lost ones have we recruited, including those who merely join us by day?”

Lance frowned. “Not counting... you know, them you brought tonight, near *dos cientos. Entiende?*”

Arthur's face revealed that he understood. Lance had been teaching him Spanish, and Arthur was a quick learner. He sighed, his voice filled with sadness. “Two hundred. How wasteful humanity has become.”

Lance nodded in agreement as both remained side by side in silence, gazing into the darkness of the tunnel, contemplating the future.

CHAPTER 3: THAT IS WHO YOU ARE

THE FOLLOWING MORNING AS ARTHUR began his training with the new arrivals, Lance decided to go to school. He hadn't been there in... actually, he couldn't recall how many days. Or was it weeks? But he needed some distance between himself and the new kids. He'd caught those same two, the blond and the buff one, eyeing him this morning, sizing him up, as though trying to make a decision about him. That creeped him out, *big* time. He'd felt they could see right into his heart and soul, and that made him feel exposed. He *hated* that feeling. It made him feel like they could see... his secret! Just thinking of it pulled his heart into his throat with fear.

So he put on his old skater clothes, wrapped the gold circlet that Arthur'd given him around his head to restrain the hair, then hopped on a bus and went to MTS. He needed to talk to Ms. McMullen.

He spotted her during Nutrition, crossing the war-torn campus, struggling under a load of books as she darted between kids and around caution tape. Lance ran up beside her.

"I'll take them for you, Ms. McMullen," he offered with a smile, and she grinned with relief as she handed them over.

"Thank you, Lance. Where have you been?"

Despite his troubled state of mind, he did not fail to notice how easily he was able to carry the heavy load. Before Arthur, he'd have been fighting just to hold this many books, let alone walk with them. He was *stronger*!

He grinned. "I been busy. No time for school."

Jenny frowned, tossing her blonde hair away from her eyes. "How are you ever going to learn to read and write better if you don't come to school?"

Lance threw her that knowing look she'd seen on occasion. "Ms. McMullen, you're a good teacher, and you know I already read and write better than anyone in class."

She laughed, and they resumed their walk toward her classroom. "You're right, Lance. I guess I just miss seeing you."

"Ms. McMullen, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, but let's get these books into my room before they crush you."

She fished keys out of her pocket to open the classroom door.

“Don’t worry about me, Ms. McMullen. I’ve gotten a lot stronger.”

As they entered the room, she pointed to a desk for him to deposit the books. He wore a DC skater shirt and jeans. The shirt had short sleeves that revealed the musculature of his arms.

“I can see that, Lance. Have you been working out?”

Lance nodded. “A lot.” He threw up his arms in a mock flex pose and grinned, causing her to laugh.

“So, what did you want to ask me?” she inquired, seating herself on the corner of her desk.

He sat on the nearest desk and gazed up at her, considering how to phrase his question. “Are there teachers here you don’t like?”

His question appeared to catch her off guard, and she almost did a double take. “Why do you ask?”

“Please, Ms. McMullen, it be important.”

“Well, of course, there *are* some,” she began cautiously. “Not everyone gets along at any jobsite. Why are you asking?”

“I’m not trying to find out who you think is a butthole, Ms. McMullen,” he said, causing her to smile, “I already know who is. I guess, I just need to know how to work with somebody I don’t like.”

“Oh, is that all. Well, you could simply avoid them.”

“What if I can’t?” he insisted. “What if I gotta work straight up with them, what if we gotta, like, depend on each other?”

“It would help if I knew what you were talking about, what you mean by *depend on*.”

Lance looked down. He had no problem lying on the streets—that’s how you survived. But he liked this lady. He didn’t want to lie to her. So he said nothing and waited.

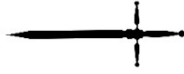
“Well, I guess, if what you’re working to accomplish is important enough, you can overlook anything about anyone.”

He looked up at her, light dawning in his almond-shaped eyes. “You mean, like in math—the whole be of greater import than the parts.”

“Yes, that’s right. But why are you talking like—”

Lance was on his feet and out the door before she could finish. “Thanks, Ms. McMullen.”

As he sprinted across campus, the bell pealed, signaling the end of class. Lance knew he’d confused Ms. McMullen with his questions, but he was grateful for her answers.



When he returned to Arthur's lair, Lance found Mark and Jack, along with other newcomers, hard at work, sweating profusely in their chain mail shirts as they swung and hacked at each other with short-handled swords. Arthur stood off to one side, observing the training and stepping in with advice when needed. Lance walked up and stood beside him.

"How was thy schooling, today?" he asked.

"It was good. I learned something important."

Arthur's eyebrows shot up. "Indeed? Would thou care to share it?"

"Yeah. Can I work with these guys for a while?"

"Are you certain?"

Lance bit his lower lip, forcing down his doubts and fears. He could do this. "Yeah."

"Very well. I shalt attend the archery practice. The lads seem to hit everything *but* the target." He grinned, and Lance returned it. Then Arthur moved off into the tunnel designated for the archers.

Lance sucked in a deep breath, held it a moment, and released. His heart raced, and his hands trembled a little as he stepped toward the two boys.

You can do this, Lance... You can do this...

Panting and heaving, Mark and Jack ceased their aimless hacking at one another as Lance approached.

Mark sneered. "Look, it's the pretty beaner boy."

Lance's anger swelled, but he pushed it back. He'd started this, after all. Forcing control on himself, he smiled that lovely smile that always seemed to charm his teachers. "I guess I deserve that. I'm uh, I'm sorry about, you know, calling you guys fags and stuff."

Mark was clearly caught off guard by the apology. He and Jack exchanged a cautious look. The three boys sized each other up, and then Mark said, "Yeah, well, sorry about the beaner stuff. I ain't racist or nothing." He stuck out his hand. "Name's Mark."

Lance extended his own hand, hoping his sweating palms wouldn't be too obvious. "Lance," he offered, and they shook. He found himself fascinated by Mark's deep blue eyes. They looked like they went on forever.

Mark smiled, releasing Lance's hand. "I know. Arthur's been telling us you're his second in command, that all us *knights-in-training*, as he called us, got to listen and follow you, 'specially when he ain't around."

Lance forced himself to meet Mark's gaze. "And?"

Mark and Jack exchanged another quick look before both grinned. "We can

hang with that.”

Now Jack stuck out his hand. “Especially with a guy as hella cute as you, Lance,” he gushed as they shook hands. “I’m Jack.” His grip was robust and powerful, and Lance gaped at the bulging arm muscles.

He felt himself blush, but Jack just laughed good-naturedly. “He’s even cuter when he blushes. Man, Lance, I’d kill to have your hair, and I mean that. Mine sucks.” He ruffled a hand through his shaggy mop of black curls disdainfully, but Lance thought Jack’s hair looked pretty cool on him.

Despite his embarrassment, Lance had to laugh. “Yeah, well, I’d kill to have them guns you got,” he said, pointing to Jack’s sizable biceps and shaking his head with admiration.

Jack flexed his right arm and pointed to Lance’s flowing hair. “Trade ya?”

All three boys cracked up, and Lance felt the air between them feel suddenly clean and relaxed. They were just three lost boys who needed Arthur, and each other. This was a new beginning for all of them, and Lance felt good about himself and his actions. In fact, from that moment on, he felt certain he could work with any new kid Arthur’s crusade might bring in.

He sparred off and on with each of them in turn for the next hour, coaching them on proper swordplay as Arthur had coached him. Jack had a powerful swing—man that boy was strong! But Lance knew more about technique, which saved him from landing on his butt quite a few times.

Often during their session, he caught one or both of them undressing him with their eyes, especially Mark, with those pools of deep blueness that seemed almost surreal. Each longing glance cast his way made Lance squirm, and when they broke for lunch he instructed them to refrain from any further comments about his looks because such behavior could lower his standing with the other kids.

“But you’re too hot to ignore!” Jack insisted, and Mark nodded his assent eagerly.

Lance ignored the comment. “Let’s eat, and we’ll practice more later.”

He instructed Mark and Jack to go ahead, and he’d catch up. Despite the camaraderie he’d built up with those guys, he nonetheless felt himself trembling as they vanished down the food tunnel. What he was feeling confused him. He knew lots of girls thought he was cute—“*Your hair is sssooo beautiful, and those eyes are gorgeous!*”—and now he was getting compliments from boys. Had there always been boys looking at him like *that*, and he’d just never noticed?

You know there have, fool! You just pretended there weren’t.

He honestly didn’t know how he felt about girls, or boys, eyeing him in that

way. Both thought he was good-looking, both let him know with their eyes that they liked him like *that*, and both scared him. They scared him because?

Don't go there, Lance!

Suddenly he wasn't very hungry.

I need another workout!

Usually when these memories overcame him, he'd skate them away. But that wasn't an option right now. Off to the archery range. That's what he'd do. And that's where he went, avoiding Mark and Jack for the remainder of the day. But mostly, as he'd done so often throughout his life, he avoided himself.



That evening, about one hundred of Arthur's followers were gathered around him in the great circular chamber, seated on pillows or blankets or on the ground. Arthur sat on his throne, listening to their personal stories, continually appalled by the treatment these children had received at the hands of adults who were supposed to protect them.

And he introduced to them the code of chivalry.

"What's chivalry, Arthur?" Mark asked, his bright blue eyes fixed with wonder him.

"Chivalry," Arthur began, "is a code of conduct which all of you shall swear to uphold should you choose to be knighted. Its primary focus be honor and serving the cause of right, protecting those who be defenseless in this world."

"You mean like little kids?" Chris asked, sitting on the floor, as always, near Lance, who sat in a large wooden chair beside Arthur.

"Yes, Chris, like little kids."

Chris pointed at Lance. "Then I nominate Lance for chivalry guy of the year!" He giggled delightedly, and Lance blushed.

"Here, here! We second that," blurted Jack from across the chamber, and Mark nodded vigorously.

Now Lance looked like he wanted to sink into his chair.

Arthur chuckled, and good-natured laughter rippled through the group. "I shalt take thy suggestion under advisement, Chris," he said with a twinkle in his eye, gazing at Lance with pride. Lance did not, however, meet his gaze.

"As thou should all by now know, Lance be my First Knight, and Liege Lord in my stead," Arthur continued, his voice steady and serious. "Should there be a time I cannot lead, or shall be indisposed, Lance shalt assume command. Be there be any amongst you who choose to dispute this?"

"Yeah," called out a female voice from the back. "I do."

All heads turned to see a beautiful Latina girl stand and face Arthur. There was excited murmuring amongst the children, for no one had ever seen her before. She had long flowing hair that spilled halfway down her back, soft cheekbones, full lips presently curled into a sneer, and an athletic figure, at the moment clothed in a T-shirt and tight, hip-hugging jeans.

Enrique's lower jaw dropped, and he elbowed Luis beside him, leaning in to whisper, "I just saw my future wife."

"Not if I get with her first," Luis replied, also gawking.

All eyes remained fixed on the girl, then turned to Arthur for his response.

For his part, Arthur held his composure and maintained the dignity he must if he was to command. He could not let on that she had caught him by surprise. He'd not noticed her presence.

When had she arrived?

"And thou art?" he asked calmly.

The girl tossed back her head and stood with hands on hips. "Name's Reyna," she said as all eyes flew back to her like flies to flypaper. "Heard about your little crew here and thought I'd check it out. See what you got going."

Her last statement had the effect of a challenge, and all eyes returned to Arthur to gauge how he'd handle it. Lance, in particular, observed his king with keen interest.

Arthur sat very upright on his throne, one hand on Excalibur's hilt, the other on his lap. "And your appraisal? Would thou join our cause?"

"Depends. You I could handle. You're a man who seems to have it together. You dress kinda weird, but hey, this is LA, capital of weird." Then she tossed a derisive sneer Lance's way. "But you actually expect me to take orders from a boy younger and prettier than me?"

There were sniggers from the assemblage. Mark's mouth dropped open in shock, and Jack viciously mad-dogged the girl.

"Yes, I do," Arthur stated with finality.

All eyes returned to Reyna, who stood her ground as though she knew she could whip all these boys at once. Without another word, she snatched a bow and arrow from a startled Lavern, who'd been clasping the precious weapons ever since practice had ended. With a fluidity and grace not seen among any of the kids thus far, she slipped in the arrow, whipped the bow up to her shoulder, and aimed it right at the tunnel beside Arthur's throne. She moved so fast no one even had a chance to breathe, let alone react. She sent the arrow flying.

Lance leaped to his feet, starting toward Arthur. But the arrow whizzed harmlessly past the king into a dark tunnel beyond. A thud and a sharp squeak emanated from the darkness, and then silence. From the sound, it was obvious

that she'd killed a rat, and in the dark! Arthur was impressed, but kept his composure.

Reyna lowered the bow and turned her haughty face toward Lance.

Arthur spoke only one word: "Lance."

Clearly rattled by the girl's showy performance, and smarting from her insult, Lance took a moment to meet her mocking gaze before stepping down off the platform. Mark and Jack, in particular, eyed him expectantly. The crowd parted as Lance strode across the chamber to Reyna's side and snatched the bow from her grasp. She laughed and let him have it. Glaring at her for a moment, he held his hand out to Lavern for another arrow. The small boy handed one over.

Without another word, he cocked the arrow, raised the bow, and fired in the same direction as Reyna. There was a slight sound from behind Arthur, then absolute silence.

Lance looked Arthur in the eye from across the chamber, and the king nodded. "Enrique, retrieve the dead rat, if you please."

Enrique leapt to his feet and ran into the dark tunnel behind Arthur. In a moment he returned, carrying a dead rat.

"Hold it high for all to see," Arthur instructed without looking. He'd trained Lance well enough. He knew what they would see.

A gasp rippled through the group as Enrique raised the dead rodent above his head. Reyna's arrow clearly stuck out of its head. But Lance's arrow stuck out of Reyna's, having spilt the wood of her shaft as it struck home.

All eyes returned to Reyna and Lance, standing side by side in silence. Lance locked eyes with her. She smiled approvingly and nodded, giving him an appraising look.

"I'll think about it," she announced, and with a flourish was out of the chamber and gone into the darkness.

Still holding the rat, Enrique murmured, "I think I'm in love."

Not a sound could be heard except the dripping of water somewhere off in the dark. The assemblage was stunned. Arthur met Lance's gaze across the chamber, and grinned with pride. Lance grinned back.



That same evening as Jenny finished dinner and prepared for her nightly papergrading ritual, she turned on the local news just to make sure the city was still there. Nowadays, with all the stupid decisions made at all levels of government, sometimes she wondered if the world really was coming to an end like all those idiot prognosticators kept saying.

Her thirty-two-inch flat screen powered up, and she set it to Channel 7 News because she liked their anchors. As she bussed her dinner dishes into the tiny kitchen of her one-bedroom apartment in Torrance, she heard the first story being announced.

The local anchor intoned solemnly as though announcing an appearance by God himself. “Our lead story tonight is a strange one, as I’m sure you’ve been hearing all day. Has the legendary King Arthur returned from the dead, and does he at this moment roam the streets of Los Angeles collecting children? Here’s our own Helen Schaeffer with the details.”

On hearing the name “King Arthur,” Jenny dumped her dishes into the messy sink and hurried to her living room just as Helen appeared on camera with the words “Live from Santa Monica Blvd” plastered dramatically across the bottom of the screen.

On the screen, Helen indicated the busy thoroughfare behind her. “As you can see, it’s an ordinary evening here on Santa Monica Boulevard near West Hollywood. But last night was anything but ordinary, as you’ll see from this amazing cell phone video captured by a local passerby.”

The scene cut to a video of a man on horseback, surrounded by boys, verbally sparring with two police officers. Because the audio was so poor, the TV station had put up subtitles for the exchanged dialogue. Stunned into amazement, Jenny slid down into her easy chair and gaped at the almost surreal footage unfolding before her. So caught up in the drama, she audibly gasped when the bullet bounced off the man’s armor. The tape came to an end, and Helen reappeared.

“As of this moment, King Arthur has continued to elude the police. According to authorities, he is wanted for “questioning,” only, which must be the understatement of the year. This is Helen Schaeffer reporting for—”

Jenny waved her remote and clicked off the set. King Arthur? Obviously some nut, she knew, and yet.... Wasn’t it just last month, or maybe the month before, that Lance had questioned her about King Arthur? Was he real? Wasn’t that one of Lance’s questions? She’d thought it odd at the time, but then Lance could be an odd kid. Now with this news story.... Could there be a connection?

She ran her hand through her wavy blonde hair, absently realizing that she needed to wash it. She also needed to talk with Lance as soon as possible. But how, since he never came to school? That newswoman said something about this King Arthur collecting children... could that explain why some kids at MTS had been missing these past few weeks? Lance was the key, she knew.

I’ve got to find him.



Within the Hollenbeck Police Station, Ryan sat pensively gazing at the TV, studying a freeze-framed image of Arthur from that cell phone video. It was evening, and the gang detail department was quiet. Too quiet, Ryan knew. There had been no more “tagging” for the past six weeks and no major gang incidents. The calm before the storm, he suspected. Gibson entered and tossed a report on Ryan’s desk. The older man glanced up at his partner, gnawed pencil dangling from his lips.

“You *still* looking at that tape?” he asked. “You must have it memorized by now.”

Ryan leaned back in his swivel chair and held up a drawing of the “A” tag against the freeze-framed video image on the screen. The frozen video frame was blurred, but clear enough to reveal Arthur’s shield emblazoned with the same symbol.

“He’s our tagger, Gib.”

Startled, Gibson leaned forward for a closer look, snatching the picture from Ryan and examining it against the monitor. “Well, I’ll be damned! How the hell’d you make that connection?”

Ryan took back the paper and set it down next to some Internet printouts. These printouts showed various shields emblazoned with heraldic symbols of one kind or another. “Did a little Internet search. I remembered from college about knights and how they always had a crest on their shields. Hell, I was really into that stuff back then when I was young and stupid. You know, knight on a horse riding into town and cleaning it up for all the good people?”

Gibson nodded, loosening his dark blue tie, and rolling up another chair to sit beside his partner. “Yeah, I know the feeling. So what do you suppose this guy is up to? He’s gotta know he’ll have every gangbanger in the city gunning for him if he keeps putting that up on their turf.”

“All forty-one thousand, give or take?” Ryan asked with a crooked smile, which only accentuated the deep frown lines on his craggy face.

“You know what I mean.”

“Anything on that dagger?”

Gibson picked up the file folder and flipped it open. Within were various photos of the knife Arthur had used against the rookie cop. “Pretty weird, Ry. The lab did all the usual tests.”

“Yeah? So?”

“So they think it’s from England,” Gibson continued in that tone of voice game show hosts use when they’re about to reveal what’s behind door number one.

“So what’s the punch line?”

“Near as they can tell without carbon dating, England of the sixth century, or thereabouts.”

“Don’t crap on me, Gib. I’m so not in the mood.”

Gibson leaned forward, his tired features dead serious, and handed Ryan the report. “I’m not. It’s all in here.”

Ryan gazed at the report a moment, and then looked his partner in the eye. “I don’t know what the hell’s goin’ on, but I think you and I have an all-nighter to pull with Mr. Internet. We need to find out everything there is to know about King Arthur.”

Gibson’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s a lot of information, Ry.”

Ryan tossed the report onto his desk and pointed at the next desk. “And there’s an awful lot of cyberspace right there on your computer, partner. Let’s get cracking.”

With a heavy sigh, Gibson rolled the chair over to his own immaculately organized desk and set to work.



The episode with Reyna had excited the boys more than usual. Some of the older ones, like Enrique and Luis, could talk of nothing else but “who she’s gonna like better, me or your fool ass?” while the youngsters were all excited that Lance had bested her. “We don’t need no girl anyways” was a common refrain among them.

It had taken Arthur and Lance much longer than usual to settle the in-house sleepers for the night. Speculation ran in whispers among the supposedly sleeping boys about what would happen next, and would she be back, and would she want to join, and how did she learn to shoot like that? Finally, silence punctuated by the ever-present dripping of water and the occasional echoing whinny from Llamrei wafting in from her tunnel, settled over the main hall.

Arthur and Lance sat side by side on the platform in front of the king’s throne, legs outstretched before them, enjoying a bit of downtime after such a tumultuous evening.

Lance pushed his hair back from his eyes and looked at Arthur. He’d removed his circlet, and his lengthening hair framed his soft features like twin waterfalls. “Can I ask you something, Arthur?”

“Of course. What is it you wish to know?”

“What was it like when you’s a kid? You know, way back in the day?”

“My childhood was magical, thanks to Merlin. But lonely, as well. There be only my foster brother, Kay, to play with, at least until Merlin came to tutor us.”

Lance pulled his legs up and under him, Indian style, and faced Arthur. “What was he like, Merlin? Was he really a powerful wizard?”

“Merlin did indeed possess powers above and beyond nature. Not in the way thy modern society hath created such magical inventions, no. Merlin was like a *force* of nature. He taught me about life, all life, and the precious nature of it, and why preserving it at all costs should be our primary aim. I owe much to Merlin, and to God, for granting me this second chance to make things right.”

Lance digested this new information, considering his own life. He supposed he believed in God, but had never given it much thought. He sure didn’t believe God had ever done anything for him. But then, he hadn’t done anything for God, either, so he supposed they were even. “What about your parents?”

Arthur sighed heavily, a twinge of sadness creeping like mist over his face. “I never know my sires, Lance, though I have oft been told of my mother’s great beauty. My foster father, Sir Ector, did his best to make me feel as one with his family, so much so that I did truly come to think of him *as* my father.”

Lance’s face clouded over at the mention of “foster father,” and he felt Arthur’s eyes scrutinizing him.

“Tell me of thy upbringing, Lance, if thou would have it so.”

Lance squirmed and allowed his flowing bangs to obscure half his face, a trick he always used when he wished to hide from others. Just the mention of his past squeezed his heart and sent a lump of anguish into his throat.

“There ain’t much to tell. My mother... she did drugs. And she....” He paused and sucked in a deep breath, fisting his tunic spasmodically. Then blurted, “She sold me to a stranger when I was one years old!” His breath lodged in his throat, and he began to sweat. “She *sold* me, Arthur, so she could buy crack cocaine!” He paused again, fought for air, struggling for control. His entire body had tensed up, ready for flight.

I can do this, he assured himself. *I need to do this*.

“I don’ even remember her face.” That last barely came out as a wisp of breath, and he looked at Arthur with abject pain welling within his sad green eyes.

“I be truly sorry, my boy.” The king’s voice was laced with deep sadness.

“I don’t even have a real last name, Arthur,” Lance went on quietly, fighting back the tears.

Be strong, Lance! You’re First Knight!

Arthur was confused. “But, did you not say thy name be—”

“Sepulveda?” Lance finished for him, nodding bitterly, eyes afire with lament. “Yeah, that’s the name they gave me at Children’s Services because....” His breathing almost stopped. “...That was the name of the street where I got left

when that stranger didn't wanna feed me no more." His enflamed eyes brimmed with an impending flood, and his body began to tremble. "Arthur, I'm named after a street!"

The king's body seemed to sag with pain, becoming smaller and so much less imposing than he always seemed to Lance. "Thy life hath been one I would not wish upon my fiercest enemy."

Arthur reached out a comforting hand and placed it upon Lance's shaking shoulder.

Lance recoiled at once, untangling his legs and leaping to his feet, almost falling back, eyes wide with terror, gasping for breath, shaking with fear, feeling like an animal caught in a trap.

"My apologies, Lance," Arthur said, pulling his hand slowly back. "I had forgotten."

Lance's breathing gradually slowed, but his eyes never left Arthur's hand, which now rested on the king's own lap. "No, it ain't you, Arthur, it's me. I'm..."

"Doth thou wish to speak of it?"

"No!" Lance looked away and sat again on the platform, farther from Arthur this time. His heart remained in his throat, his stomach churning.

"As thou wish."

Silence fell between them for a few moments, and then Lance began to cry, softly, and agonizingly. He struggled to hold back the tears, but they forced their way out. His voice felt raspy and rough, like air passing through bones.

"It ain't just you, Arthur, I ain't never told nobody. I been tryin' to ferget it, 'cept I can't."

"Perhaps to speak openly of this pain may lay it to rest."

Lance refused to look up. His hair covered his entire face now, and he sniffled and gave in to more tears. His legs splayed outward, and his hands were clenched into tight fists, gripping the folds of his tunic like a lifeline.

"It's jus' that... in this foster home when I's small...."

"I am here, Lance."

Lance fought his shivering body for control. His voice became small and uncertain, like the faintest whisper of wind through the leaves of a tree.

"I was six years old when it started... the man... my foster dad... he sometimes came to my room at night and... he tole me that this was what boys did together and that he was doing me a favor by teaching me." He gulped and shuddered. "He, uh, he tole me I really wanted it even if I didn't know I did...."

He glanced hesitantly into Arthur's gentle face, his wide eyes seared and desperate and without hope. He saw the compassion and understanding and then

broke.

“He raped me, Arthur! He did it a lot, for almost three years! And he made me do stuff, too, and... I... I wanted it to stop, but I didn’t stop it. He kept saying it was my fault, that I wanted it, and, oh God, Arthur, I must’ve liked it ’cause I never ran away, not till I was nine years old and.... Oh, Arthur, maybe I *did* want it, maybe I’m queer like Mark and Jack and that’s why they make me so nervous! I mean, I ain’t never even kissed a girl before, though some’s tried, but I’m scared of them too. When I’m around them gay boys I feel things I don’t wanna feel.” His eyes peeked through his hair beseechingly, revealing the guilt and the shame pouring forth from his soul. “Oh God, Arthur, I don’t know who I am. I don’t even know *what* I am!”

He leapt at Arthur like a wild animal on the attack and flung his arms around the man, sobbing uncontrollably into Arthur’s tunic, his body shaking violently with pain and humiliation. Arthur gently stroked his hair, held him tenderly, and spoke soothingly into his ear.

“But I know what thou art,” he began, cradling and rocking the sobbing child. “Thou art Lance, my chosen First Knight, who shalt lead the children of this city in a triumphant crusade to right the wrongs that have been done to them. You were not chosen because you favor girls or boys, but because you already possess the qualities that make a true man—honor, loyalty, faithfulness, and compassion. These be the measure of any man, and you are a better man at fourteen than many grown men I have known. That is what, and that is who you are, my Lance.”

Arthur’s words penetrated Lance’s deep and throbbing pain and warmed his heart with their sincerity, but the sobbing continued unabated.

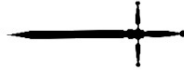
They remained this way until Lance finally cried himself to sleep in Arthur’s strong, comforting embrace. Then the king gently laid the boy down, wiped the tears and snot from his face with one sleeve, and carefully covered him with several blankets.

As he sat and watched Lance’s breathing become smooth and even, he ever so softly brushed the damp hair off the boy’s face. There were still lines of anguish drawn across his unblemished features, but slowly these eased themselves away as deeper sleep grasped hold of the boy and carried him off to the necessary Land of Forget.

Arthur knelt and bowed his head in prayer. “Dear Lord, thank ye for delivering unto me this lost one, and all of these lost ones. May I do right by your faith in me. You have set unto me a great and noble task. I ask only the strength and humility to achieve it.”

Then he lay down close enough to Lance should the boy awaken and need

him, but not so close as to stir the horrific memories he'd only just expunged. After a time he eased into a fitful sleep.



When he awoke early next morning—or what he surmised to be morning since no sunlight penetrated the storm drains—Arthur instantly noted that Lance was not beside him and leapt up in fright. Concerned about the boy's state of mind, he hurried down the nearest tunnel and suddenly pulled up short. Lance was just ahead, sitting beside little Chris, who slept soundly and snugly, his breathing soft and even.

Arthur approached quietly and knelt beside Lance questioningly. “Does all be well?” he whispered so as to not wake the sleeping child.

Lance nodded, gently stroking Chris's soft blond hair. Then he looked up at Arthur, his own hair tangled and matted with dried sweat, and met the king's eyes with determination. “I'm gonna make sure what happened to me *never* happens to him.”

Arthur understood, and nodded, hesitantly reaching out to place his hand on Lance's shoulder, pausing until the boy smiled gratefully. He lightly squeezed Lance's shoulder to show his approval and then removed his hand.

“Thank you, Arthur, for last night, for listening, and for...,” Lance trailed off and looked away.

“For what?”

Lance shyly peeked from behind his draping hair at Arthur's face and whispered, “For not hating me.”

Arthur drew back, appalled at the notion. “Hate thee? Never.”

Lance's face broke into an almost beatific smile, and he impulsively hugged Arthur. They remained that way for a long moment. Then Lance pulled away, busily pushing the hair back from his face, and stood up.

Arthur stood, as well.

“Sorry,” Lance said weakly, his voice soft with trepidation. “Better stop with all the hugging. I *am* supposed to be your First Knight, after all.” He shyly lifted his eyes to meet Arthur's gaze and saw pure compassion in those brown eyes.

“And a finer one I could never hope to find.”

Lance beamed with pride.

“Come, lad, let us prepare for the day.”

Lance nodded and side by side they returned to the throne room.



By the time the underground residents had all risen and bathed, dressed and eaten, it was near eleven o'clock by Lance's cell phone. Even the homeless kids seemed to have a phone these days—most, like Lance's, were jail broken, and, like every other kid these days, he typically used it for texting, especially here underground, listening to music, or watching videos or social networking.

Most days, all the kids drifted in around noon to continue training, so Lance seldom sent out a blanket text. There were almost three hundred kids now, he realized.

Hell if I'm gonna put all those names in my phone book!

Before weapons training each day, Arthur always allowed kids, especially newcomers, to tell their stories—who they were and what their lives had been like before joining the crusade. This day was no different. He looked majestic and almost larger than life on his throne with Lance seated in his own large, wooden chair beside him. Lance had brushed his hair and replaced his gold circlet, the remnants of the previous night's purging removed for the moment from his heart. The other kids sat cross-legged on the ground or on blankets or stood along the periphery of the group.

Today's group was huge, Lance noted, as he scanned the room.

Maybe the whole three hundred.

There was one notable exception—Reyna had yet to appear. Lance had to admit, the girl was pretty obnoxious, but man, could she shoot! He'd love to put her in charge of the archers so he could focus on the swordplay.

Wow, he thought to himself, I'm thinking like a real First Knight!

Arthur addressed the crowd as he did every morning, "Be there any among you who'd like to share your story?"

Mark shyly put up his hand. He and Jack sat near the front, now clothed like everyone else: baggy tunics, leather pants and jerkins, and a wrap for the head, which was necessary in Mark's case to keep his mop of long, unkempt blond hair from obscuring his vision during practices.

Arthur nodded to Mark, who glanced at Lance and hesitated. Lance nodded as well, and Mark began. "I come from Washington, up north. My parents have money. No Bill Gates or nothing, but they're pretty loaded. Nice house in the suburbs and all. Anyways, I guess things was okay when I was little, but then when I was thirteen my folks caught me kissing another boy out in the pool house, and they freaked something crazy. Flat out told me they wouldn't allow me to be gay, they wouldn't have me embarrass them like that with their friends. I tried to tell them I didn't just wake up one day and decide to be gay, that I always felt this way, that I was born this way, but they didn't care."

Lance suddenly felt ashamed of the negative attitude he'd initially shown the

blond boy, especially given his own conflicted feelings. “So what happened?” He really needed to know.

Mark grimaced and shook his head, those huge blue eyes pooling with pain. “Didn’t want nuthin’ to do with that truth, or me. Kicked my ass right out the house and into the street, said they wasn’t gonna stand for no faggot son, and if I ever decided to ‘become straight’ I could come home. I was *thirteen*, man! Ain’t heard from ’em since. I hitched my way to Hollywood ’cause, well, that’s where homeless kids go, or so I heard. Make it in the movies or some sh—crap.” He gave a tragic, hollow laugh. “That’s why you seen me on the streets. There’s no movies for kids, especially little queer boys like me. Just the streets. Last two years it’s all I could do to survive, ya know?”

Lance leaned forward, his brow furrowed, his heart tight with anguish and empathy. “What about the, you know, the drugs?”

Sadness settled over Mark’s soft, milky-white face. “Only way I could deal, Lance. Men using me all the time, doing whatever they wanted to my body.” He shivered. “Had to kill the pain somehow.”

Now little Chris, seated as close to Lance as possible without being up in the throne area with him, reached out toward Mark, took the older boy’s hand in his, and asked, “Mark, did your mama ever say she wished ya’d never been born?”

Startled, Mark’s eyes widened, and he nodded painfully.

Chris’s small, round face echoed that pain. “That’s what my mama tole me too, ’fore she left me alone in that dirty ole alley and never come back.”

Mark tried for a hesitant smile, squeezing the small boy’s hand gently before releasing it. Many heads nodded throughout the chamber.

Lance squirmed with discomfort and sorrow, glancing at Arthur, who looked deeply troubled and sympathetic.

“What about you, Jack?” the king asked cautiously.

Jack patted Mark on the back and said, “Kinda the same, ’cept I hitched here from Idaho. Same reason—couldn’t stay at home, so I came to Hollywood to be a star. Yeah, right!”

He stopped a moment as bitterness and anguish seemed to overwhelm him. Mark reached out to pat him on the back, and Jack offered a grateful smile.

“My folks weren’t super rich like his, but they didn’t want no queer-boy for a son, neither. Didn’t matter that I worked out and played football and all that ‘manly’ stuff. Hell, my dad accused me of playing sports so I could check out the other guys. He never even got that I did those things for him, ’cause *he* wanted an athlete for a son.”

His whole body tensed, and he gripped the folds of his tunic, pausing before continuing. He turned his sad brown eyes up toward the king.

“I used to be quarterback, Arthur. I know that probably don’t mean much to you, but it’s kind of a big deal in football. But nothin’ I did was good enough.” He glanced at Mark and then toward Lance. “They was gonna send me to some ‘rehab’ place that was s’posed to make me straight.” He emphasized those last words with the finger quotation marks. “What bull—! Oh, my bad, sorry, Arthur. Just like Mark said, I didn’t just wake up one day and decide to like boys.”

He paused and sighed bitterly. “Anyway, when they was going to send me to the shock treatment place, or whatever it was, that’s when I decided to split. But you wanna know the worst part? My dad tole me I was adopted, which I didn’t even know till then, and that he was so happy the faggot under his roof wasn’t his own flesh and blood. That was it for me, Arthur. I hitched over here, and Mark and me met on the streets, pretty near where you found us. That’s the only place in Hollywood for homeless gay boys to earn their keep. It’s either that or juvy.”

He dropped his eyes again in shame. “So here I am, star quarterback to slut boy, just ’cause my parents couldn’t deal.” He angrily brushed a tear from his eye.

“Didn’t you like, hate doing all that shi—I mean, that stuff?” Luis asked, a look of disgust plastered across his acne-scarred face.

Jack snorted. “What do you think? Old guys doing you while talking about how their kid gets all A’s in school or got a home run in his little league game?”

Luis had an expression of appalled revulsion on his face.

“I hate it, man!” Jack spit out. “I miss playing sports. But mostly I miss having a family, you know? I got no one ’cept Mark.” He dipped his head to hide the tears dropping into his lap.

Every muscle in Lance’s body froze as Mark and Jack shared their stories, and his own painful past welled up in his throat like bile.

Slut boy. That’s what Jack called himself.

Was that me too?

Those words were a knife to his heart— they hit way too close to home.

Shoving his personal guilt aside, Lance leapt to his feet, gazing at Jack with deep intensity. “Jack, look at me.”

Surprised, Jack raised his head.

“You do not just have Mark for your family,” Lance stated loudly and with finality. “You have me and Arthur and everyone here. *We* are your family!”

The gathered kids broke into applause, and Jack’s face spread into an enormous grin of gratitude. Lance grinned back and ran a hand quickly through his hair, which made Jack laugh. Mark threw his arm over Jack’s shoulders and pulled him close.

Arthur rose to stand beside Lance and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder as he spoke. "My First Knight be correct. We all be family here. Every life in here and out there is precious in God's eyes, even if not so in man's. But remember, my knights-in-training, the needs of the whole company be of greater import than the needs of the few, or even the one, myself included. No one is indispensable to our crusade."

Arthur glanced at him, and Lance nodded his understanding.

"Does that include me?" came a familiar female voice from behind the assemblage. All heads turned to look at the tunnel behind them, and there stood Reyna, haughty as ever, dressed to kill. She wore a full archer's ensemble: tight brown pants that accentuated her long legs, knee-high brown boots, long-sleeve, multi-pocketed, button-down jacket, and an archer's glove on her right hand. Her silky long hair was braided and drifted down her back like a climbing rope. Slung over her left shoulder was an expensive-looking bow, and a quiver filled with arrows.

Within the group, the few girls scowled, but the boys, especially the older ones, gaped at her in open-mouthed awe. Reyna tossed a contemptuous gaze toward Enrique and Luis, sitting beside one another, mouths open like grouper fish, and then turned her attention toward Arthur.

"Do I take thy meaning, Lady Reyna, that thou wish to join us?"

Reyna chuckled wryly. "Don't know about the 'Lady' part, but yeah. I got a few months to kill while my parents party in Europe, so why not? Might be fun."

Arthur turned to Lance.

Lance understood and looked out over the heads of the group to lock eyes with Reyna.

Don't blush, fool!

"Does this mean you're willing to take orders from a boy younger and prettier than you?"

This time there was no laughter.

Reyna gazed long and hard at him, but Lance never broke eye contact, and that obviously impressed her.

"Yeah, that's what it means."

Lance turned to Arthur. "Sire, if it please you, I'd like to make Reyna head archery instructor, so I can focus more on the swordplay."

"Agreed." Arthur turned to Reyna. "Everyone, welcome our new archer, Reyna."

Thunderous applause erupted from the assemblage, along with a few whistles and catcalls, which drew a frown from Arthur.

Lance wondered what that was about. He suspected it was because a hot chick

like Reyna might get some of the guys fighting over her.

Enrique quickly shoved Luis aside to open up a space between them. “Move over, fool,” he whispered and then waved at Reyna. “You can sit here, we got room.”

She eyed both boys with disdain. “I’ll stand, thank you.”

“Lady Reyna,” Arthur continued, “And yes, a knight must always address any lady as ‘Lady’—it is of the code of chivalry—tell us thy story. How did thee come here to us?”

Reyna raised her well-groomed eyebrows and chuckled. “I love the way you talk. It’s so cool. Anyway, not much on me. I’m almost seventeen. My parents are rich fat cats who live out in Porter Ranch. They pretty much buy me whatever I want long as I don’t, you know, talk with them much.” She laughed bitterly. “God forbid they’d wanna spend time with *me*. Far too busy, my folks, impressing the rich white people because they’re rich Latinos with just as much money. It’s all... whatever, to me.”

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?” Lance asked as he resumed his seat beside Arthur. She still intimidated the hell out of him, but her skills with a bow and arrow were fantastic.

“Any of you seen that movie about the kids who had to fight to the death in some arena?” Many heads nodded in the affirmative. “I *loved* the book and told my parents I wanted to learn archery. ’Course, they got me the best instructor money could buy. He only stayed around till I got better’n him.” She tossed off that haughty little laugh.

“How come you got a few months with nothing to do?” Enrique threw in, his eyes devouring the stunningly beautiful girl.

“My parents went to Italy for their wedding anniversary. They never want me to go on vacations with them so they pay me money to stay home.”

“They pay you?” Lavern exclaimed.

Reyna eyed the small boy dismissively. “Yeah, I got me six thousand this time. Long as I keep my grades up and don’t give the servants a hard time, it’s all good.”

“What about school?” Jack asked.

“I go when I need to. No tests today, so I’m good.” Then she scrutinized Jack and Mark more closely. Mark still had his arm wrapped around Jack’s shoulders. “You guys gay?”

Mark and Jack exchanged a surprised look. “How’d you know?”

“I’ve been around.”

Arthur surveyed the group. “Does anyone have more to share before we begin training?”

Mark threw up his hand, and Jack laughed. “You’re not in school, fool!” Jack said, laughing.

Mark shrugged sheepishly. “Old habit, I guess.”

“Jack,” Arthur said before Mark could ask his question, “We all be knights-in-training. While it seems a popular word in this era, our code of chivalry requires respect for one another. Therefore, we must refrain from use of the word ‘fool’.”

Jack flushed red. “Sorry, Arthur.”

He and Mark exchanged a smile, and Arthur nodded to reassure them he understood.

“So, Arthur,” Mark began again, “that night you rescued us... well, you never said how come that bullet bounced off of you.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, tell us.”

There were excited murmurings among the assembled, especially from the boys who’d witnessed the event.

Arthur placed Excalibur in front of him, point to the ground, his hands resting atop the jeweled hilt. “Merlin once told me that so long as I hold Excalibur in my grasp, no harm shall befall me. I pray he be correct, for the next phase of our crusade be almost upon us.”

He lifted Excalibur and handed the enormous sword to Lance, who found he could support its weight with greater ease than before as he held it across his outstretched arms. Arthur reached down beside his throne and lifted up his shield, holding it out for all to see.

There were gasps of surprise and excited murmurings from the crowd. Emblazoned on the face of the shield was a magnificent rendering of the “A” symbol with the sword thrust through it, the same symbol many of these kids had seen in their neighborhoods, the symbol that had ignited gang wars throughout the city.

Enrique leapt to his feet in shock. “Crap, Arthur, you didn’t tell us youse that tagger!”

Arthur frowned at Enrique’s language, but Enrique didn’t seem to notice.

Luis stood beside his homeboy and pointed at the shield. “Them gangsters, they all want your blood, Arthur. They want you dead!”

Arthur lowered the shield and raised a hand to quell the excited murmuring. “I know that, Luis. Though I did not at first comprehend the reason, upon awakening in this city, I had been given directives within a vision. There were tools, what you call ‘spray paint’, and locations provided. I proceeded to ‘tag’ these areas as the vision dictated, and now I understand why. These gang members be of great import to our cause, and though I do sincerely hope my life shall not end at their hands, we must at least give them that choice.”

Lance stared at Arthur. He'd known this day was approaching, but it *still* scared the hell out of him.

CHAPTER 4: MIGHT FOR RIGHT

AFTER ANOTHER TWO WEEKS OF intensive training, Arthur felt his squires were ready for that next phase—recruiting those who were called gang members to their cause. Lance had some knowledge, but others like Enrique and Luis were far better at educating Arthur on gang life and gang think. Both of them had friends in gangs, and both had flirted dangerously with the idea of getting jumped in themselves.

According to Lance, who had used the wizard-like Internet on his phone—Arthur never failed to marvel at the advancement of man—there were thousands of gang members in the County of Angels. All that “might” was available for his cause. If he were to succeed, if his new Camelot might achieve a greatness surpassing the old, he’d need as many of those youth as possible.

Reyna had proven an adept instructor, more condescending than Arthur would have liked, but she accepted his advice that she would gain greater cooperation if she complimented the good, more than she criticized the bad, in her pupils. Once she took that advice to heart, the boys and girls—a few more had materialized since Reyna joined up—quickly mastered the techniques and were well on their way toward becoming expert archers.

Lance had worked extra hard coaching those who chose the sword as their weapon, and these boys had increased in size and strength, as had Lance himself. Some of the bigger lads like Enrique and Luis wielded the two-handed broadsword with deadly accuracy and power. Lance had chosen a sword slightly smaller than Excalibur in size, one which could be gripped with one or both hands, and he could now easily switch back and forth from one to both during a fight.

Arthur felt extreme pride in Lance for his improvement, his drive and ability to lead. It seemed to the king that the boy, having gotten his deep-seated pain out into the open, and knowing Arthur would not reject him for his ambiguous nature, seemed determined to focus on the present and the future. That impressed him immensely.

In laying out their plans, Arthur and Lance had gathered all the boys who had intimate knowledge of gang life and sought their input. Contacting the “shot

callers,” as Arthur had been informed the street leaders were called, was relatively easy. Word spread fast on the streets, what with cell phones and texting the communication medium of the day.

The biggest problem, Arthur was told, was that most of those kids carried guns, or could easily acquire them. Again marveling at the technology, Arthur was given a crash course via the Internet on modern weaponry, particularly the most commonly used guns on the streets.

Knowing that his adversaries on Saturday night would possess these weapons, Arthur ordered every archer to be part of the campaign. A sword was no match for a gun, he realized. He, of course, would carry Excalibur, and other swordsmen, Lance included, would flank him to add a greater sense of strength to his presence.

Those guns concerned him, however, for though *he* might be safe with Excalibur, the others were not. Still, despite the all-too-real possibility that one of his children could be killed, he *had* to move forward. It was his destiny, his purpose, his sole reason for being here. War always brought casualties, he knew, glancing frequently, and with trepidation at Lance, all throughout the meeting.

It was now Friday night, and the word had gone out to neighborhoods throughout the city. The mystery tagger requested a meeting with any and all shot callers who should like to attend. Of course, Arthur knew they’d bring others for backup, but then, so would he. The stage was set. Tomorrow night, he and his eager knights-to-be would either find themselves in an all-out war, or the beginning of something great and mighty for this city and its people.

Lance asked Arthur to take him back to Eucalyptus Park so he could practice his skating, which, as he informed Arthur, he’d been sadly neglecting of late because of all his weapons training.

Happy to spend time with his protégé, Arthur readily agreed. “On one condition,” he added slyly, his brown eyes lit with amusement.

“What?” asked Lance.

“You must teach me the use of this skateboard of yours.”

Lance’s face lit up with pure joy. “You got it!”

And so they rode Llamrei late into the night, arriving at the park after midnight. Arthur carried Excalibur, and Lance his own sword, both sheathed, as a precaution lest trouble accost them on the journey. The trip to the park was uneventful, however, and within its environs everything reflected solitude and peace.

Lance sighed as he looked around him at the shadows and pools of streetlight and the emptiness and the calm. “If only life could be like this all the time, Arthur,” Lance mused, his young voice wistful and melancholic and sounding

older than it should. “No war, no adults hurting kids, no drama.”

Ah, my dear Lance, that would needs mean no people, either, for with people always comes great good and great evil.”

Lance nodded sadly. “Yeah, I know.” Then he flashed that devilish grin. “Come on, Arthur. Your lessons begin now.”

Leaving their swords strapped to Llamrei’s saddle, they slipped into the skate park via Lance’s secret entrance, and the boy leapt forward onto his board in one fluid motion, sailing out into the park and up the nearest ramp, his long hair floating in the breeze like angel wings.

Arthur marveled at Lance’s prowess on this very odd invention. Lance flipped and turned and jumped and landed, all with a precision. After fifteen minutes of warming up, Lance skated over to the king. A grin split his handsome face, which had begun beading with sweat.

“You ready?” the boy asked, holding out the board.

Arthur eyed the board uncertainly. “Methinks I should attempt this on a flat surface, Lance. T’would not be seemly for thy king to break his arm before we face our destiny.”

Lance laughed with delight. “You got that right. C’mon.”

They exited the skate park and moved back into Eucalyptus Park proper, where there was grass and pathways for Arthur to practice on. They stopped, and Lance handed Arthur the board. He eyed it a moment before setting it on the ground. “How should I begin?”

Lance placed one foot on the board. “Just put one foot here, right in the middle, and then kick against the ground with the other,” he instructed. “Then when you get some speed up, put both feet on the board and keep your balance. Piece of cake.”

Arthur’s eyebrows shot up. “Piece of cake?”

Lance shrugged, placing the board in front of Arthur. “Just an expression. Means something’s easy.”

“Oh,” replied Arthur. “Perhaps it should mean something that you make *seem* easy.”

“C’mon, chicken, get on.”

Arthur’s eyebrows shot up again, but he didn’t respond. Rather, he placed one booted foot on the board as Lance had instructed and attempted to push forward with his other. He managed one good push before the board flew out from under his foot, and he nearly toppled backward. Lance laughed, and even Llamrei, nibbling at the grass, looked up and whinnied in amusement.

Arthur frowned, his pride floating to the surface.

If a boy can do this....

Approaching the board a second time, he again placed his left foot firmly in the middle, adjusted his center of gravity, and began kicking at the ground with his right foot, feeling, he thought, rather like a horse. But the board went forward and he with it. This time he kept firm pressure on the board with his foot so it would not escape him, and he proceeded along the winding pathway.

Lance clapped with delight. "You're doing it, Arthur! Now ride it, man."

Arthur raised his kicking foot carefully and planted it firmly behind the other, and did not tumble off. The board, with him on it, moved steadily forward, not with the rapidity Lance could achieve, but forward motion nonetheless.

"Yes!" Lance shouted.

Arthur then made a mistake. He turned his head to acknowledge Lance's "Yes" and promptly lost his balance. The board flew out from under him, and he toppled backward, crashing hard onto the grass rising upward from the path. The air *whooshed* from his lungs as he landed, and he lay dazed and confused for a few moments.

"You okay, Arthur? I shoulda tole you not to turn your head."

Arthur raised himself onto his elbows. "I be fine, my boy. Growing up, I fell from many a horse, and that be a fine art I learnt quite well."

Lance chuckled. "You did look pretty funny."

"Yes, you did," said an unexpected voice from behind Lance. Lance whirled in fright. "Ms. McMullen!"

A lady stood directly behind the boy, clad in jeans and a light jacket, her blonde hair loose about her shoulders, her expression wary. "I was told you hang out here, Lance."

"What you be doin' here, Ms. McMullen? It ain't safe."

She gave his tunic and pants the once over, glanced down at Arthur sprawled on the grass, then back at Lance. "I just drove over tonight on a hunch. I've been worried about you, Lance. You haven't been to school."

Embarrassed, Arthur stretched out a hand, and Lance clasped it, helping pull him to his feet. Brushing grass off his hauberk, Arthur eyed the lady awkwardly. The two adults sized each other up.

"Where are thy manners, Lance?" Arthur said, recovering his aplomb as best he could. He had trouble taking his eyes off this lady.

"Huh?" replied Lance, nervously pushing his sweat-drenched hair from his face. "Oh, sorry. This is Ms. McMullen, the teacher I tole you about. This be King Arthur. And I be his First Knight."

"I be honored to meet thee, Lady McMullen," Arthur said smoothly and with great respectfulness.

She made no move to shake his hand. "As soon as I saw you on the news, I

knew that's why Lance was asking me all those questions. But I still haven't figured out what you're up to."

Arthur's eyebrows rose enquiringly. "Up to?"

"He ain't up to anything, Ms. McMullen," Lance interjected indignantly, "'cept helping kids."

She ignored Lance completely, her gaze locked on Arthur's face. "Is it for the publicity? Is that why you're pretending to be King Arthur?"

"Pretending?"

"I'm not fourteen years old, mister, no offense Lance, and I don't fool easily. You don't expect me to believe you're really King Arthur, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Because King Arthur, if he *was* real, died centuries ago."

Arthur smiled warmly, gazing at her in wonder.

An extraordinary woman, he thought, a woman of spirit.

"Lance hath told me of your fascination with my past deeds. I can assure you my present ones be of the same ilk."

"What, starting a new Round Table or something?"

Arthur nodded, his eyes never leaving her face. "Precisely, save this time I shalt make it permanent."

She recoiled in horror. "I warn you, if anything happens to Lance...."

Arthur placed a hand on Lance's shoulder. "Be assured, milady, Lance shall come to no harm." He found himself fascinated by the loveliness of her features, especially her golden hair.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't stare at me like that," she said, her voice firm.

Arthur glanced down. "My sincerest apologies, milady. It just be that you bring forth memories of my beloved Guinevere, both in beauty and in spirit. I did truly never expect to gaze upon one such as her again."

Lance gazed nervously from Arthur to Jenny and back again.

Arthur's sincere tone softened her expression for just a moment. But then it returned, a look that told Arthur she'd likely been hurt in the past and was instinctively distrustful as a result.

"Guinevere, huh? That's a line I haven't heard before."

Arthur smiled at the way she bristled with indignation. "You possess my Gwen's stubborn temperament. It t'were a quality Lancelot loved in her, as well. He called her 'Jenny' because she told him it did always make her feel young."

Arthur noted Lance looking startled, and realized in one corner of his mind that he had yet to tell *this* Lance of the previous one.

Before he could begin, the lady replied, "It just so happens that's my name too. Jenny."

Arthur's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Indeed?"

Lance fidgeted, looking from one adult to the other. "Come on, Arthur, we gotta go. 'Night, Ms. McMullen."

He tried pulling Arthur's sleeve toward Llamrei, but Arthur stood his ground. Lance dropped the sleeve, looking like he'd just been abandoned on a street corner. He snatched up his skateboard and sullenly moved up the rise to Llamrei, petting her gently around the snout.

Arthur remained frozen in place, gazing with wide-eyed wonder at the lovely young woman before him. The streetlight cast her blonde hair within a halo of light that entranced him.

"Be thou a good teacher, Lady Jenny?" he asked with a tilt of his head.

Mesmerized by his gaze, Jenny was clearly caught off guard by the question. She cleared her throat, then replied, "I, uh.... I don't know. I try. I love what I teach."

"But do you love *who* you teach?"

Jenny opened her mouth to respond, but then closed it.

Arthur smiled warmly. "Methinks we shalt gaze upon one another again."

Turning, he strolled up the rise to Llamrei and Lance. So absorbed were his thoughts with this fascinating young woman, he failed to notice Lance glowering down at her as he mounted the horse. He reached for Lance, but the boy ignored the proffered hand and scrambled up into the saddle by himself. Arthur's gaze remained on Jenny, who looked radiant beneath that circle of streetlight. He raised his hand in.

"Farewell, Lady Jenny."

Jenny slowly raised her own hand in farewell as Arthur turned the horse and trotted away.



The return journey was made in silence, not because Lance didn't want to talk, but due to Arthur's preoccupation with Jenny. Lance had made an attempt at drawing him out, but the king's responses to questions fell into the category of grunts or nods.

For his part, Arthur found himself replaying in his mind the all-too-brief encounter with that fascinating woman. What had he sensed within her? Strength, yes, stubborn defiance, certainly. But what else? He knew virtually nothing about her except she taught Lance and other children like him. She obviously cared for Lance, which pleased him. But what of her other charges? Did her heart go out to them, as well, or was her teaching job nothing more than

that—a job?

He found her by turns confusing and alluring, and felt drawn to her even more than he'd been toward Guinevere. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, after all, part of a treaty agreement. She'd been beautiful and bold, nobody's fool, his Gwen, and somewhere along the way he *had* fallen in love with her, and then loved her deeply until the end.

He suddenly realized that Llamrei had stopped. Looking around, he saw they were within the riverbed facing the grill entrance to his lair. Lance stood on the ground, holding open the enormous grate for them to enter.

“Well?” Lance asked sullenly, gripping his board like a weapon.

Arthur shook his head a moment to clear his thoughts. “My apologies, Lance,” he began, pulling himself back into the present. “My mind wandered.”

Lance snorted. “Yeah, I bet!”

Arthur noted the tone and Lance's slouchy posture and sullen look. “You seem troubled, Lance. What be weighing upon thee?”

Lance looked down at the ground. “Nothing.”

“Hast thy mood to do with the Lady Jenny?”

Lance snapped his head up like a cobra preparing to strike. “Look, she's only a teacher, okay!”

Arthur recoiled.

Lance looked ashamed and bowed his head. “Sorry. She's cool. It's just....”

Arthur gazed down at the boy, concerned, but genuinely mystified as to what was troubling him. “Just what?”

“Nothing. I'm tired,” he said, and then stepped past the grill to enter the darkness of the tunnel without looking back.

Puzzled, Arthur trotted Llamrei through the entrance and closed the grill behind them. The bobbing, bouncing light of Lance's lantern guided him through the dark tunnels back to their chamber, but the boy said not another word along the way.



As Jenny returned to her apartment, her mind raced, replaying images of her encounter. Tossing her jacket haphazardly onto the sofa, she wandered into her broom-closet-sized kitchen, opened the fridge, and pulled out a carton of orange juice. She was so lost in thought that she took a swig from the carton without using a glass, set the juice down near the sink, and drifted into the living room.

She knew she should be exhausted—Fridays were usually the end of the line for energy levels—but her mind was hyped by the night's events. Who was this

man, and why didn't she simply call the cops and report that she'd seen him? Report that he had a fourteen-year-old boy in tow and kept that boy out of school every day? She *could* do these things, and her mind told her that she *should*. But her heart told a different story. She'd been burned enough times by men—she knew the “user” type *very* well by now. This guy wasn't like that.

He almost reminded her of this alien character from an old TV series she'd seen on cable. This alien had been here on earth once before and fathered a child. Thinking his son was in trouble, the alien returned to earth to help him, and discovered the boy's mother had disappeared. Father and son set out to locate her. Because the alien wasn't from earth, everything seemed new to him, and he sincerely saw the best qualities in everyone he met. He even helped bring those qualities to the surface.

That was the feeling Arthur gave her. He seemed out of place in this time, in this world, and yet he oozed sincerity. And Lance adored him—that was obvious. She knew enough of Lance to know he was nobody's fool. Still, he was fourteen years old and could be “wowed” by swords and horses and tales of chivalry.

Like you, Jenny? Isn't that why you loved those old Arthurian stories, where knights rode horses and rescued fair maidens, and right and wrong were clearly delineated ideals?

But human beings weren't that simple, were they? People were shades of gray, at least in her mind. You had your left-wing ideologues and your right-wing ideologues, and each believed their playbook held all the answers to every human condition. But weren't people so much more complex than that? Didn't most of us fall within the gray area, and thus the solutions to human dramas could never come from a single playbook, but rather from a combination of both? Didn't each of us need to be seen as an individual first, and member of a group second?

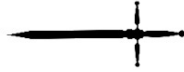
Could this man somehow, impossibly, *be* King Arthur? Could those stories of old *really* be true? She considered this possibility but a moment before shaking her head. No, it wasn't possible. She'd sooner believe he was some kind of alien from outer space. And yet....

She felt the weight of what she knew, and the even greater weight of what she didn't know, squeezing her like a giant vise. And yet, what of Lance? Could he be in any danger? Not, she thought, not from the man himself, but possibly from how his ultimate plans played out. A new Round Table? She needed to know more. She needed to find out where Arthur holed up and exactly what he was planning.

Yawning with fatigue, she rose to enter her bedroom, tired, but unlikely to

sleep well. At least tomorrow was Saturday, she thought as she entered her bathroom to brush her teeth. Gazing at her bewildered expression in the mirror, Arthur's parting words returned to haunt her: "Do you love *who* you teach?"

I used to know the answer, she realized, but now I'm not so sure.



As Arthur entered the central chamber, now officially christened "The Hub" by Reyna, and dismounted Llamrei, Lavern ran forward to grab his arm.

"Sire, come quick." He began pulling him toward one of the sleeping tunnels. Concerned, Arthur flicked his gaze toward the silent Lance, who eyed the exchange from the weapons rack.

"Lance, see to Llamrei, please," Arthur commanded and jogged after Lavern.

Lance watched them retreat into the tunnel and glowered. "I guess now I'm stable boy too." Sighing with frustration, he strode to Llamrei and grabbed her reins. "Come on, girl, let's get you settled in for the night." The tired horse whinnied and nuzzled Lance's face gently. "Well, at least you haven't forgotten me." His steps heavy with fatigue, he led the horse away to be unsaddled and fed.



As Arthur approached a large group of his boys gathered in a circle, Enrique broke away from the others and stepped forward. "Mark is sick, Arthur."

Arthur nodded to Lavern and Enrique, then pressed past them into the center of the circle. Jack knelt beside Mark, who lay on one of the futon-like bedrolls covered with a blanket, his tunic drenched with sweat, shivering, and writhing in pain.

Concern enveloped the king. "What hath befallen Mark?"

From his kneeling position, hands on Mark's chest to hold him down, Jack turned a distraught expression up to his king. "Withdrawal, Arthur."

Puzzled, Arthur knelt beside Jack to gaze down at Mark's tortured face. The grimace of pain was obvious, but the boy also twisted and moaned and bucked, and yet there did not appear to be anything physically wrong with him. "Withdrawal?"

"He's hooked on junk." Jack's voice almost stuck on the word, his tone guilt-ridden.

Arthur frowned uncomprehendingly.

"The heroin, remember, Arthur?" Jack explained tightly, clearly frustrated. "It's a nasty ass drug." He pulled one of Mark's arms out from under the blanket

to display the ugly, purplish needle tracks. “I’ve tried to get him to stop. I kept telling him that shi—sorry, that stuff would kill him.” Then he looked shamefully to the floor. “He’s been using, Arthur, even since we came to live with you. I’m sorry. I shoulda told you.”

Arthur squeezed the boy’s shoulder gently. He recalled seeing Mark purchase drugs on Hollywood Boulevard and now studied the boy’s pale arm riddled with holes.

Jack met the king’s eyes imploringly. “Please, Arthur, he’s my best friend. We gotta do something!”

“What must we do for him?” Arthur asked uncertainly.

“I don’t know.” Jack looked lost and frightened. “I guess we could let ’im sweat it out, but that’s risky, man. There’s other drugs that can help him, ’cept I heard they get you hooked too.” Jack began to tear up, turning his pooling eyes from Mark’s pallid face back to Arthur’s concerned expression. “I don’t want him to die, Arthur!”

“Step aside, please, Jack,” Arthur said softly.

Jack rose to his feet unsteadily, his breaths short and panicky.

Arthur sat carefully beside Mark, cradling the boy’s head in his arms while Mark continued to shake and moan in agony, his delicate features twisted into a grimace of suffering framed with beads of rolling sweat. His eyes opened and he flung his gaze wildly about the chamber, finally settling on Jack looming above him.

“Get me some junk, man! I need it!” The voice sounded harsh, almost demonic.

Jack’s tears dropped onto Mark’s blanket, and he shook his head sadly. “I can’t, man.”

Mark hurled curses at him and shrieked, “It’s killing me!”

Jack flinched at Mark’s words.

Mark howled with pain, thrashing and twisting within Arthur’s iron grip, fighting to escape. Arthur said nothing. He merely held the struggling boy in place until the bucking settled into squirming. Mark’s face and body flamed with fever, and sweat poured forth like rain.

Arthur removed one gauntlet and placed his bare hand to the boy’s forehead. He nearly yanked it back from the extreme heat. Then he looked up at the circle of concerned faces gazing down at him.

“Fetch me a bowl of water and many loose pieces of cloth. I also require drinking water separate from the other.”

Several boys ran to comply with the request.

Jack remained, his wide, wet eyes fixed fearfully on the red and feverish face

of his friend. “What’re you gonna do?”

Arthur offered a smile of reassurance. The cause of Mark’s condition was new to him, but not the boy’s pain and suffering. He’d dealt with more than his share in Britain. “Stay with him, pray for him, help him through the pain. The rest of you retire to thy beds. The hour grows late, and we have a great destiny awaiting us tomorrow night.”

Jack stepped over Mark’s prone figure and sat on his other side, swiping away tears. “I’m staying with him, too.”

Arthur nodded, knowing Jack would never abandon his friend in an hour of need. As several boys returned with the requested items, the others gradually dispersed, murmuring among themselves. Arthur dipped a piece of cloth into the basin of water and gently mopped the sweat from Mark’s brow while Jack took the feverish boy’s hand and gripped it tightly.

“Fear not, young Mark,” Arthur assured him in a calm, soothing voice. “What thou hast done to thyself shall, with thy strength and God’s help, be this night undone, and thy life will once more belong to thee.” Gently, he wrapped the blanket more securely around Mark, laid a cool, damp cloth across the sleeping boy’s forehead, and continued to mop his grimacing face.

As the night wore on, Jack’s stiff posture finally relaxed, and he drifted off into a fitful sleep.

Arthur continued to rest Mark’s head in his lap, and to hold him securely when he became agitated. Periodically, he dribbled a bit of drinking water between Mark’s lips, but otherwise he mopped rivulets of sweat from Mark’s pale, pinched face, and prayed, his head bowed.



For his part, Lance had stayed away. He still felt... he wasn’t quite sure what he felt, but somehow it seemed there was a sudden gap between him and Arthur, a gap he didn’t understand, a gap that twisted up his stomach like a cramp. He tossed and turned in his bedroll, sleep eluding him.

Finally, he rose with care, so as to not wake little Chris slumbering beside him. He slipped a baggy tunic over his shivering bare torso and crept silently into the tunnel, where he knew he’d find Arthur... and Mark. He stopped and crouched low when they came into view. He didn’t want Arthur to see him.

Why not?

He didn’t even know. He observed the man sitting beneath a soft pool of lantern light gently cradling and ministering to... someone else.

Someone who *wasn’t* him. Loneliness almost drowned him.

Arthur gazed empathetically at Mark's face as he toweled off the sweat. "There doth be many addictions, young Mark, to which a man may find himself enslaved. Most be of our own choosing, but some be put upon us by chance. Have no fear, young one. Despite your past, you always have a future here, with us."

Lance listened to those words, and knew Arthur meant them, just as he'd meant them when he'd assured Lance of his allegiance, when he'd cradled Lance in his arms and soaked up his pain.

I am part of something great, he told himself with a silent sigh, and Arthur is the greatest man I've ever known, so why do I suddenly feel so... empty? So alone....

Uncertainty raking across his heart like claws, Lance propped himself up against the wall. His thoughts drifted back to the aching pain of his childhood, to who he used to be, to *what* he used to be, and to who he'd become since Arthur appeared.

Jack had called himself a slut boy for what he'd done out on the street. But how was Lance any more pure? Hadn't he allowed that man to... use him... *that* way, without fighting back? Wasn't he a worse slut boy than Jack could ever be? Did that word even apply to boys?

Self-loathing clamped onto his wildly beating heart as he gazed through blurring tears at Arthur, with Mark wrapped in his arms. Did he even *deserve* somebody that good? Him, who'd never done anything worthwhile in his life? He didn't know why, but the loneliness returned in full, threatened to suffocate him with its smothering totality, and he began to cry, softly and achingly, gradually crying himself into a restless sleep.



When Enrique and several others entered the tunnel around midday, they found Jack asleep, clasping Mark's hand in his own, and Arthur still cradling the blond boy in his arms.

"How he be, Arthur?" Enrique inquired.

"Better, but not yet recovered. Rouse the others and set about feeding them. Then you may commence further weapons practice. Have you seen Lance?"

Enrique pointed toward the mouth of the tunnel. Lance was curled into a fetal position, still asleep. Concern washed over Arthur at the sight, but he did not show this to Enrique. "Let him sleep a bit longer. You may begin the training for today. I shall join you shortly. When Reyna arrives, she shall direct the archers."

"Sí, Arthur," said Enrique with a broad grin and hurried off.

Arthur remained as he'd been throughout the night, cradling Mark's head and praying for the boy's deliverance. Yet he found his gaze drifting over to the sleeping bundle that was his First Knight. He'd hoped that Lance had purged himself of his childhood demons, but realized now that was not true. How could it be? How could so much suffering vanish so rapidly? Even Merlin could not affect such a miracle.

His own childhood had been pleasant and nurturing. He'd been loved by Sir Ector, and by all of the man's household staff. What did he know of the pain and misery and intense loneliness that Lance, and all these others, had endured? He'd purposely selected these children for his new campaign because older people were too set in their ways. They couldn't, or wouldn't, change.

Such had been a great aspect of Camelot's downfall—too much infighting amongst the men, all vying for greater position, all victims of false pride. Children, he knew, even such damaged as these, could yet be guided and molded into something that he hoped would change this city, and its people, into something great. But they *were* children, he reminded himself, and he'd had little experience with children in his previous life. Perhaps the Lady Jenny might be of help in understanding the hearts and minds of his children.

His musings were interrupted by groans from Mark.

The moaning awoke Jack, who stretched his muscular arms and shook the sleep out of his eyes. "How's Mark?" was all he asked, sitting up quickly, his tormented brown eyes anxiously searching his friend's face for life.

"He is better, methinks," Arthur said in a tired voice, offering Jack a smile of hope.

Arthur's voice awoke Lance, who slowly uncurled himself and gradually pulled himself up into a sitting position, shaking the sleep from his eyes.

Mark stirred, his bloodless face strained from the ordeal, making him look far older than his fifteen years.

"How do you feel, Mark?" Arthur asked in his calm, soothing tone of voice.

Mark's eyes flitted from Jack's grinning face to Arthur's gentle look. "Arthur?"

"Yes, lad, it be I."

Weakly, Mark gazed up at the man, confused. "You... you been with me all night?"

"Aye, lad, and much of the day. Thou hast been quite ill."

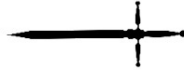
Mark appeared bewildered and very unsettled, his voice shaky. "No one ever did... nobody ever did... nothing like that before...."

Now Jack's face fell. "I was here too," he whispered, his voice tinged with sadness.

Mark glanced at him and smiled, , but quickly returned his gaze to Arthur.

“Save thy strength,” Arthur insisted, raising the water bottle so Mark could take a few sips. “Rest, now, young Mark, while I thank God for thy deliverance.”

As Mark fell silent, Jack and Lance watched Arthur bow his head in prayer. They wore expressions of sadness, as though both had lost someone he loved.



In Boyle Heights, Esteban and Jaime, and as many of their homeboys as each could round up, met before the wall displaying Arthur’s “A” symbol. “Pray for Peace in the Barrio” and the dove were still dominant, but the angry youths below it had no intention of praying for peace. They wanted war. It was what they’d been taught to do. They hit you, you hit ’em back! That was life in the barrio, not peace.

Esteban and Jaime stood side by side, as numerous other gang members, all under eighteen, hovered excitedly around them. Old pickups and cars and low-riders packed the street expectantly.

The two intimidating boys clasped hands firmly and bumped fists with dramatic flair. Both wore the requisite tank top undershirt to display their intimidating musculature, and Jaime had a bandana wrapped around his head.

“Never thought I see us back on the same side, *carnal*,” Esteban told his former friend with a nod.

“We gonna kick that guy’s ass, dawg!” Jaime replied loudly. “The others, they be comin’?”

“Sí,” Esteban replied. “But you still the hothead, homie, so let me do the talkin’, ’kay?”

Jaime nodded. “But if the guy pisses me off....” He left the threat unfinished, raising his .38 to finish the sentence for him.

Esteban eyed the weapon soberly and then turned to all those assembled. “Remember, no shootin’ ’less one a us says so. *Comprenden?*”

The assembled gangsters, young and teen, armed with a variety of firearms, nodded their assent.



All of Arthur’s nearly three hundred children were present, girls and boys. The girls flanked Reyna, outfitted in her full archery ensemble, longbow and quiver slung indolently over her shoulder. Those boys wielding swords had girded themselves with protective armor: chain mail, chest pieces, helmets, and shields. Much of the armor fit the young bodies awkwardly, at best, and Arthur and

Lance were administering last minute adjustments.

The archers, key players in Arthur's strategic plan, did not wear armor due to their need for agility and quickness. He recognized the risks, knowing the gangsters could fire randomly into the dark and strike one of them, but he believed his children were as trained and ready as they'd ever be to take on this challenge.

As Reyna adjusted the bows and quivers of several archers, Enrique and Luis popped up to flank her. Enrique spoke first, "You need any help, Reyna, I got your back, no sweat."

"Forget that fool," Luis tossed in, causing her to look his way. "I'll protect you."

Reyna laughed derisively. "More like the other way around, *cholo* boys."

She dismissed them with a wave of her hand, and they high-fived each other.

Lance struggled to adjust his helm. When Arthur stepped forward to help him, Lance shrugged him off and stepped to one side to finish on his own.

Arthur stepped to Lance and leaned in. "Lance, thou hast been moody since we encountered the Lady Jenny last night," he whispered. "You need fear not, lad, for she, nor anyone, shall ever come between thee and I."

Helm half on and half off, a startled Lance turned to face Arthur, stunned that the man had somehow read his thoughts. He gulped with uncertainty. "They won't?"

"Nay," Arthur assured him, placing one gauntleted hand on Lance's shoulder. "You have my word."

Lance dropped his gaze, embarrassed by his behavior and unable to face this good man. "I'm sorry, Arthur. It just be that you... that *I* never had...." He trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished. Because he knew he wasn't worthy.

Arthur gazed at him in confusion. "Never had what, Lance?"

Lance couldn't say it. Not now. Maybe not ever. "Nothing."

"Art thou with me this night?"

Lance smiled for the first time, reassured that he was still wanted and needed. "Truly, sire."

Arthur smiled back and then reached out to slip Lance's helm the rest of the way over his head, adjusting his long hair so nothing obscured his vision. Lance grinned from underneath it and gave Arthur a big thumbs-up sign. Grinning back, Arthur returned the sign before turning to his assembled warriors, now prepped and ready and awaiting his orders.

"Attention, my noble knights-to-be! Ye all know the plan. Reyna shall position the archers, while Jack and Enrique will position the swordsmen near Lance and myself should the need for hand-to-hand combat arise. After everyone

is in place, Reyna, Jack, and Enrique shall also flank me for our meeting. Be there any questions?”

Little Chris timidly raised one small hand. He wore a billowy tunic and looked like a frightened puppy.

“Yes, Chris?” Arthur asked.

“What shall happen to me if you don’t come back, Arthur?” There was true fear in that high-pitched voice.

The king stepped over to the small boy and lifted him into his arms so they could look at each other eye to eye. “Fear not, young Chris, for we shall return to thee. You have my word as a knight and a king. Okay?”

Chris beamed. “Okay.”

Arthur set him down beside a pallid-looking Mark, who a loose tunic and drawstring pants. The effects of his inner struggle were plainly written across his soft, delicate features like graffiti.

“Sure I can’t go, Arthur?”

“After what you have been through?” Arthur scoffed. “Nay, Mark, though thy loyalty pleases me.”

“I’d do anything for you, Arthur,” Mark replied earnestly.

Jack gazed long and hard at Mark, and his face clouded over with pain.

“Then care for this little one, Mark,” Arthur said, “for he is the hope.”

Mark gazed up at the man lovingly. “Godspeed, Arthur.”

Jack put a hand on Mark’s arm, and the blond youth turned to him as Arthur moved back to the main group. “I’ll see you when we get back.”

Mark eyed Jack uncertainly, taking in the armor and shield, the sword dangling from a sheath around his waist, and then threw his arms around Jack’s broad shoulders impulsively, hugging the bigger boy as though never wanting to let go. “Be careful, Jack, please. You’re my best friend, you know?” He pulled away and looked Jack in the face.

Jack forced a grin. “Jacky’s got this one covered. Nothing but a scrimmage. I’ll see ya later.”

Mark nodded.

Arthur stood up on a chair and surveyed his assembled troops. “Our destiny awaits, my lads and ladies. Let us go forth to meet it.”



Cars and trucks bled their way into Griffith Park from every entrance that wasn’t locked or otherwise gated. Normal operating hours ceased at 10:30 p.m., so the gang members had to sneak into the park by whatever means necessary. To

attract less attention, fewer cars were employed, which meant cramming each one with as many homies as possible.

Much as Esteban wanted every homeboy he could get, even from enemy 'hoods, he knew that too many bodies and too much movement would attract undue attention from the cops. The park was patrolled periodically, and he and the guys wanted to get in and out as quickly as possible.

He'd talked a bit with Jaime, but didn't really know how the black gangs were thinking. Jaime was a hothead, and never thought things through. But Esteban, angry as he was at being "dissed" by this tagger guy, wanted to hear what the man had to say. What proposition did he want to make? And why all the races? That didn't usually go down on the streets. Blacks and Samoans and even Asians were his enemies, just like Jaime and other Latinos from different neighborhoods. That was how it worked, that was all he'd known growing up, so what stupid-ass fool would try to get them all together?

He'd established a rep throughout the gang community as calm, cool, level-headed, and hella smart, and probably the best "talker" around. He found himself looking forward to this "meeting."



A full moon cast an almost ethereal glow over the park and its environs. Arthur stood atop a platform within the Boys Camp area. Cabins surrounded them for summer programs, and this platform was center stage for talent shows and other gatherings. Darkness enveloped him. Ominous shapes of normally cheerful-looking cabins and teepees loomed in the shadows, and a cool breeze disturbed the branches of the manzanita and wild sage trees.

Rustling noises drifted in from the darkness, from all around him. To Arthur's right stood Lance and Reyna, he wielding his sword and shield, while she had her bow cocked and ready. Both had braced themselves, eyes and ears attuned to every possible threat coming at them from out of the enveloping darkness.

On Arthur's left stood Jack, with a heavy broadsword gripped tautly in one hand, and little Lavern, his bow cocked and ready for action. Of the younger children, Lavern had proven the most adept with a bow and arrow, and he'd begged to be by Arthur's side. Backing them up were Luis and Enrique with their swords and shields, and several archers named Sergio, Norman, Jose, and Sylvia, a small, usually quiet Hispanic girl, recruited by Reyna, who'd also proven to be a natural with the weapon.

Lance glanced nervously about him, long silky hair spilling from his helm and down his back.

Arthur's keen eyes expertly scanned the darkness ahead, his bearing regal and strong as he awaited the confrontation to come. He'd had years of experience as a warrior, and those skills had not left him. Tension pulled his muscles tight, his senses into high alert. He glanced at Lance, who met his gaze without fear. Arthur nodded, and the boy returned it. They were ready.

The sound of muffled car engines drifted through the trees. Lance looked up again at Arthur, and the king nodded. Lance put a hand to his lips and whistled something that sounded like a birdcall. From all around them, answering birdcalls could be heard in reply. Then silence reigned once more, except the sound of tires on dirt. Then these sounds, too, ceased. Doors opening and slamming came next, followed by approaching footsteps on gravel. *Many* footsteps. Reyna and Lance exchanged a look, and she tossed him a cool, reassuring grin.

Nervous though he was, Arthur dared not show it, so he stood impassively as hundreds of forms materialized dimly from beneath the blanket of darkness, spreading outward to fill the area with writhing, living movement, like a horde of rats emerging from the sewers. Wavering guns and long-bladed knives glinted in the moonlight.



Several forms broke away from the mass to stand before them, and Lance recognized two of them - Justin and Dwayne. There were two other Latino youth, another African-American, an Asian, and a mountainous boy who could only be Samoan.

The thick-muscled Latino broke away from the others.

Lance noted the handgun tucked within the waistband of his baggy jeans.

"So you the guy who been messin' wit' our 'hoods, eh?" He stopped up short and puffed out his muscular chest in amused defiance.

Dwayne pulled a gun and took a step closer, taking aim at Arthur's head. The Latino calmly reached out one brawny arm to push Dwayne's hand downward so the gun pointed at the ground.

"They got blades, man! An' I owe that big muther fer messin' me up, anyways."

Lance gazed down at Dwayne, eyed the bandaged hand without sympathy, and realized he wasn't afraid anymore. "Methinks now the odds be more even, eh?"

Dwayne glared at Lance in confusion. "Huh? What you be talkin' about, Pretty Boy?"

The Latino guy chuckled and turned to his assembled army. “Hey, dawgs, don’ you know who this guy is? I seen him on the news. He’s *King Arthur*.”

Derisive laughter rippled through the darkness like ghosts in a graveyard. Arthur raised his shield higher so the symbol would be clearly visible in the moonlight. Seeing that hated “tag” sent a flurry of angry murmurs rippling throughout the crowd. More guns and knives glinted portentously.

Reyna, Lance, Jack, and Enrique tensed up instantly, aiming their weapons at Dwayne and the Latino.

“This ‘tag’, as thou hast dubbed it,” began Arthur calmly, his voice strong and resonant, “be my knightly symbol, displayed here upon my shield.”

“So how come you be puttin’ it up in our turf, huh?” That came from the Samoan who, Lance thought, looked big enough to lift up a truck.

Arthur lowered the shield, but gripped Excalibur tightly. His voice rang out clear and unruffled. “Do you take so much pride in these neighborhoods where you live?”

“Damn straight, *ese!*” the buff Latino practically spat.

“Then, perchance, I may inquire why the dwellings be so shabbily attired, the streets overrun with trash and vermin, the children without role models? Why do thy people have so little to show for all of thy pride?”

Dwayne rose up to his full height, his face a mask of rage. “It ain’t our fault, fool, it’s white people like you who’s keepin’ the blacks in the ghettos, man! We can’t do nuthin’ cept fight back.”

“You do not fight back,” continued Arthur, fixing his intense gaze on Dwayne. “You run wild in the streets with no thought of anyone save thyselfes.”

“You know nuthin’, man!” the other Latino spat, stepping beside Dwayne, fingering his handgun anxiously.

Lance noted the forearm tattoo of Our Lady of Guadalupe, but kept his gaze fixed on the gun, his sword at the ready.

The buff one shouted, “Quiet! I wanna hear more.”

Arthur moved his intense gaze back to him. “My placement of this symbol in thy midst did accomplish its purpose. It brought all of thee here to me, united as one. When can any of thee recall the last time you did gather together without bloodshed?”

Agitated murmuring rose up from the slithering dark shadows behind the big guy. Actually, Lance noted, the guy was pretty short, but super buff, with a bald head and a dangerous scowl. At Arthur’s words, he and the other Latino guy exchanged a look of surprise. So did Dwayne and the other black guy Lance didn’t know. The Asian and the Samoan nodded in acknowledgement. Arthur’s words had hit home.

The buff guy gazed at Arthur with a grudging respect. “Okay, dog, so you got us all here. Now what?” He smirked arrogantly. “We could kill you, real easy.”

Arthur smiled. “Methinks not, *dog*, for I am not without weaponry myself.”

Everyone laughed.

“Them swords, man!” sneered the third black guy mockingly. “Hell, we’d cut you down ’fore you even lifted ’em!”

Arthur maintained his calm, cool tone. “You take much pride in thy cowardly guns which shoot metal pellets from such a distance that thy lives be not even threatened. Methinks such weapons be more suited to the female gender.”

Reyna chuckled at that, but Dwayne exploded with rage. “That’s it, you son of a bitch!” He raised the handgun and fired before Esteban could stop him. The bullet ricocheted off Arthur’s armor, disappearing into the trees.

A second later, an arrow whizzed through the air from the darkness and pierced Dwayne’s jacket sleeve, pinning his wrist to the tree beside him and knocking the gun from his grasp.

Other gang members raised their weapons to shoot, but arrow after arrow flew in from the dark and expertly struck the weapons, knocking them to the ground, but not piercing any flesh or injuring any of the gangsters. Within seconds, all who had lifted their weapons had been disarmed.

When the buff guy and the other shot callers turned from the panicked confusion behind them, Reyna and Lavern and Luis had arrows cocked and aimed at their hearts.

“Hold yer fire, dammit!” Buff Guy shouted angrily, a bit unsettled. He glowered at Dwayne. “We said nobody shoot, fool! Lucky you still got a hand.”

He reached over and yanked the arrow from the tree, freeing Dwayne.

Angrily, Dwayne reached for his fallen gun, but Buff Guy kicked it aside. “Leave it. He’s got his homeboys out there.”

Reyna cleared her throat, drawing his scrutiny in her direction. His eyebrows shot up, finally realizing that she was female. She smirked, and he tossed her a slight smile. “His homegirls too.” He raised his eyebrows, and Reyna nodded, satisfied.

“He called me a bitch, man!” shouted Dwayne angrily.

Buff Guy whirled on him. “Well stop actin’ like one, and shut up so the man can finish!” Then he turned to the others. “And that goes for the rest a you *vatos!*” He looked back at Arthur, lobbing a slight smirk Reyna’s way. “Go ahead, dawg. You got *my* attention.”

“Those you see here be well trained in hand-to-hand combat. Thy way of fighting pits several against one, often with these cowardly gun weapons fired from moving vehicles against those who cannot fight back.”

Angry chatter erupted from the assemblage. Buff Guy turned to quiet them. "He's jus tryin' ta rattle us. Don' pay no attention."

Arthur focused on the buff one. "To thee I pose a question."

"Yeah?"

Arthur leaned in. "Doth *might* be right?"

"Huh?"

Arthur's gaze never wavered. "Methinks this doth be thy philosophy, that if thou hast sufficient numbers, the *might*, thou art always right. Is this correct?"

Buff Guy chuckled, affecting an insolent attitude. "Sure, dawg. Survival of the fittest."

"We rule these streets!" Dwayne shot back. "This city belongs to *us*. We got respect!"

Arthur eyed Dwayne appraisingly. "And having the might doth always make thee right?"

"Huh?"

Arthur ignored Dwayne's response and gestured for Buff Guy to step forward. "*Venga!*"

"You know Spanish?" Obviously surprised, he stepped to the platform. Arthur nodded almost imperceptibly to Lance, who raised his sword and moved forward threateningly.

"You pussy, you got no balls and no brains, neither!" Lance spat.

Buff Guy's face went red with fury and he thrust his hands toward Lance's throat. Reyna and the boys instantaneously aimed their weapons at his heart and head. Still seething, the young hoodlum promptly ceased his forward motion and eyed the weapons with caution.

Angry words and forward movement by the crowd were halted by Arthur's commanding voice. "Hold fast, young ones, lest thy companion die!"

They stopped and watched, many glancing apprehensively around them in the dark, as though anticipating another volley of arrows.

Buff Guy ignored Lance and glared at Arthur. "What the hell is this, man?"

"Was he right in saying those words to thee?" Arthur asked calmly.

"What?"

"Was he right?" Arthur repeated, more forcefully this time.

Lance watched the guy's face and saw control returning.

"Hell, no, man, I didn't say crap ta him!" He cast a quick glare Lance's way.

Lance's gaze never wavered.

"And yet, methinks," Arthur went on, pressing home his point, "he doth have the *might* at his disposal to defend his words. By thine own definition, this makes what he said *right*."

“That’s different, man, he—” He stopped suddenly, and Lance clearly saw the light dawn in his eyes.. “You tricked me!”

Arthur shook his head. “Nay. I have merely shown thee the truth.”

Dwayne, frustrated and angry, exclaimed, “You be talkin’ in circles, man. Speak English or somethin’.”

Buff Guy ignored Dwayne as Reyna and the boys pulled their weapons back. He eyed the smirking Reyna curiously. Then he exchanged a look with Lance, and grinned.

“Ya did okay, dawg.” He held up one fist. Lance nodded, and they did the fist bump. He then turned to face the others. “What the man be sayin’ is true. Just ’cause we got guns and we got numbers don’t make us right all the time.”

“What the hell’s ‘right’ gotta do wit’ it?” Dwayne practically shouted. “We’re talkin’ respect, and survival!”

“Exactly,” interjected Arthur. “Respect and survival. And I have conceived a plan that shall not only gain thee true respect, but shall also ensure thy survival, and that of thy children yet to be born.”

The other Latino guy reacted with surprise and asked, “What plan?”

“*Might for right*,” Arthur announced, causing a ripple effect through the crowd. “We shall use all of my gathered strength combined with all of thine and direct it only toward that which is right. Thou may all become knights of my new Round Table. You shall crush corruption, defend the helpless, foster with your words and deeds the tenets of morality and righteousness. Thou shalt become the heroes thy society so desperately needs. And in so becoming, right the wrongs that have been done to your generation.”

“We don’ need no cracker like you,” spat Dwayne. “We got our freedom, and we got the streets!” He looked to the other black guy for support, but the other boy remained quiet, contemplating Arthur’s words.

“No man has freedom who needs air to breathe,” Arthur went on. “And if thou cannot see beyond the color of one’s skin, then thou art already blind, and thy life is without value. I speak the truth, and truth be truth for all. I can help thee find real purpose in life, and a channel for thy vast energies. The entire world shall know of Arthur’s knights, and history shall be ours for the making.”

Dwayne spat on the ground before Arthur’s feet. Lance instantly raised his sword and Reyna her bow, but Arthur remained unfazed. Dwayne glared at them with hatred. “Not me, man! Count me out. C’mon, Darnell.” He turned to leave, but the other black guy, who Lance now knew was named Darnell, didn’t follow his lead.

“What he say kinda do make sense, Dwayne,” he said, a trifle embarrassed to be admitting it. “I ain’t sayin’ I agree to nuthin’, but I be wantin’ to hear more.”

“Man, you gonna listen to this cracker? You crazy, cuzz!” He stalked off in fury, with Justin and all of his homies following. A palpable silence fell over the assemblage as they watched this group depart.

Nobody else made a move to follow.

The Asian, the Samoan, and the other Latino exchanged looks, but none of them budged.

Arthur scanned their expectant faces. “And you others? What be thy feelings?”

Buff Guy gave Reyna the once over, and then sized up Lance’s small stature compared to the hefty sword he wielded. “Can you teach us to fight like these guys ya got? Without guns?”

“Assuredly,” Arthur confirmed, “but force is used only as a last resort, for a knight hath, above all else, honor. His word be sacred under God, and he must always protect the weak and the innocent.”

“We don’ know, man,” Buff Guy finally said. “It all sounds crazy loco.”

Reyna stepped forward into the moonlight, illuminating her striking face and cocked brow. “What’s wrong, buff boy, you scared of somethin’ new?” She flashed him a mocking smile.

He instantly bristled. “I ain’t scared a nuthin’!”

Reyna grinned and licked her lips tauntingly. “You sure?”

Arthur leaned forward toward him, his voice calm and inviting. “Thou did come here tonight to end my life and continue your fruitless existence. Doth this still be thine intent, or be ye willing to listen further to my loco ideas?”

The shot callers exchanged yet another look between them. Darnell nodded, and then the others.

Buff Guy stuck out his hand to Arthur. “Street name’s Smarty, dawg, but you can call me Esteban, an’ I guess ya got our ears.”

As Arthur shook the extended hand, there were rippling murmurs of assent from the crowd.

“Hell,” Esteban added, “we ain’t got nuthin’ ta lose.”

Arthur grinned, and Lance expelled a heavy sigh of relief. Reyna kept her smirk fixed on Esteban, who eyed her with extreme interest.

CHAPTER 5: WE'RE BROTHERS NOW, AREN'T WE?

THE ENERGIZED AND TRIUMPHANT CHILDREN chattered and babbled and practically danced their way back to their underground castle following the successful gang showdown. Jack felt immense pride at walking beside Arthur and Lance as they led the massive parade through the storm drains, and he listened with amusement as the various archers loudly laid claim to which gun they had dislodged from which gangster.

Reyna, thrilled with the whole experience, had taken off for her house, “so the servants don’t call my parents *again*,” promising to be back in the afternoon when “the buff boy and his bangers show up.”

Enrique and Luis were clearly not pleased with her obvious interest in the stronger and more commanding gangster, but they also looked more determined than ever to impress her.

Arthur had his arm over Lance’s shoulder as they walked, looking very proud of his First Knight.

Jack remained silent on the return journey. His thoughts drifted, as they often did, to Mark. Despite the thrill of success this night, he couldn’t get Mark out of his head. He’d almost lost the boy he loved, something he didn’t want to even imagine.

Why don’t you just tell him how you feel?

He shook his head, chest tightening, breath catching in his throat.

Stop going there, Jack. Your heart wants something it can’t have...

His eyes drifted toward Lance, basking beneath Arthur’s pride and obvious love, marveling again at the boy’s almost ethereal beauty, and wishing someone would show that much pride in him for once. Jealousy slipped a noose around his heart and tugged.

When they finally arrived back at The Hub, Mark lay dozing with little Chris wrapped in his arms. As soon as Arthur stepped into the chamber, Mark’s blue eyes popped open. He leapt to his feet and said to Chris excitedly, “Hey, Chris, Arthur’s back!”

The little boy awoke and turned his sleepy head. Arthur bent down and winked at the boy, who shook off his slumber and leapt from Mark’s arms to

throw himself at Arthur, flinging his arms around the man's neck and squeezing for all he was worth. "Oh, sire," he gushed, "I'm so happy you're back!"

Arthur stood, holding the small boy in the crook of his arm.

Mark straightened his rumpled tunic and tried to fix his mussed mop of hair as he too, stepped forward. "Me too, Arthur."

His eyes locked onto the man, but Arthur merely smiled, patted Mark on the shoulder, and said, "All was a success, Mark and Chris. Tomorrow we shall have new recruits to instruct and train."

Mark nodded, unable to drop his gaze from Arthur's exuberant face. Jack noted the intent look with uncertainty. Frowning, he stepped toward Mark, his height cutting off Mark's view of Arthur. "Hey, I'm back too. Remember me?"

Mark turned those huge blue eyes up to Jack's serious face and gave him a perfunctory hug. "Oh yeah, I figured you'd be okay, Jacky. You're too buff to get hurt."

Jack frowned, his heart tightening. "But I'm not bulletproof like Arthur."

At the king's name, Mark immediately glanced past Jack's shoulder to observe Arthur deposit Chris back onto the ground. He pulled away from Jack, leaving a painful void within the older boy's chest.

"Lads, we must all needs rest, for it is late into the night and the morrow shalt bring the next stage of our crusade," the king announced. Then he turned to Lance. "Come, Lance, let us get armor and weapons stowed and everyone down for the night."

Lance nodded and Arthur moved off to assist his warriors with removal of their armor. Lance stepped up and high-fived Jack. "Good job out there, man."

Jack grinned despite the tightness around his heart. "You too, man. I thought that dude would crap his pants when you called him a pussy."

Lance laughed. Then he turned to Mark. "Everything okay here, Mark?"

Mark's forlorn gaze rested on Arthur across the chamber, and he turned back quickly. "Oh yeah, you know, babysitting. Sounds like you guys had all the fun."

"It was cool. 'Course Jack was the buffest guy out there, made that gangbanger look skinny." He punched Jack on the shoulder.

For some reason, the compliment and Lance's admiring look caused Jack to turn red, *not* something he normally did.

Jack broke eye contact with Lance and tossed Mark a knowing look. "Mark likes my bod, don't ya?" He winked, but Mark nodded absently, his gaze drifting back to Arthur, who was helping Lavern off with his armor.

Jack turned to Lance. "You wanna get buffer, Lance, I'll show ya how to work out and stuff."

"Sure, that'd be great. But right now we gotta get all our stuff put up."

He began unstrapping his chain mail as he hurried across to the wooden clothing racks. Jack eyed Mark once again, noted the faraway look in his friend's eyes, and asked, "You okay, Marky Mark?" That had early on become Jack's pet name for Mark, despite the younger teen's skinny frame.

Mark nodded, locks of unkempt hair drifting across his forehead, those pools of blue filling slowly with gloom. "Yeah. Just tired from, you know, the withdrawal. See ya in the morning, Jacky."

He started to turn away.

"Hey." Jack stopped him. "Could you, uh, well could you give me a hand getting all this stuff off?" He raised his eyebrows hopefully.

Mark smiled warmly, looking like the Mark of old, the one before Arthur. "Sure."

And the two set about removing Jack's various layers of protection.



The next day, residual excitement from the night before percolated through the tunnels as everyone prepared for the new arrivals. Enrique and Luis searched for the smallest tunics they could find to better accentuate their muscles in preparation for Reyna's arrival. Both seemed to know they couldn't compete with Esteban's buffness, but they appeared confident they could charm their way into her heart.

Lance, as always, slept with Chris beside him and dutifully got the youngster bathed and fed as soon as they awoke. The dripping water was continuously gathered into large tubs and then heated by a charcoal fire pit beneath them. Arthur and Lance had bought a supply of charcoal for the purpose, as well as water-purifying tablets to clean the water and kill germs, and it worked sufficiently well to avoid a cold bathing experience. Boys old enough to shave, like Jack, could use these same tubs for that purpose, too. Lance usually just "bird bathed" because he'd gotten accustomed to doing that on the streets, and he hated being naked in front of anyone, anyway.

Reyna blew in like a whirlwind, decked out in her slickest pants and a very stylish tunic she'd had altered so that it almost put Arthur's to shame in its ostentation. As always, she carried her bow and quiver of arrows. "Don't leave home without 'em," she always said. Enrique and Luis turned on the charm immediately, but she coolly rebuffed them.

Lance had sent out their location to Esteban via text message, and the gang leader was to relay the information to whomever else wished to come. By midday, the chamber swelled with children, most of Arthur's original group and

another hundred or so gang members. Lance, Jack, Mark, Reyna, and Lavern stood around the throne with their weapons in hand just in case any of the newcomers tried to take a shot at Arthur. Esteban had been told that no guns were allowed, but since when did gangsters do what they were told? Lance knew Arthur had Excalibur in hand, but he and the others felt more secure standing with him, creating a visual show of force.

Esteban sauntered in wearing jeans and a very tight tank that showed off his solid physique, obviously for Reyna's benefit. She noticed, but as always, played it aloof and disdainful. He gazed up at her and smirked, flexing his chest a little for effect, but she chuckled in that haughty way of hers and looked at Lance as if to say, "Can you believe this guy?"

Lance, however, *was* impressed with the older teen's intimidating muscles, but made sure not to show it in front of him.

Arthur shared about how he'd pulled Excalibur from the stone back in Britain, about his ancient kingdom of Camelot, and its ultimate downfall.

"I was but sixteen when crowned king," Arthur went on in response to a question, "and not experienced in the ways of women. A beautiful lady named Morgause, scheming to gain a hold on my throne, did use her witchery to seduce me."

Esteban fidgeted. "You said all this destroyed your knights. How?"

"Morgause conceived a son, Mordred, and poisoned his mind against me," the king recalled sadly.

While Esteban may have looked bored, Lance was riveted to the tale, especially at the mention of a son.

"Upon attainment of manhood, Mordred sought to usurp my throne. Ultimately, it was the adulterous affair betwixt my queen and my best friend that did give Mordred his final victory, for in my sense of justice I was forced to wage war upon them all."

Lance held his breath in shock. Arthur had a son? Who'd rebelled against him? He finally found his voice. "You never told me this, Arthur. What happened to your son?"

Arthur met his wide-eyed gaze. "Alas, Lance, he betrayed me, tried to take my life... and I killed him."

Lance's mouth dropped open in disbelief. He couldn't imagine the gentle Arthur killing his own son. The revelation dazed him into silence, while all the assembled digested the implications of Arthur's story.

Esteban nodded approvingly.

Arthur stood, his flowing cloak swinging down around his boots, and announced, "Tomorrow, I shall further lay out my plans for our campaign, but

for now we shall have weapons training.”

The new guys whooped and hollered with excitement, but Arthur stared them back into silence. When all had settled down, he said, “For those who are new to us, Reyna be the chief instructor for archery, and Lance for swordsmanship.” He indicated Lance, who stood and stepped to the king’s side, a trifle nervously. Those gang guys looked mean as hell!

Jaime—the other Latino dude from the previous night—snorted, and Esteban laughed. “Him?” he said derisively. “He don’t look big enough to do much damage.” The homies laughed.

Lance fought back a blush of embarrassment as Arthur took a step closer. “When all of thee are knighted, Lance shalt be designated First Knight, Esteban. This means he shall command in my stead. Does that pose a problem for thee?”

Esteban shrugged, exchanging an amused smirk with Jaime. “I don’ know, man. He did okay last night, but he had all you for backup. To me, he looks kind a girly to be in charge.”

Darnell and the other gangsters laughed even louder, but none of Arthur’s original group joined them.

Arthur glanced over at Lance, waiting for him to act.

Fighting down his panic—that kid was buff as hell, after all—Lance unsheathed his sword and held it tightly. “Grab any sword you like and we’ll see if I fight ‘girly’.”

Now the gangsters erupted with excitement. Fighting was clearly what they knew and loved. Jaime slapped Esteban on the back. “Show ’im what ya got, dawg!”

Esteban eyed Lance appraisingly. “You got it,” he said and got to his feet, sauntered over to the weapons rack, and casually perused the armaments.

There was silence as he hefted several large swords, testing their weight and the feel of each hilt in his grip. Everyone watched with breathless anticipation. Lance glanced nervously at Reyna, and she blew him a kiss, which made him smile.

Esteban turned and saw the gesture, and it clearly annoyed him. Reyna turned to look his way and tossed him a mocking smirk. That irritated Esteban even more. He snatched a heavy, sturdy, two-handed broadsword, gripped it tautly, the muscles of his thick forearms rippling with power, and stepped to the center of the crowd.

Everyone pressed back as far as they could, leaving a center circle for the two combatants. Lance stepped carefully down from the platform to face off against the much stronger and intimidating Esteban.

“Sure you don’t want any armor for protection?” Lance asked sincerely,

noting the older boy's exposed arms.

Esteban bristled with indignation. "I got more armor in these muscles, kid, than you could ever wear! Let's go at it."

The two boys circled one another like cats, each sizing up the other's strengths and weaknesses, each looking for an opening to strike. Esteban swung first, and hard, hoping to use his sheer might to knock the sword out of Lance's grip, or drive the smaller boy to the ground. But Lance easily danced to one side. The weight of Esteban's sword threw him forward. He stumbled and nearly lost his balance.

Cursing, he recovered his footing and turned just as Lance swung downward with his weapon. Esteban raised his sword in time to block the blow, but the impact of iron against iron sent thrumming vibrations from his hands all the way up his arms.

He stumbled back and then used all his strength to push against Lance, causing the smaller boy to fall back several feet. Lance almost lost his footing, but weeks of training with Arthur paid off. Esteban took a wild swing at Lance. Lance easily ducked, and the blade sailed harmlessly over his head. Seizing the advantage, Lance pushed forward and rammed his shoulder into Esteban's rock-hard chest, causing the bigger boy to stagger backward, pinwheeling with his arms, and almost losing his grip on the enormous sword.

Each time Lance scored a victory, the original group cheered. Each time Esteban gained the advantage, the gangsters whooped. Lance knew full well that Esteban, or any of these kids, wouldn't hesitate to kill him if the mood hit them. The outcome of this one-on-one fight might make or break the entire crusade, he realized. He had to win!

Esteban screamed and charged, swinging downward as hard as he could with his sword. This time Lance did not dance away, but deftly swung his sword up and around to easily deflect the powerful blow. Esteban's blade struck the concrete floor, missing Lance completely.

By now, Lance was sweating, but not as much as Esteban, he was pleased to note. Despite wearing his gold circlet, sweaty hair dangled before his face, drifting in and out of his field of vision. He ignored it.

He and Esteban circled one another again, but neither made a move.

Then Esteban swung, and Lance easily parried. Esteban swung again, harder this time. And again Lance parried, deflecting the blade harmlessly. Again and again Esteban swung his sword hard, obviously thinking that sheer might would win the day. But what Lance lacked in physical size, he more than made up in technique, and calmly parried Esteban's every thrust, every swing, and every lunge.

Dripping with sweat, his tank top soaked through, Esteban finally lost his cool. Eyes bulging, mouth twisted with rage, he ran straight at Lance, blade pointing out.

Lance ducked under the blade and swung the flat of his own sword against Esteban's shin, causing the bigger boy to cry out in pain, stumble, and crash hard to the concrete. He lost his slippery grip, and the broadsword clattered along the ground to land at Reyna's feet. Exhausted as he was, his shin throbbing with pain, Esteban rolled over to regain his feet—and found the point of Lance's sword at his throat.

Lance breathed heavily, but Esteban panted like a dog after a two-mile run. The two boys gazed intently at one another. Just as with Reyna, Lance knew this to be the key moment for him. His gaze never wavered.

Finally, after several tense, silent seconds, Esteban broke eye contact and looked away. "You win," he mumbled in humiliation.

Lance pulled back his sword. "Still think I'm girly?"

Esteban shook his head, spraying droplets of sweat all over the ground.

Lance turned and fixed a challenging gaze upon the other gang members. "Anybody else wanna take me on?"

One by one, they shook their heads and looked away.

Lance swept his fiery green eyes over the assemblage and settled on the panting Esteban. "Got a problem with me being First Knight?"

Esteban turned his gaze in amazement up at the smaller boy. "Anybody who fights like you—hell, no!"

Lance grinned and extended a hand. Esteban flicked his gaze over to Jaime and the other homeboys. They nodded with understanding, so he turned back to Lance and stuck out his hand.

Lance pulled him to his feet, and Esteban limped to a chair to massage his bruised shin.

Darnell shook his head in amazement. "You gonna teach us all to fight like that?"

Lance nodded. "Starting right now."

And so it came to pass that Lance earned the respect of the gang members in the only true way they understood, through strength and force.

Arthur clapped Lance solidly on the shoulder and smiled in approval. No words were needed. Mark and Jack grinned at him, and even Reyna flashed him a thumbs-up sign, which made him lower his eyes and grin foolishly.

For the remainder of that afternoon, Arthur and Lance and those with sword-fighting experience, coached the gangsters who sought to learn the use of these weapons, while Reyna and Lavern worked with the archers. As usual, Enrique

and Luis tried to outshoot each other for Reyna's benefit.

Lance noticed her eyes drifting toward the swordsmen whenever Esteban wielded a weapon. Esteban still limped after his earlier battle, but he was strong and quick, and his powerful muscles swelled whenever he swung at a dummy target. Lance could tell Reyna liked what she saw.

Finally, after nightfall, the gang members drifted back to their 'hoods, and she bade them good night. "It's late, Reyna," Enrique implored, turning on the charm. "You should stay here tonight. We'll stay too."

She laughed. "Yeah, and have to sleep with both eyes open? Hell no! 'Night, Arthur," she called as she disappeared down the tunnel with a wave of her bow and a fling of her ponytail.

Disappointed, Enrique and Luis followed. Sometimes they stayed overnight, but usually went back home so their moms wouldn't worry.

Esteban smiled at the look of disappointment on their faces as he and his homies returned their swords to the armory and prepared to leave.

After telling Arthur they would return tomorrow, he paused to exchange a look of deep respect with Lance. They gazed at one another a long moment.

"*Carnal*," Esteban said with a nod, and Lance broke into a smile. They were equals now. Esteban tossed him a crooked grin before turning with his entourage to leave.

Suddenly, it was just the usual homeless kids who always stayed, and Lance felt an immense sense of relief. Peace surrounded him at this late hour when everyone had gone down and Arthur bade him good night. But peace was always tenuous at best. He'd done his job, the gangsters had accepted him, but did that make him worthy? No, he knew. His past, and that feeling of being forever dirty, would always be in the way.

Despite the silence, despite the ever-present, almost soothing drip of water, peace skittered around and away from him. As always, Chris snuggled up to him, but Lance squirmed and couldn't get comfortable. Fleeting images, memories, fears, and doubts kept intruding.

Finally, he extricated himself from the small boy's embrace, slipped on his baggy tunic and boots, and padded softly out of the sleeping area into The Hub. A few battery-powered lanterns still burned through the night, turning the enormous chamber into a shadow-realm.

As he entered the shadowy Hub, he found he wasn't alone. Mark rested against a wall gazing absently at Arthur's silent, empty throne. Lance's heart rate jumped, and he paused, considered turning back, but Mark noticed him, and Lance couldn't bring himself to be rude anymore. So he approached and tentatively sat beside the shaggy-haired blond, supporting his back against the

concrete wall.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” he asked, hoping the nervousness in his voice wasn’t too obvious.

Mark shook his head, untamed bangs flopping against his forehead. Then he eyed Lance with a lopsided grin that enlightened his soft features. “You sure kicked gangbanger ass today, Lance.”

“I don’t really like fighting much, you know, but with guys like that, I guess it’s all they understand.”

Mark nodded, bangs dropping in front of his eyes. “Yep, a good old fashioned ass whupping. Remind me not to get you mad.”

Lance laughed, wrapping his arms around his upraised knees. “No worries. I’m a skater. I only whup ass when I got to.”

Mark chuckled at that, and they sat a few moments in tenuous silence. The drip of water, an almost living presence within these dank, damp tunnels, was the only sound except their own breathing.

Lance looked at the other boy. “You still, like, craving the heroin?”

Mark nodded, flipping the blond mop off his forehead. “Sometimes, but not right now. When I do, I come out here and stare at the throne, and I think of Arthur, what he done for me, an’ I shake it loose. No more a that junk for me.”

Lance nodded. Arthur had that effect on him too. The two boys sat in silence.

Mark turned his haunted blue eyes on Lance. “What was it like, Lance?”

“What was what like?”

“Spending time with Arthur, you know, just the two of you?” Lance looked puzzled a moment, and Mark smiled. “I mean, you had him all to yourself, right, ’fore the rest of us kids came along?”

Now Lance understood, and it freaked him out because that’s one of the things that’d been troubling him this night, another reason why he couldn’t sleep. Besides his haunted past, he’d also been reflecting back to those early days not so long ago when it was just him and Arthur and no one else, back before he always had to prove himself to this kid or that one.

How much he enjoyed the ease of those initial days, the closeness he’d felt with Arthur. He knew now how much he’d needed that closeness and wished more than anything it could be that way again. After all, Arthur knew his secret and had accepted him anyway. Not just accepted him, *embraced* him. *Trusted* him. Maybe even.... No, don’t go *that* far.

“It was awesome,” he mused, smiling in spite of himself. “I like, showed him all around the city, taught him about cell phones and TV and trains and busses. Even got him on a swing at the park.”

Mark’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he laughed. “Man, that sounds great.

You're so lucky."

Lance nodded. He *was* lucky, wasn't he? Where would he be right now if he'd never met Arthur? On the streets? Looking for a safe place to sleep? Still hiding from himself? "He's like nobody I ever knew before, you know?"

Mark nodded in agreement. "I know. All men ever want outta me is...." He stopped, let the thought trail off with a heavy, painful sigh. "Sometimes, Lance, I'd try to *pretend* they loved me, you know, just 'cause I was so lonely."

The sadness pooling in those oceans of blue stabbed Lance straight through the heart. "I'm sorry, man" was all he could think to say, imagining how terrible it must've been out there, feeling his own humiliation and self-loathing. "I know about the lonely part, for sure."

He looked long and hard at Mark, whose gaze had locked once more on the throne, his mind somewhere far away, and made a decision. He'd thought about it for too long already. He wanted to know. No, he *needed* to know.

"Mark, can I ask you something?"

Mark pulled his gaze from the throne and fixed his eyes on Lance. "Sure, anything."

Lance hesitated, his heart rate increasing, his anxiety rising like volcanic lava. His fingers clutched at his tunic. "When, um, when did you, you know, like, realize you were gay?"

"I think I always knew, you know?" He shrugged. "I knew I was different. Not playing with dolls and girly stuff like that, but, I don't know, when my dad kept wanting me to play sports with the boys, I didn't want to." He laughed. "I realized all I wanted to do was *watch* the boys play sports. I guess that's when I kind of figured it out. For a while I kept telling myself I was bi, you know, so I wouldn't have to admit it? But girls just didn't do it for me."

Lance nodded, uncertain how to respond since he'd broached the subject, especially given his own mixed-up thoughts and feelings. "I still can't believe your parents just kicked you out like that, especially your mom."

Mark laughed again, bitterly this time. "She was worse than my dad. He was kind a for, you know, hiding me in a closet from the neighbors. But she's the one that told me if I didn't decide right then and there to not be a faggot, I could get out and never come back. So, I never been back."

"That sucks," Lance said, feeling his own abandonment wash over him.

Mark turned his eyes back on Lance, and Lance noticed for the first time how long and almost delicate Mark's lashes were.

"Can I ask *you* something?" Mark asked, almost shyly. "Something personal?"

Lance shrugged, oddly fascinated by those butterfly shaped lashes.

"Are you gay?" Mark asked softly.

Lance instantly averted his eyes, dropping his gaze to the floor, knowing his face had turned bright red with shame, and grateful for his flowing hair to cover it. He was going to deny it. He *had* to deny it! The denial was right there, right on the tip of his tongue! But what actually slipped out was a strangled, “I don’t know.”

He waited for Mark to laugh, but there was no laughter. Timidly, panic twisting his stomach into knots, he raised his eyes and peeked fearfully at Mark’s face. What he saw there stopped his breath in his throat—it wasn’t the mockery or condemnation he’d expected. It was *understanding*.

Mark placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, Lance. It’s pretty common.”

Lance didn’t freak when Mark touched him, and the boy’s words almost made him do a double take. “It is?” He thought he was the *only* confused one.

Mark nodded, pulling his hand back. “I hear that a lot on the street, especially from guys that been raped by older men.”

Lance sucked in a shocked breath. “How’d you...?”

“It’s in your eyes, man,” Mark explained sadly, his voice sounding gentle and far away and laced with hurt. “It never goes away.” His blue eyes swam with tears, and he swiped at them with the sleeve of his tunic.

Lance watched him cry softly, wanting to reach out and comfort him, but he was too afraid.

“Am I a slut boy, Mark?” he whispered.

“What?” Mark asked in surprise, his eyes wide and blurred.

“That’s what Jack called himself, for, you know, doing what you guys were doing out there. But am I any better? I let Richard... do those things to me for three years! I didn’t run. I didn’t tell anyone.” His eyes welled up as he gazed despairing into Mark’s softly gentle face. “Can a six-year-old be a slut boy, Mark? Is that what I was?”

Mark shook his head, lightly grasped Lance’s hand, and squeezed.

The touch sent shivers through him, but he didn’t pull away.

“No, Lance, you’re a victim,” Mark said softly, “just like me and Jack. It wasn’t your fault, man. Don’t go there, please. You’ll hate yourself, and you’re way too cool to hate yourself.”

He smiled warmly, and Lance felt an unfamiliar surge of joy and acceptance, his eyes welling with tears.

“Thanks, Mark. Thanks a lot for saying that.”

Then they fell silent again, each lost in thought.

“Mark?” Lance finally broke the painful silence. “How will I, you know, figure it out, about what I am, I mean?”

Mark smiled sadly. "Give it time. You know that ole Beatles song 'Let It Be'?"

Lance wiped his damp eyes and nodded.

"Just let it be, Lance," Mark repeated, "and it'll all work out the way it's supposed to."

"Thanks!" Lance was afraid he might start bawling any minute, feeling more grateful than he ever thought he could be. He'd been carrying those fears around for so long....

But then panic shot through him like a bullet. "Uh, Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"You won't, you know, tell anyone about me, will you?" Lance fisted his tunic tightly, knowing he must look as desperate as he felt. "I mean, I'm First Knight and all and...."

Mark smiled tenderly and held up a clenched fist. "Our secret." They did the fist bump.

Lance felt a warmth engulf him that he'd only previously experienced around Arthur. This boy, whom he'd dissed, accepted him just as he was, just as messed up and confused as he was! Unbelievable....

They sat again a moment before Lance said, "Can I ask you another question?"

"Anything."

"Are you and Jack, well, you know...." Lance felt himself turn red.

"Boyfriends?" Mark finished for him, a twinkle of amusement in those amazing eyes.

Wholly embarrassed, Lance nodded.

"Naw," Mark went on with a shake of his head. "He's my best bud, though. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him. Saved my ass a grip a times. Man, Lance, we been through it, him and me." His blue eyes gleamed devilishly, and he grinned. "Why you asking? Interested?"

Lance turned so red he thought he might faint, but Mark laughed and gave him a playful shove. "Just kidding. He *is* hot, though, you gotta admit."

Lance blushed again, but didn't care anymore. Mark was his friend now, and friends didn't care about stuff like that.

"I'm not gonna go there," he said softly and they laughed, a simple, comfortable, easy laughter that settled into a comfortable silence.

"You're pretty cute, yourself," Mark practically whispered, casting a shy look Lance's way.

Lance flipped his hair dramatically. "It's the hair!" he proclaimed in self-mockery. "That's what everyone says."

Both boys cracked up. They were buds, now, like Mark was with Jack. Lance had never had a *real* friend, had never let himself be that vulnerable, but now he welcomed it. *Now* he recognized just how much he needed it.

But then his face darkened like storm clouds, his eyes dropping like the setting sun. He still had something to say—his conscience wouldn't let him off the hook.

“Thanks, Mark, for, you know, everything. I feel so crappy hating on you guys, especially since *I'm* so messed up.” His gaze fell hard to the cold stone floor.

Mark threw one arm around Lance's shoulders and grinned. “Hey, man, it's all good. I mean, we're brothers now, aren't we?”

Lance snapped up his head and gaped. Of course they were! Wasn't that what Arthur's crusade was all about? How come he didn't see it first?

“Yeah,” he agreed, “yeah, we are.” He threw *his* arm around Mark's shoulders. “Brother.” They locked eyes a moment, smiled bashfully, and then turned to gaze absently at the throne.

And so they sat, arms around one another's shoulders, each lost in his own thoughts, sharing the closeness of their newfound brotherhood, and just letting everything be, until they drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.



Neither of them woke when Jack padded out to the throne room wearing only his leather drawstring pants, but no shirt or shoes. He started looking around, and then stopped short when he saw the two boys together, asleep against the wall, arms draping each other's shoulders, and he nearly lost his breath with despair.

“Oh, Mark,” he whispered, his stomach plummeting as he gazed sadly at the only boy he'd ever really loved, and with a heavy heart returned to his bedroll, where sleep would elude him for most of that long, painful night.



Jenny stood at her classroom door, welcoming her students. She had not seen Lance since Eucalyptus Park the previous week, nor had she seen this so-called King Arthur on the news anymore. But neither of them was far from her thoughts, no matter what she was doing.

As her students trickled into the room—tardy bells didn't mean much to MTS students—she noticed other missing faces besides Lance. Uneven attendance had always been an issue at this school, but in the past few days, weeks maybe, kids seemed to have disappeared. Could this Arthur have anything to do with it, she

wondered?

One of her better students, another skater named Khalil, stepped past her with a “Morning, Ms. McMullen,” and headed to the corner to deposit his board. On a hunch, she followed.

“Say, Khalil,” she began. The handsome Jordanian boy turned around, his mass of bushy hair tied back as usual, his attire pure skater. “Have you seen Lance around at any of the usual skating places?”

“Pretty Boy?” Khalil replied.

“Yes.”

“No. Nobody’s seen ’im. He’s like the best around here too, so we kind a been wondering.” He shrugged.

“Thanks, Khalil, go ahead and put your board up.”

He nodded and went to the corner near her printer and stashed his skateboard. Jenny turned to welcome her other students, who loudly and boisterously pushed and shoved and insulted their way to their seats. She sighed and considered Arthur’s question once again. Did she love them? She used to, she knew, shaking her head at their uncivil behavior, but now she wasn’t sure anymore.

When she’d begun teaching, almost never would a student curse at a teacher. Now they did it with impunity. Where they learned such behavior, she couldn’t imagine. Home? Television? It didn’t really matter. Whatever the reason, good manners, as they used to be called, or civil behavior, were a thing of the past, and everyone was the worse for it.

And yet, she was required to teach these kids Shakespeare and Fitzgerald—two authors she loved—rather than proper social behaviors that would benefit them on a job and throughout their lives. Much as she loved classical literature, these kids didn’t need it and, it seemed to her, had more important lessons they *did* need to learn. Sighing again, she set about taking roll and calming the class so she could begin her required lesson plan for the day.



When Jack had finally cried himself to sleep, he’d been alone, but when he awoke the next morning, he found Mark’s arm draped over his bare chest and the blond boy curled up beside him, his unruly mane tickling Jack’s cheek. Despite the pain he felt at seeing Mark and Lance together, it still felt good to have Mark beside him, even though he knew it was only in friendship.

Later, while he and Mark and some of the older boys were tending to the needs of the younger children, he spotted Lance giving Chris his breakfast. He found himself staring at the younger, astoundingly beautiful boy with envy. And

jealousy.



Lance felt someone's eyes on him and turned to see Jack staring. He saw something in the other boy's eyes before Jack quickly looked away, but what was it? A sudden chill ran through him. Did Jack know? Had Mark told him? But no, he knew Mark would keep his secret. Still, why had Jack been staring at him so intently?

"Are you gonna train me with the sword today?" Chris asked around a mouthful of Pop-Tart—something one of the guys had brought from home—interrupting Lance's uncertain thoughts. "You been promising me, Lance."

Lance managed a smile for the little bright-eyed boy, who'd already grown and filled out in the three months since they'd found him. "Sure, Chris, I'll train you with whatever sword you can lift."

"All right!" the boy replied, shoving the last of his Pop-Tart into his mouth. "Let's get started."

Arthur's other kids began trickling in from home, and morning workouts began in earnest. Amid the bustle of bodies streaming about the weapons racks, grabbing swords and chain mail and bows and arrows, Lance watched as Chris tried out several different swords. Finally, the small boy chose a midsized weapon that weighed him down a little, but he gripped it tightly and turned back to Lance with a toothy grin.

As other boys paired off and began sparring, Lance went easy on the little one, but when Chris started hacking and stabbing hard at his shield, he had to laugh and *really* defend himself. He felt pleased that Chris was becoming more confident, less dependent, and so much stronger.

The little boy smashed against his shield with a force Lance hadn't realized was there, and Lance felt his heart swell with pride and love for this little brother who'd adopted him and looked up to him. Another wall around his heart had begun to crack and crumble, he realized with uncertainty. Was that good or bad? He really didn't know.

Gripping the hilt of his sword more tightly, he focused on parrying Chris's thrusts before his musings got him seriously hurt.

As usual, Enrique and Luis sparred against one another as soon as they'd arrived. They always practiced swordplay in the morning because they had to do archery in the afternoon so they could flirt with Reyna. Each had his favorite sword and shield, and they were pretty equally matched. They knew each other's style so well they could actually carry on a conversation while sparring and not

risk getting hurt.

Enrique announced that he was going to ask Reyna out, and Luis suddenly burned with rage, smashing his sword violently into the other boy's shield and causing Enrique to stagger back. "Not if I ask her first!" he retorted loud enough to draw Lance's attention from across the chamber.

Without pause, the jealousy and rivalry for Reyna's attention frothed to the surface, and the boys began hacking and stabbing at one another for real.

"You ain't doin' nuthin', homie!" Enrique shouted back with a vicious thrust that Luis barely danced away from.

The sound of metal slamming against metal became louder, and their thrusts and parries grew more intense. Everyone in the vicinity stopped and stared in amazement. Arthur was nowhere in sight, but Lance didn't hesitate.

He leapt forward with his sword thrust out before him. "Stop it!" he shouted, his voice sounding young, yet commanding. The combatants ignored him, thrusting and swinging and cursing at each other.

Chris backed away and bumped into Jack and Mark, who, like everyone else, had stopped their own sparring to watch the scene unfold. "Go get Arthur," Mark urged Chris. The small boy nodded and ran off toward one of the other tunnels.

Lance watched the boys fight, his sword ready, but paralyzed and unsure of what to do. "I said stop!" he shouted a second time, but his words fell into empty air. The fight continued. If anything, it grew more intense. Lance was certain one of them would be hurt or killed if he didn't do something.

Lavern came running into the tunnel to find out what all the commotion was about. Lance snatched the bow and arrow from the boy's hand, cocked the arrow, took aim, and fired a straight shot at Enrique's shield. The arrow smashed hard into the shield making a *ping* sound and snapping into two pieces. Startled, both combatants, winded from their exertions, ceased their swinging and hacking to gaze at Lance in horror.

"The hell, Pretty Boy?" gasped Enrique, sweat dripping down his angular face, gaping in disbelief at the broken arrow by his feet. "You could a killed me, fool!"

"Like you guys weren't tryin' ta kill each other already?" Lance retorted brusquely, stepping boldly forward and getting between them. "What's wrong with you two?" He glared at each in turn.

Enrique pointed at Luis. "This fool thinks he's gonna take Reyna from me!"

"You don't even got her, fool!" shouted Luis right back.

It looked like the two were going to start up again, but Lance pushed them back from each other, staring them both down. They mad-dogged each other from either side of Lance, but made no further aggressive movements.

Lance looked from one to the other. “Look, guys, I hate ta tell ya this, but Reyna don’t go for either of you. If she’s into anybody it’s Esteban. So what the hell are you two fighting for?”

“I’ll kick that fool’s ass!” Enrique spat. “Big-time gangbanger—I’ll waste that punk!”

“Listen to me,” Lance ordered in a strong voice that commanded silence and respect.

Enrique and Luis stopped mad-dogging each other and gazed with wonder at the younger, smaller boy.

“You tole me you guys’ve been friends for like, forever. Remember at school when I first told you about Arthur?”

They nodded.

“Why’d you decide to join?”

Enrique shrugged. “Sounded cool.”

“Thought it might be fun.”

“Yeah,” Lance pressed, “but remember what I told you was the *reason* for this crusade?”

Enrique and Luis exchanged an embarrassed look. “To make things better for kids like us,” Enrique said, and Luis added, “To make a difference.”

Lance’s eyes blazed with intensity. “Exactly! We’re more than friends in this crusade, guys, we’re *brothers*. Can’t let no *jaina*, can’t let nothin’ break us apart. Else we fail ’fore we even start.”

Enrique and Luis eyed Lance with a newfound respect.

“When you get so smart, Pretty Boy?” Enrique asked.

“Name’s Lance, *not* Pretty Boy, and I guess from hangin’ around Arthur.”

Enrique nodded and glanced over at Luis, who nodded back, swiping sweat from his brow. Then the three boys exchanged the ever-popular hand slap, finger clasp, fist bump-type handshake, and all the drama was over as quickly as it had begun.

Lance turned to the assembled onlookers and spotted Mark and Jack together. Mark grinned and gave him a thumbs-up sign, which caused Jack to squirm with discomfort.

“All right, everyone, back to work!” Lance commanded. And they complied.

As the crowd dispersed, Lance spotted Arthur standing at the mouth of the tunnel with Chris, watching him. The king approached and gazed at Lance without a word. Then a smile creased his bearded face. “Well done, Lance.”

Embarrassed by the compliment, Lance averted his eyes, looking down at the floor. “Oh, they weren’t really fighting, it was just—”

Arthur’s hand on his shoulder caused him to stop and look up. Arthur’s grin

was still there. “Well done, my boy.”

Lance broke into a grin. “Thanks, sire.”

Arthur nodded, and Lance turned to Chris. “Ready for more, little man?”

Chris swatted sweaty blond hair from his eager blue eyes and nodded enthusiastically, drawing a laugh from Lance and the king. Lance took Chris back over to their corner and resumed their lessons.

After a while, Reyna blew in with her accustomed bluster. To their credit, Enrique and Luis paid her no mind, which she noted with obvious disapproval.

Shortly thereafter, Esteban and his crew arrived, followed by Darnell, Jaime, Tai (the big Samoan), and Duc (who, Lance now knew, was Korean). All had brought more gang members to partake of the training, and the chamber swelled to bursting with the energetic youth.

All who’d arrived from their homes brought various and sundry foods for lunch, as had become the daily custom, and after a few hours of physical activity, the kids were tired and hungry, even Jack and Esteban, the two most physically fit of the lot. And so they spread throughout the tunnels and ate their fill—talking, laughing, cussing, and bragging.

Arthur had gone off to feed Llamrei, so Lance sat with Mark and Jack, and Chris and ate a relaxed meal with his friends—no, his family. That’s who these guys were, he now knew, not just Mark, but *all* of them were the family he’d never had. He believed he was unworthy of such a gift, and yet they made him feel something almost foreign—happy.

Lance joked with Mark and Chris and pretended not to notice Jack’s steely brown eyes boring into him. He’d glance up while eating to find Jack eyeing him in an almost invasive sort of way that caused Lance to physically squirm. It creeped him out and confused him at the same time.

Why does Jack keep doing that?

He shivered and forced his attention back on Chris while the small boy finished his food. Jack’s intense probing looks had killed his appetite anyway, so he gave the rest of his sandwich to Chris, who grinned and popped the whole thing into his mouth and puffed out his cheeks like a squirrel.

Lance had to laugh at the boy’s antics and found himself feeling a growing love for this little boy such as he’d never felt for anyone. He grinned at Chris and then reached out with both hands to tickle the boy until Chris, rolling and pitching on the concrete floor, almost cried with laughter.

Finally, unnerved by that probing stare from Jack, he stopped tickling Chris and rose to his feet. “I’m gonna go check on everybody else,” he said, mainly to Mark, avoiding Jack’s penetrating gaze. “Uh, see you guys later.”

“Can I come too?” Chris piped up, and Lance grinned down at the small boy

who'd become his shadow.

"Sure, Chris, c'mon." Chris leaped to his feet and grabbed Lance's hand. Lance cast a quick grin toward Mark. Mark grinned back, and Lance set off with Chris into the tunnels.

Jack observed the silent exchange between Mark and Lance and settled into a funk. Mark nudged him playfully. "What's wrong, my buff man?"

Jack looked up into those wide blue eyes, his own brimming with pain. "I saw you guys last night." It was barely a whisper.

That caught Mark by surprise. "You were listening?"

Jack shook his head sadly. "I woke up, and you were gone. When I came looking, I saw you guys asleep with your arms around each other." His fists clenched and his face took on a pained expression. "Did you, uh, hook up with him last night?"

Mark's lower jaw dropped open. "Hell, no! He ain't even gay, remember? We was just talking."

"With your arms around each other?" Jack retorted snidely, fisting his tunic to control his shaking.

"He's been through a lot, just like we have, and, I guess, we both needed some comfort."

Jack gazed at Mark sadly. "I could comfort you. I always did before."

"Jacky, nothin' happened! What's wrong with you these days? Don't you like it here?"

Jack pulled up his knees and cradled them, looking down at the floor. "'Course I do. But sometimes... well, sometimes I miss those times on the street, you know, when it was just you an' me, and I could protect you, and hold you, and make you feel better when some guy treated you like garbage."

Mark grabbed Jack's upper arm and squeezed affectionately. "You still protect me, big guy, and we're still together, right? It's just, well, now we got Arthur to protect us."

Jack looked away again. "I know, but..."

"Remember on the streets, Jacky, what we always hoped for and wished for and talked about?"

Jack did not meet his eyes. "Yeah. A family that would accept us and love us."

"Right," Mark confirmed enthusiastically. "And we've found that here with Arthur and Lance and the others."

Jack returned his gaze to Mark's earnest face. "They don' all accept us here, 'specially them gangsters. I been hearing 'faggot' whispered when I'm around."

"So?" Mark replied, moving around to sit right in front of him and forcing their eyes to meet. "We're always gonna hear that crap from somebody. But they

won't try anything here 'cause you'd crush 'em with these guns a yours."

He squeezed Jack's biceps and grinned, which sent a shiver of longing through Jack's entire body.

"Look, Jacky, you're my best bud and always will be. But we got a home now. We got Arthur, an' he's the best thing to ever happen to a guy. It'll be great, you'll see!"

His gushing enthusiasm finally won over Jack, who smiled and dropped his knees, grabbing the boy he loved in a tight hug. "You're right, Marky Mark. I just worry about you, that's all."

"Well don't," Mark said against his shoulder as they held each other. "Arthur'll take care of me."

That made Jack frown, and his heart drooped even lower. It felt like he might be losing Mark after all, but *not* to Lance.



After lunch, the hundreds of kids of varying ages and backgrounds, including the few girls who usually clung to Reyna, gathered in The Hub and packed it so tightly it was a miracle anyone could even breathe. Arthur sat upon his throne, Lance seated by his side. Eager faces gazed up at the king expectantly.

"To all of thee I posit a question," Arthur began when everyone had settled. "Do any of thee believe this city, indeed, this state and country, has at its core the best interests of children?"

Esteban cursed and shook his head.

Arthur gazed at him without malice, but with firmness, and obviously Esteban got the point.

"My bad, homie, it's a habit."

Arthur nodded. "One of an excessive number of bad habits taught to you by your parent's generation."

"How you mean?" Darnell put in. "My granny, she don't cuss none at all."

"And yet, in thine entertainment—which was not in existence in my time—the music and movies—are not these profane words utilized with frequency?"

Darnell shrugged. "Yeah, so?"

"And are these entertainments for children be created *by* children, or by adults?"

Esteban nodded Arthur's way. "Adults. So, what about it?"

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'hypocrite'?" Arthur asked the assembly at large.

Reyna called out, "Yeah, my parents!"

The assemblage laughed.

“How so?” pressed Arthur.

All eyes turned to Reyna, as usual holding court in the rear. Esteban winked at her, but she ignored him. “My parents complain about poor people who don’t take good care of their kids and let ’em run wild, ’cept they do the same thing, right? Where are they now—partying in Italy while they pay me to stay here and do whatever I want.”

“Well said, Reyna,” Arthur replied. “Hypocrites decry behaviors they themselves do. Rich or poor, it doth not matter. All that be of importance is values.”

“Okay, Arthur,” said Esteban. “So what’s that got to do with music and movies and sh—stuff?”

“Alas, the very indecent activities and profane language children be punished for in this state be the very same activities most common in the entertainment for their usage.”

Esteban’s eyes lit up with understanding, and he turned to Darnell and the others with a revelatory look. “He’s right, homies. All the sh—stuff that’s in our music and movies, that’s the same stuff we get busted for and kicked outta school for and... even kicked outta the house for.” He glanced around at many nodding heads.

“What about all the grownups who abuse us kids, Arthur?” Lavern asked. “I know kids beaten by their folks, well, like me, and nuthin’ happens to the parents. But the kid beats on another kid smaller ’n ’im, and he goes to juvy.”

“Or prison,” Duc, the Korean gang member added. All eyes turned to him. “One a my homies tried to kill his mother’s boyfriend ’cause the guy used to beat the sh—crap outta him and her. Nuthin’ happened to that guy, but my homie’s down for twenty-five to life. He’s only fourteen, man.” Duc shook his head with anger, and further livid murmurings rippled through the chamber.

Arthur cleared his throat, and silence fell once more. The king eyed Lance beside him. He’d been attentively following the conversation, his own bitter life experiences rising in his throat like bile. “And what, Lance, do you think might improve the lot of children in this city?”

Lance considered a moment, and then the idea struck like lightning, something he’d considered from time to time, but had never articulated. “Methinks kids should be able to vote,” he announced, almost like a candidate running for election.

A ripple of excitement ran throughout the group.

“Yeah, right!” Tai, the Samoan boy, spat out. “Like that’ll ever happen.”

“And yet,” Arthur went on, “Lance makes an excellent point. According to the

laws of adults, are not children considered to be *as* adults when they do something wrong, but *not* when they do something right?”

Now Esteban piped up again, looking excited. “Yeah, guys, he’s right. We ain’t adults today to vote for these ass—these idiots, but tomorrow we’re adults for being in a gang or using the guns they give us or gettin’ caught up in a crime. It’s *pura paja!*” He turned to Arthur. “Sorry, Arthur, but there ain’t no other word for it.”

“But there is,” Arthur assured him. “The correct word is *stupid.*” That got a laugh from the assemblage. “If a child of fourteen be an adult for criminal purposes, should not the same fourteen year old be an adult for the purposes of voting? Does that not seem fair, lads and ladies?”

There was a huge cheer from the crowd, and Lance grinned at Arthur, who acknowledged him with a nod.

“Esteban, Tai, Darnell, Jaime, Duc, and any others of you who belong to these gangs,” Arthur went on. “What be the benefits?”

Most shrugged, and Darnell just pointed to Esteban. “You tell ’im, cuzz. You the smart guy here.”

Esteban looked at Arthur. “We run our own, don’t gotta listen to the stupid adults. We got power in the streets—people’s scared a us. We got respect!” The others nodded. “But ya know, Arthur, the homies be like a family, like what you got going here. Most a us, well, there ain’t much at home, ya know? My moms, she tries, but she works two jobs and don’t have no time for me. She’s got my baby sister to mind.”

“Be there no father in thy home?” Arthur asked, suspecting the answer.

“Hell, no!” Esteban spat. “If I ever find that muther—my *jefe*, I’ll kill ’im!” Arthur looked troubled by Esteban’s virulent response troubled, but let it pass for now. “And what of thy baby sister’s father?”

Esteban shrugged. “Oh, he was just some guy my moms hooked up with. He didn’t stick around.”

“And does this *hooking up* be good behavior to teach children, or bad?” Arthur asked, his tone without judgment.

Esteban glowered a moment and looked like he was on the verge of losing it, but kept his cool. “It’s bad,” he reluctantly admitted, and no one challenged his assessment.

Most had had similar experiences with their own mom or dad, or even themselves. They’d never thought of it as being bad—hooking up was just something people did for fun, without thinking. They’d never considered the consequences before.

“So whadda we do about all this?” Esteban spoke again, forcing himself to

stay calm. “There ain’t nuthin’ gonna change it.”

Heads nodded all around him. Even Reyna nodded her agreement.

Arthur stood and gestured for Lance to stand beside him. “We shall change it. All of us gathered here today. But we shall not begin with thine elected officials, nor thy corrupted school system, nor thy so-called peace officers. Nay, my lads and ladies, we shall begin where any revolution must needs begin—with the *people*.”

Excited murmuring wafted through the group, but no one even thought to argue. That’s why they were here, after all. They wanted something different. They needed something better. And they clearly hoped Arthur might be that something.

CHAPTER 6: HOW ELSE CAN THEY LEARN?

WITHIN THE GANG TASK FORCE Unit, the officers on duty sat at their desks surfing the net, looking for deals on electronics, or scrolling vacation spots on travel sites. There had been no gang activity of any notable sort since before the weekend—just the standard drug dealing, but no shootings or turf battles of any note, and that “tag” hadn’t appeared anywhere else within the city. Such a development was not only surprising, but in its own way, alarming.

Ryan sat at his computer gnawing on a pencil, scrolling through site after site, devouring everything he could unearth on King Arthur, both the mythical and the historic. Gibson sat at his own desk, his computer open to similar sites, but at the moment, he was frantically texting on his phone. He slapped the phone down with a disgusted sigh.

“Teenagers,” he grunted. Several detectives around the squad room turned his way with a sympathetic nod.

Ryan glanced up from his research and took a swig of coffee that tasted three days old. “Justin hasn’t texted you back?”

Gibson shook his head. “I don’t know, Ry. When his mother can’t handle ’im she sends ’im to me, and all we do is argue. Hell, the kid’s hardly home, and she don’t know where he goes, and he never answers *my* texts.”

“Can’t help you there, partner,” Ryan offered, popping some gum into his mouth. He needed to break this pencil-chewing habit somehow, and he figured if gum worked for cigarette smokers, it might work for pencil chewers, too.

Gibson nodded. “Yeah, you and the ex were smarter than me and mine.”

“Does he keep in contact with Sandra when he’s out?” Ryan asked, more to help his partner than out of any real interest. Kids were nothing but potential criminals in his book.

Shouldn’t be seen nor heard till they turned twenty-one.

Gibson shook his head, taking a swig of his Diet Coke.

Ryan recalled with amusement when Gib had sworn off coffee three years back, but now he had the Diet Coke addiction. It never ended.

“Isn’t he eighteen soon?” Ryan offered hopefully.

“Nope,” Gibson replied. “Two more years.”

“Too bad.”

“You know what bugs me the most?” Ryan looked up and pretended he was interested. “He’s embarrassed that I’m a cop. Says his friends give him crap about it.”

Ryan frowned. *Was that a good response?* “Makes you wonder who his friends are, huh.”

“Yeah, it does. He never brings ’em round. I don’t know, Ry. You bust your butt for these kids, and they don’t appreciate it. Hell, I’m out there cleaning up this city so his kids’ll have a better life, and he doesn’t even care.”

Ryan eyed his troubled partner a moment. “You know I know nothing about raising kids, but maybe yours doesn’t want you to spend so much time saving the city and give some of that time to him.”

Gibson jerked his head up from his Diet Coke, his face stormy.

“Go home, Gib,” Ryan offered. “There’s nuthin’ goin’ on here. Maybe Justin’s there, and you guys could go get a pizza or something.”

Gibson set down his empty soda can and reached for the photo on his desk. He gazed at the face of a handsome young boy. He set the photo down and rose from his chair, snatching his jacket off the back of it. “I am gonna head home, Ry. Call if anything pops.”

“Will do,” Ryan agreed, and Gibson was out the door in a flash.

Kids, Ryan thought. *Thank God I don’t have any!*



The nondescript warehouse appeared to be a bland and ordinary four-story building. That’s just how Mr. R. and Mr. L. wanted it to appear. Just one of dozens of similar buildings in Los Angeles that wouldn’t attract any particular notice from police or the populace at large.

Of course, their real names were unknown, and to all the boys who ran their drugs on the street they were known simply as Mr. R. and Mr. L. To the world at large, both men—under different identities—were prominent, successful, and powerful businessmen.

Mr. R., third generation Mexican, had made his fortune in real estate and land holdings. He had Mayor Villagrana in his pocket, and thus the mayor’s full cooperation. His overly generous monetary support of Villagrana’s campaign got him whatever he wanted when it came to skipping environmental standards or bypassing zoning laws. He *owned* the mayor.

Mr. L., from Hong Kong, had been working with Mr. R. for several years. Wildly successful in neo-capitalist China, he had gone into the drug business

with Mr. R. because it was astoundingly lucrative, with very little overhead. As an importer of fine china and works of art, it was easy to smuggle the drugs past customs. A few well-placed bribes always did the trick. Mr. R. had reasoned, rightly so, that all the incompetence from the Mexican drug cartels these days made them too risky a proposition for importing drugs.

But the US government hardly looked at China regarding drug trafficking, and, even when they did, the smuggling was surprisingly easy, and the overly bloated bureaucracy stumbled over itself with ineptitude. LA was such an addicted city that both men made a fortune under the table almost equal to what they made over it, without the annoying matter of taxes or tariffs to pay.

Of course, nowadays, many people ran little drug rings out of their own homes, so whenever possible, the partners subsidized these neighborhood operations, took the lion's share of profits, and no one was the wiser. Meth was hot, and of course, cocaine and marijuana never lost their appeal. Mr. R., in particular, was thrilled to see heroin make a comeback. A strongly addictive drug, it promised years of money rolling in from whoever used it, until the inevitable overdose, of course.

A sad, but necessary part of the business.



Justin stood before Mr. R., as always noting the slicked back hair, finely chiseled cheekbones, and an extensive collection of gold jewelry. He particularly fancied a large, ornate, twenty-four carat gold ring on the index finger of Mr. R's right hand.

As was his custom, standing beside R.—he never sat in the presence of flunkies or dope peddlers—was Mr. L.—a small guy wearing exotic wire-rimmed glasses, dressed a fancy business suit, and always bearing an impassive expression that was scary.

Alongside Justin was Dwayne.

Mr. R. had been very unhappy that the two boys hadn't killed Lance that night in the alley, and Justin had genuinely feared for his life. But when Mr. R. and Mr. L. heard about this mysterious figure in knightly armor, they'd become intrigued. From that night onward, they'd been fascinated by the news reports of Arthur's street fight with the LAPD and had instructed Justin, Dwayne, and all their runners to find out what they could about this man: where he hid out, what his plans were, what impact he might be having, negative or positive, on their street business.

"Anything new, boys?" R. asked in that silky-smooth voice of his.

Dwayne shook his head, but Justin said, “My dad and his partner are trying to nail the guy, but can’t find his ass anywhere.”

“Darnell been goin’ and meetin’ the dude somewhere,” Dwayne offered, twitching and fidgeting, “with a bunch a his homies, but he won’t tell me nuthin’.”

“You both should have accepted the man’s invitation in Griffith Park,” Mr. L. stated in a cold, dispassionate voice, causing Justin to squirm.

“Your second mistake in a matter of weeks,” Mr. R. reminded him sternly. “Do not make a third.”

Mr. L. snapped his fingers, and several young Asian men hurried forward with bags of white powder, which Dwayne and Justin quickly stuffed into their rather large backpacks. To make himself appear harmless, and to offset his boxer-like build, which intimidated many children, Justin always sported a child’s backpack with cartoon characters, which seemed to amuse Mr. R.

“Now, boys,” Mr. R. concluded when they’d slung the packs over their shoulders, “I want more information on this so-called King Arthur, and I want it soon. He’s already stolen some of my gang members, and I can’t have that, can I?”

Justin shook his head, and noted Dwayne doing the same.

Mr. R. flashed his perfect teeth. “Do not disappoint me.”

The boys nodded nervously.

“You may go,” Mr. L. commanded, and Justin sure needed no further urging. He turned and followed Dwayne as fast as possible out of the office. Both of them scuttled down four flights of stairs, and bolted out the back exit into a small, unseen alley.



Day by day, Arthur instructed his knights-to-be, and day by day they grew stronger in weaponry and in chivalric knowledge. Even the gang members had thus far adhered to Arthur’s rule of no street rivalries entering his safe haven. They’d also shown vast growth, both in civil behaviors, and more importantly, in their strong desire to follow a better path in life. True, their learned tendencies toward arrogance and domination over the weak were traits that might never fully disappear, but in their willingness to accept a new way of thinking, the boys were becoming more adept at controlling those tendencies. And that was all Arthur could ask of anyone.

“One day soon,” he told the assemblage, “those who wish and who be worthy shall be knighted by me into this new Round Table. Yes, we do not have a

physical table, but the symbol of that round table be crucial to our success. None of us can strive for greatness above and beyond any other. The needs of the entire company be of greater import, remember. The code of chivalry, to which every knight must swear fealty, requires us keep faith in God and each other, to fight for all, not merely a few, to avoid unfairness at all costs, and to always speak the truth. Can ye all gathered here accept this code and strive to the best of your ability to live it?”

There was silence from the assembled kids as they digested Arthur’s words. The code was extreme for most of them. Especially for Esteban and the other gang members who’d spent their young lives ignoring rules and laws—lying, partying, slanging, running their own program.

Lance leapt to his feet and cried out, “I can, sire!”

Within the crowd, Mark jumped up as well, grinning at Lance. “And I, sire!”

Next stood Jack, glancing a moment at Mark, whose gaze was locked on Arthur, before turning to face the king. “And I.”

Reyna stepped forward in the rear, holding her bow above her head in salute. “And I, Arthur.”

Esteban threw her a smile before he, too, rose to his feet and stepped forward. “And I.”

Within moments, the entire chamber had risen to its collective feet, shouting in unison, “And I, sire!”

Arthur turned to Lance with a smile and a nod, which Lance returned with a slight bow. Soon, Arthur knew, his army would be ready, and his crusade could truly commence.



Jenny was attempting, and failing, to teach *Romeo and Juliet* to her ninth graders. She hated the slavish way the school and the district forced teachers to adhere exactly to the state-mandated curriculum. Much as she loved Shakespeare, plays were meant to be seen, not read, especially with such arcane English that it was practically a foreign language. As if those paper pushers in Sacramento had any idea what her students needed to learn to be successful in life.

All it would take was for school districts to tell the state, and the feds, to go take a hike. If every district in the state did that, what could Sacramento do, give everybody detention? They couldn’t cut off funding because that would be a public relations nightmare. Sadly, nobody in this state had the intestinal fortitude to fight back. Including her, unfortunately.

At present, a boy named Tony and a girl named Maria struggled to read aloud some passages from the Shakespeare play, mangling the dialogue worse than any actor on those cheesy science fiction movies she sometimes watched to kill time.

The other students paid little or no attention. Their minds were either wandering, they were doodling, playing with their cell phones, or otherwise tuning out the horrific acting of their fellow students. Quite frankly, Jenny didn't blame them.

Tony read, "I take thee at thy word: call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd; henceforth I never will be Romeo."

Maria responded after a pause, "What man art thou that thus be screen'd in night so stumblest on my counsel."

During this recitation of lines, Jenny wandered down the aisle to a heavy boy wearing black and snagged the car magazine he'd been looking at. "Hey!" the boy exclaimed indignantly, "That's mine!"

"You can have it back after class," Jenny said in a quiet voice. "Now pay attention."

"What for?" the boy asked with disdain. "Nobody talks like that no more."

Now Maria piped up with, "Wait a minute, I lost my place."

A few students laughed, and Jenny sighed. It was only second period.



The following days for Arthur, Lance, and their rapidly swelling army settled into a routine. Weapons and fight training in the mornings, lunch, and then Arthur would offer instruction on the ways of knighthood, with discussion and questions afterward.

The number of gang members who attended, and indicated their intention to reject their old gang and join Arthur's new one, swelled by the day, though Arthur continually made it clear his was not a gang. His was a brotherhood. The homies explained to Arthur that street gangs were about brotherhood too, just mixed in with criminal activity and running the streets.

The Round Table, Arthur repeatedly assured them, would be different.

"As Knights of the Round Table," he explained one day, "you follow the code of chivalry, as I have told thee. Above all, that means honor. The weapons we be using, and with which thou art all training, shall be used only for self-defense, and to protect those who are defenseless. You have not been able to win the hearts and minds of the people through violence and crime, but you shall through service to all."

"There's always gonna be *vatos* wanna run their own, Arthur," Esteban

pointed out. “They ain’t gonna like us musclin’ in on their territory. That always means war.”

The gang kids nodded their assent.

Arthur tipped his chin approvingly. “You be correct, Esteban, as it hath always been with mankind. However, does life itself not seem too bitter already without territorial battles or wars or feuds?”

Esteban shrugged, but many of the nongang kids nodded their assent.

Mark and Jack exchanged a knowing look.

Esteban was no longer clad in a tight tank top, but had adopted one of Arthur’s tunics and accompanying leather drawstring pants while in the presence of the king. As was the custom, most of the other gang kids followed his lead.

“The motto of this world seems to be ‘Do what is easy,’” Arthur continued, his eyes roaming their expectant faces, making eye contact with as many as possible. “Ours shalt be as follows—do what is right, rather than what is easy.”

He let that sink in a moment.

“That done be hard, Arthur,” Darnell threw out, and many heads nodded their agreement.

“Anything that be worth doing doth be hard, Darnell.”

Darnell fell silent to digest this.

Arthur went on, “*Might* lies within the bad half of people, the selfish half. We cannot cut it out, so instead we turn a bad aspect into something good—we agree as a knighthood to use might *only* for right. It shal be the oath to which all of thee must swear.”

The assemblage nodded in understanding. Lance clarified the message by explaining that as knights they’d have to switch “me” with “we,” and not just the “we” of the Round Table, but the “we” of society. They were to put their own interests and wants second to the needs of the community. Arthur accepted the reality that children and teens were naturally self-centered, so, while Lance’s “we” over “me” idea was an easy concept to understand, it was a hard one for them to put into practice. His previous life had taught him that most adults cannot manage such a seemingly simple philosophy.

Lance and Mark and Jack and others within his inner circle had assured him that enough of the kids would give it their best shot, not because it came naturally, but because their lives were so lousy that anything else would be better, especially a campaign that sought to right the wrongs that had been done to them.

Arthur continued making eye contact with as many of the children as possible while he spoke, and he saw eagerness in their eyes. They wanted this, he knew. They craved this opportunity to make a real positive change in their lives.

“In the world today, I hear that what be wrong for some be right for others, and what be *injustice* for some be *justice* for others. Be assured of this, my young knights-to-be, right and wrong doth be for all peoples and all situations. We must strive at all times to elevate the good half of ourselves, rather than give in to the bad. Only then can we achieve greatness.”

Esteban raised his hand. “What if, like, you give some *vato* a mess a chances and he keeps screwing ya on purpose? How can we have mercy, like you been saying, for guys like that?”

“Ah, Esteban, there doth be no limit to mercy, and the treacherous need it most of all, for how else can they learn?”

Esteban fell silent, considering this answer while the other gang kids began murmuring amongst themselves. This was an idea they’d always believed would never work on the streets and so it had never been attempted. But now Arthur had gotten them wondering, which was precisely his intent.



That afternoon, Jenny stood before her eleventh-grade English class taking roll. Of the thirty-nine who should be present, she only had twenty-five. And all those missing were boys. What was going on? Admittedly, most of these boys hated school, and their attendance was hit and miss anyway, but now she hadn’t seen them for several days straight.

Teachers were supposed to call home when kids missed more than three days, but how could she call all these parents when this attendance pattern was occurring across every one of her classes? She’d be here till six o’clock every day making calls, and when would she grade papers or prep lessons?

Shaking her head in confusion, she addressed the class. “Anybody know what happened to the kids who’ve been absent a lot?”

Heads shook disinterestedly, but no one answered.

“Okay, pass forward your homework.”

A few papers drifted languidly up the rows to the front, and Jenny collected them, gazing in consternation at the small number.

“This is all the homework? Ten papers?”

Many students shrugged again and looked bored. Dejected, Jenny set down the papers on her impeccably ordered desk and turned back to the class.

“Okay, pull out your copies of *The Great Gatsby* and we’ll continue.”

Groans arose as backpacks came up and hands went digging for the book. Some kids ignored her request completely. One boy continued doodling; another put his head down, while two girls passed a nail-polish bottle back and forth.

Jenny eyed them all with wonder and annoyance. Here she was doing her best and they didn't even care. Of course, she reminded herself, *you* have a choice to be here. They don't. And they don't have a choice of what English class to take, either. Fighting back her annoyance, she set out to implement her lesson plan for the day, and sought to make it as fun as possible.



The following afternoon, hundreds of tired, but emotionally satisfied youths crammed around Arthur within the chamber for their daily discussion. Arthur and Lance had spoken of their growing need to find another, larger venue to conduct trainings and meetings and to make plans, but neither could think of an option. Even Esteban, who joked about using the old Coliseum downtown, had no viable suggestions. The sheer number of recruited kids was daunting.

Word would go out on the streets about Arthur and his crusade, and every day there would be new faces among the throng. Some were disaffected gang members looking for something more fulfilling, while others were just cast-offs like Lance who needed a home.

As always, Arthur sat on his throne, which several of the girls festooned daily with flowers they'd bring with them. Lance sat at his right, sitting taller and more confident in his seat.

"Here, in your land," he told the assemblage, "I have beheld much divisiveness between the various peoples. Such be true of mine own time as well. Humanity hath not changed much, I'm afraid. As was true then be true now — thou have all been conditioned by thine elders that cultural separatism be an integral part of thine identities, that differences be of greater import than similarities. This be totally false, my noble company. No matter our background, we all be the human children of God and far more similar than different."

The kids looked at each other thoughtfully—black and white and brown and Asian and Pacific Islander and gay and straight and those who weren't certain who or what they were or would be. Some looked accepting of the notion, while many appeared unsure.

Noting their hesitation, Lance stood to face the king. "May I, sire?"

Arthur nodded.

Lance turned to gaze at the crowd. All eyes were fixed upon him expectantly—he was one of them, after all, and they looked eager to hear what he had to say.

"When I first met Arthur," Lance began, butterflies doing cartwheels in his stomach, "I thought like he just said. I'm Mexican, an' I grew up on the streets or

in foster homes my whole life.” His voice grew more confident with each word. “I learned from black adults that Mexicans were dirty, from Mexican adults that blacks were dangerous, from white adults that I was lower ’cause I had brown skin, and from straight adults that gay people were perverts who should all be killed.”

There were gasps, nods, and head shaking from various kids in the crowd.

Most of them had obviously heard the same things.

“I started to think like that too, just like all the other kids I knew. But when I got into skating, I met black skaters and white skaters and Asian skaters, and I found out we were all the same. We loved skating. We cried when we got hurt. We bled when we got cut. There was nuthin’ different enough to be worth hating on. All those hater adults who taught me wrong should be ashamed. The only group I still hated on when I met Arthur was—” He paused and looked embarrassed. “The gay kids.”

Some of the gang members laughed and high-fived each other. Lance glared them into silence. Then he met Mark’s gentle eyes, and the blond boy gave him that shy little smile.

“I was wrong there, too,” he announced in a commanding tone. “When I got to know Mark and Jack, it was just like with them skaters I hung with. I ain’t no different than any gay boy in here and neither is none a you, I don’t care how hard you are. They didn’t choose being gay any more than I chose to be Mexican or homeless.” His eyes roamed the sea of faces before him. “If we’re gonna make this whole fellowship-thing work, if we’re gonna take all this *might* we got and change things to make ’em better, we can’t be hating on each other, or anyone else out there who don’t look like us. We *have* to be a team!”

“Like the Avengers!” Mark shouted excitedly and began applauding vigorously. “Lance is epic!”

The chamber erupted into thunderous clapping and foot-stomping approval, even from Esteban and Reyna, which caused Lance to blush with embarrassment. They were supporting... *him!* He turned to Arthur, whose beaming smile of pride warmed his heart more than all the applause in the world.



Down in South Central Los Angeles, Justin was hard at work, standing on a shadowy street corner between two buildings, waiting for the junior high down the street to let out. He wore a long coat and designer sneakers, the newest style, lots of bling, and of course, his cartoon-character backpack. When he did business, he liked to show off. His father had wanted to have dinner tonight, but

Justin didn't want any part of his dad and the other pigs. Except maybe to pump him for information about that Arthur guy to keep Mr. R. off his back.

That crazy old Mexican scared the crap out of Justin, and he wished almost daily that he hadn't let Dwayne talk him into selling for the guy. Sure, the money was great—he probably pulled in more in a good week than his old man did in a month. But R. was dangerous. He'd as soon kill a kid as hire one.

So avoiding dad and not pissing off R. seemed to be his only activities these days. He didn't even have time for a girlfriend anymore, and that *really* sucked. He hadn't gotten any action in months. His ex kept texting him, and he considered hooking up with her, but just couldn't stand her bitching. So he ignored her texts just like he ignored his dad's.

His phone beeped. Pulling it from his pocket, he saw the text was from Dad. Justin cursed with annoyance.

Where r u? it read.

Usually he didn't even respond, but this time he thumbed in *Busy*.

Instantly a follow-up message popped up. *Come home I'll take u 2 dinner.* Justin considered a moment whether or not to respond.

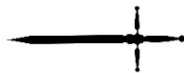
Maybe he'd take the old man up on the offer, maybe not. He wasn't even gonna meet Dwayne tonight 'cause R. had some other job for him, something he wouldn't tell Justin about. Which was fine with him. He knew Dwayne was bad news—crazy, and unpredictable—but he was in too deep with R. to ever get out.

Not 'less I died, he thought, something the Mexican could easily arrange.

Yeah, maybe he'd give in and meet Dad. Might be news on that Arthur guy. All depended on business, he decided. Speaking of which, a group of the middle-schoolers were chattering and texting their way down the sidewalk.

School's out, he chuckled to himself. Time to get to work.

As the group approached, Justin whistled to get their attention. The kids stopped and turned. One of them, a chubby seventh grader named Darius, knew Justin and was a regular customer. He grinned and waved for the others to follow. As they stepped closer to Justin, the teen let the coat drift open. Numerous pockets had been sewn into the lining, bulging with bags of dope. He was ready.



It was a quiet afternoon in Jaime's run-down, Latino neighborhood. Of course, nothing here was suburb-like—the big bad city was only and always a few streets away. But this little enclave in Boyle Heights was tucked back from the main drag, which at least allowed children to play in the streets most of the time

without fear of being run over by speeding cars.

Jaime's mother stood to the side of her small, one-story stucco house, hanging clothes out to dry on a makeshift clothesline strung from the window to a dead tree. Helping her was Jaime's little sister, Anna, who was barely four years old. The little one handed mom the clothes from a basket, and mom hung them up.

Jaime sat languidly on the porch with his pregnant girlfriend, Sonia. Normally, he attended Arthur's daily meetings, but Sonia had said she wanted to spend more time with him.

"You're, like, always gone and never answer my texts," she'd told him the night before. She knew about Arthur and his crusade and approved of Jaime's involvement. She'd even attended some of the meetings.

Her pregnancy made weapons training difficult, and she didn't like Reyna's haughty strutting, so she usually stayed home and helped her mom or helped Jaime's mom with Anna. To set her mind at ease that he wasn't cheating on her, which he'd done on more than one occasion, Jaime had promised to spend all afternoon and with only her.

He'd been with Arthur for morning training and had explained to the man his predicament. True to his philosophy, Arthur had insisted that Jaime stay with Sonia, that he was acting as a responsible man for staying with his girl and vowing to be a father to his child.

"You possess a quick temper, Jaime, which you must control," Arthur had said, having seen that temper flare more than once during weapons practice. "But you be a man of honor, and that is the far greater quality."

For some reason, the compliment had pleased Jaime immensely, maybe because his imprisoned father was such a loser, or maybe 'cause he'd really come to admire Arthur and what the man was trying to do.

In either case, he vowed to watch his temper and left for home, which was why he and Sonia were cuddling on the porch steps when a screech of tires ripped around the corner and a big, black Impala careened toward their house. A black arm gripping a handgun, and part of a head, appeared at the open backseat window, and the shooter began firing. Jaime caught a glimpse of Dwayne's twisted dark face before he jumped on Sonia and pushed her to the ground.

Bullets whizzed past, and several struck the wood of the porch, inches from Jaime's head. Then with another screech of tires, the Impala sped past and vanished around the corner, out of sight.

Jaime cautiously lifted his head and checked Sonia for injury.

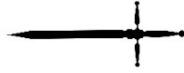
She shook her head. "I'm okay."

And then Jaime's mother let out an ear-piercing screech of anguish and Jaime's blood ran cold. Leaping to his feet, he turned and raced past the porch to

the clothesline, and stopped dead, his heart suddenly in his throat.

“No!” he whispered, more to himself than anyone else, and dropped to his mother’s side.

She was cradling little Anna to her bosom and rocking back and forth, keening with sorrow as blood streamed from the little girl’s chest. Jaime fumbled in his pocket for his phone and punched in 911.



As Arthur continued to teach his vast assemblage the necessary qualities for knighthood, Lance felt various sets of eyes on him, as though his earlier speech had somehow elevated him in their esteem. Mark, of course, kept eyeing him shyly and tried a few times to make him laugh by flipping his hair the way Lance had done that night they’d bared their souls to each other. Lance smiled, but forced himself not to laugh.

Esteban and Darnell and some of the other heavy-duty gangsters kept glancing his way, as though considering whether or not his words had merit and might apply to them. Esteban finally caught his eye and gave him that little chin raise, which for guys was the equivalent of “you’re okay.” Lance felt special and important, something he’d never felt before Arthur came along.

And then there was Jack. The boy kept watching him, but would look down any time Lance caught him staring. Finally, the last time he had felt eyes on him and glanced up, he’d found Jack studying him, and this time the gaze didn’t waver. Lance smiled as he would toward a friend.

Jack stared a moment longer, and then he looked away.

Lance shuddered and returned his attention to Arthur.

The king concluded his lesson with the following words, “Thine identities be not determined by skin color, but by thy choices and accomplishments. Pride comes from what we do with our lives, from how we make the world better for our having been in it. All of thee have indicated your wish to be Knights of the Round Table. If such be true, you must take Lance’s stirring words to heart—you must put aside all the bigotries and feuds and what you call the payback mentality. We cannot build the future by avenging the past. The past must remain where it is.”

Silence had fallen on the massive crowd as everyone mulled over these simple words that sounded easy, but were so difficult to act upon in real life. As though fate had chosen the worst possible moment—or perhaps the best, it was hard to know with fate—to intervene, Jaime pedaled into the assemblage on his old rusty bike, out of breath from his hard ride, but frantic and furious. He spotted

Esteban up near the front, dropped his bike, and pushed his way through the throng.

“Este!” he called out.

All heads turned or craned for a better view as Esteban leapt to his feet, Darnell right beside him. Reyna strained from the back to get a better view now that so many guys were standing.

“Over here, dog, what’s up?” .

Jaime pushed through, his face flush with anger and bitterness. Some of his homies crowded forward to get closer to him.

“My lil’ sister been shot!” he spat, glaring at Darnell, who instantly bristled.

“What you lookin’ at me fer?” Darnell asked defensively, tensing for a fight.

“Who was it?” Esteban asked quietly.

“Dwayne!”

Esteban turned to Darnell with a hard look.

“Hey, man, he ain’t my homie!” Darnell insisted, feeling his own homeboys gearing up behind him.

Esteban sighed. “Come on, *vatos*, we got work ta do.” Then to Darnell, “You comin’ too?”

Lance had learned all their histories by now, and he knew Darnell and his homies had never sided with a Mexican gang against another black gang, so he was floored when Darnell nodded and turned to signal his homeboys.

As more boys rose to approach Esteban, Arthur stood commandingly and shouted, “Hold thy positions, lads! This goes against everything I have taught thee. It goes against the very precepts of knighthood and chivalry.”

Everyone settled into an uneasy, shuffling silence as Esteban halted and turned back to face Arthur. “With respect, Arthur, this be personal. They got his little sister, homies, an’ she be jus’ four years old!”

“Thou *cannot* build the future by avenging the past.”

“Them’s good words, Arthur, but they don’t change nuthin’. She could die, and we gotta get them that done it.” Fists clenched tightly, the boy’s hard, handsome face gazed at Arthur with fierce anger and determination.

Arthur looked directly into Esteban’s eyes. “No. All you must do is take me to the child.”

“Huh?”

Arthur’s gaze never wavered. “Take me to her, whilst we still have time.”

Esteban looked ready to lead the others away. But he hesitated. His narrowed eyes squinted at Arthur, his face tight with indecision. He glanced at Jaime and Darnell. They stood frozen, too, suddenly unsure what to do.

Esteban uncoiled his fists and locked eyes with Arthur. “Okay.”

In back, Reyna sighed with relief, and Lance let out the breath he'd been holding. Disbursing the kids back to their homes and assigning some older "sleepers" to watch over the youngsters, Arthur took Esteban, Darnell, and Jaime, along with Lance, Mark, and Jack, and they set off at once for the hospital Jaime told them housed his sister.

As Esteban passed Reyna in the dispersing crowd, he glanced her way. "You coming with us?"

Reyna looked appalled. "I don't do county hospitals."

Esteban stared at her a moment in disbelief before stalking away in fury. Lance eyed Reyna with disappointment as he hurried after the others.



County USC was located off Marengo Street, not far from Central Juvenile Hall. Much of the facility had been renovated over the past few years, and its seedy, psycho house look had been replaced with a bright, almost inviting façade. However, it was often the stuff of nightmares: endless hours waiting in the emergency room; suffering through days or weeks to see your doctor; heavy armed security and metal detectors everywhere you walked, even at the elevators; endless paperwork and red tape. On the plus side, County USC did boast one of the best trauma centers in the country, and its doctors had become experts on treating bullet wounds.

As a kid with no family, Lance had practically grown up in this hospital, and he hated every inch of it.

The storm drain system had an entrance not far from the hospital, and the encroaching twilight helped conceal the rather odd-looking group as they ascended endless flights of steps and passed through thick glass doors into the massive, towering facility.

Arthur had brought no metal, having been told by Lance about the metal detectors and armed cops who patrolled the hospital like it was a prison. But he did wear his standard red cloak over a white tunic and leather pants, with knee-high leather boots, and struck an unusual figure cutting across the lobby to the checkpoint.

The entire group looked out of place with all the boys dressed in similar fashion. Long-sleeved baggy tunics and drawstring leather pants with accompanying leather boots were *definitely* not the fashion in this part of town. Every set of eyes followed the group as it approached the uniformed guard standing beside a large, walk-through metal detector.

The guard, who was shaped somewhat like a pigeon with a potbelly and

skinny neck, eyed the group suspiciously. “What’s with the getups?” he asked, his voice rather high and reedy.

Lance, who’d already thought ahead, replied with, “We was at a costume party, man, when we heard his lil’ sister been shot.”

He indicated Jaime, the only one dressed in regular clothes. The guard shifted his gaze from Lance to Jaime and then gave the tall bearded man with the cloak the once-over. “And who’re you supposed to be, Thor?”

Arthur tilted his head in confusion.

Lance said, “Yeah, he’s Thor. Can we go faster here, please? His sister’s serious.”

The guard eyed him, and then waved them through. Checking in at the information booth, they were given name and destination badges by an overweight woman with a beehive-like hairdo.

Another armed guard stood beside the elevators and pushed the button for the intensive care floor, eyeing the group with raised eyebrows. As the elevator took forever to arrive, Lance felt the need to say, “We were at a party.” The guard nodded silently and ushered them into the elevator.

Intensive Care buzzed with activity. The first nurse they spotted easily directed them to the only gunshot wound on the floor. She handed them masks, which Arthur gazed at quizzically until Lance showed him how to put it on over his mouth.

“So we don’t spread germs,” he explained, and Arthur nodded.

The nurse shook her head and glowered until all the boys had donned their masks. Only then did she allow them to proceed. Arthur, Esteban, Jaime, Darnell, Lance, Mark, and Jack strode down the hall in the indicated direction, ignoring the odd stares from other nurses and orderlies. When they reached his sister’s door, Jaime shoved it open quickly, and they all followed him into a small, drab, and very cold room.

Within the room was a bed with an oxygen tent covering it. Beeping and clicking machines that monitored vital functions, as well as IV and plasma drips, surrounded the bed. Beneath the clear, plastic tent Lance saw a small, pale face and his heart lurched with pain.

Jaime looked through the tent, his fists clenched. An older lady and Jaime’s girl, Sonia, wearing similar masks, sat huddled by Anna’s bedside, watching her shallow breathing and comforting one another. The lady had been crying, her eyes puffy and red, and Sonia’s looked the same. Jaime stepped around the bed and engulfed Sonia in a tight hug.

“Where’d you go?” she whispered.

Jaime ignored her, pulled himself away, and knelt down before the lady.

“Mama?”

Through her tears, the mother gazed despairingly at the son. “Why, why this have to happen? I tell you not to hang wit’ these boys, *mijo*, I tell you to get out of the gang, but no, you can’t! An’ now my baby gonna die.”

Jaime tried to hug her, but she rebuffed him, and he stood. “Mama, dis man—” He pointed at Arthur, who gazed down at the dying child. “He be King Arthur, an’ he says he can help.”

Arthur stepped around the bed and took the woman’s hands in his.

“You can’t help, sir,” the distraught woman mumbled through her tears, “less you can do miracles.”

Despite the mask covering his mouth, Arthur’s eyes smiled at her, that warm and inviting look that always put Lance at ease. “Perhaps, *señora*, I can.” He turned to Jaime. “Please take thy mother outside, and the others as well. Lance only must remain.”

The woman looked in confusion from Arthur to Jaime, but willingly allowed her son to guide her gently from the room, followed by Sonia. Esteban eyed Arthur curiously, and then led Darnell from the room.

“Sure you don’t need me to stay, Arthur?” Mark asked hopefully.

“Not now, Mark, perhaps later ye may also be of help.”

Mark let Jack lead him from the room.

Lance watched Arthur expectantly, surprised when the man dropped to his knees beside the bed. There was no noise except the beeping and clicking of the machines, and voices wafting in from the hallway.

“Come, Lance, pray with me.”

Lance had never been much for praying, mainly ’cause things he always prayed for when he was little never came true. Until Arthur entered his life, anyway. But he did as instructed. He knelt beside the king and clasped his hands together, emulating this man for whom he’d do anything.

Arthur lowered his head to his clasped hands. “Dear God, long ago I bore witness to a miracle, performed through my dear friend Lancelot.”

Lance glanced up at that name. It was the second time he’d heard it, but Arthur had still told him about this man. He lowered his head once more.

“I now ask, not for mine own glory, but for the children whom I seek to lead, that thou send forth thy healing powers to restore this innocent child to full health. These knights of mine must make a tremendous leap of faith, dear Lord, and this night may prove the success or failure of my mission. If thou doth see fit to grant the prayer of this, thy most humble servant, I shall not ask another miracle of thee.”

He fell silent, reaching beneath the tent to take the girl’s hand in both of his.

Lance watched, but nothing happened. He didn't know what he'd expected to occur, but watching Arthur clasping the girl's hand, head bowed in supplication before God, Lance *did* pray. For real. He prayed with all his might that this girl would live.



Out in the corridor, it seemed like hours had passed since Arthur asked them to leave the room. Jaime's mother stared into nothingness, while Jaime paced back and forth in front of Sonia, who sat in a chair watching him.

"This is all my fault," he kept mumbling over and over again as he paced. Sonia had tried to comfort him, but he wanted none of it. He felt too guilty. Esteban and Darnell leaned against the wall by the door, watching Jaime pace and eyeing each other uncertainly. Mark and Jack sat together, Mark with his head on Jack's shoulder, Jack's solid arm encircling Mark's waist.

Fiddling absently with his cornrows, Darnell elbowed Esteban and indicated the pair with a smirk. Esteban glanced at the two gay boys and shrugged. Slipping the mask back over his mouth, he impulsively re-entered the room.



Lance and Arthur still knelt where they had started, Arthur's head bent in prayer over the girl. Lance's legs had begun to cramp, but he dared not rise. He looked up when Esteban entered.

The bigger boy stepped forward into the room and whispered, "What's he doing?"

"Praying," Lance whispered back.

Esteban glanced sharply at Arthur but said nothing.



After a while, Jaime stopped pacing when he noticed that Esteban was gone. He raised his eyebrows at Darnell, who sat by himself, and the black boy nodded his head in the direction of the room. Jaime stepped to the door, replaced his mask, and entered cautiously.

He sucked in a surprised breath at the sight of Arthur, still bent in prayer, with Lance and Esteban kneeling on either side of him, also praying. Jaime paused, realizing he hadn't prayed since he was a small boy, then shut the door and joined them.



As morning broke into a hazy sunrise, the intensive care floor had settled into an almost calm environment. The corridor was mostly empty, except for Jaime's mother and Sonia, who had fallen asleep against each other. Suddenly, mom snapped her eyes open, looking around in fear, realizing she had slept through the night. She shook Sonia quickly awake, threw off the blanket someone had draped over her, and dashed into her daughter's room, with Sonia, wiping sleep from her eyes, close on her heels.



As Jaime's mom entered with Sonia, Lance glanced up and saw her gasp, hand at her mouth in surprise. All the boys were now kneeling around the bed, heads bent, hands clasped together in a prayer chain, with Lance and Esteban holding Arthur's arms at the elbows.

As the two women stared in disbelief, the girl stirred beneath the oxygen tent, a tiny, barely audible moan escaping her lips. Arthur lifted his head, as did Lance and the others. Their eyes flicked from each other to Arthur and then locked onto the pale figure beneath the tent.

Arthur stood and gazed with true compassion at the small, brown face behind the sheet of plastic, lowering his mask to reveal his entire appearance. He offered the girl that charming smile Lance loved.

The girl's light brown eyes fluttered fully open, her gaze danced around the room, at the tent above her and the machines around her, and then focused on Arthur. Her face looked pale and bloodless, but her eyes shone brightly with life and love. She smiled.

"*Gracias*," she whispered, and Arthur nodded. Then she shifted her gaze toward her mother, who stood to one side, hand still to her mouth in shock.

Arthur glanced up toward heaven. "*Gracias, Señor*," he whispered tiredly, his boys staring at him in silent bewilderment.

Jaime's mom bolted for the bed, and the boys stood to let her through. Throwing back the plastic tent, she reached in and gently touched her daughter's face, stroked it in joyous disbelief, her eyes filling with tears.

The girl smiled. "I'm okay, Mama, don't cry. I feel much better." Her voice sounded small and raspy, but strong and assured.

Mom drew her hand back and turned to Arthur. She threw herself around him in a tight hug of joy and gratitude. Sonia grabbed Jaime's hand and squeezed, while Esteban and Darnell high-fived each other.

Had they just witnessed a miracle, Lance wondered? He had a feeling all the others wondered the same thing.

Arthur held Jaime's mother tight in his arms a moment, accepting her silent, tearful thanks, but his questioning eyes drifted to Esteban and locked on those of the boy.

Esteban looked tired, and confused. He gazed long and hard at Arthur, then sighed. "Okay, Arthur, no payback. For now."

Arthur grinned with relief and released Jaime's mom. He motioned to the other boys to leave the family alone, and a tired, confused group of youngsters left the room and the hospital, not fully comprehending what they had done but knowing it had been something important. And that was enough.

CHAPTER 7: SPEAK THE OATH SQUIRE

EARLY THAT MORNING, THE HOLLENBECK Station was bustling with activity. The drive-by the night before was on everyone's radar. It was the first in a long while, and did not bode well for the coming days. One drive-by led to another and to another, like the domino effect. All units were on high alert, and extra patrol cars had been sent to cruise the most likely neighborhoods for retaliation.

Gibson strode to Ryan's desk and tossed down the morning paper. "Hey, Ry, looks like we missed a chance to nab our king."

Ryan was on his computer, triangulating possible retaliation sites for patrol when the paper landed atop his keyboard.

"Check it out."

Ryan stared at the *Los Angeles Times* with its above-the-fold headline: "King Arthur Leads Prayer Vigil Over Drive-by Victim."

"Hellfire! He was there all night and nobody called us?"

Gibson shrugged. "I guess nobody wanted to. If you read the story, they all think he performed some kind of miracle. Docs said that girl was a goner till this guy and his kids showed up."

"Damn it!" Ryan threw down the paper and snatched up another pencil, which he began gnawing. "He was with them gangbangers, so we know what kind a trash he's recruiting. Question is, why? What are they up to? Any sign of payback for that little girl?"

"No."

"There will be." Ryan was sure of that. These gangbangers were nothing if not predictable.

"I wonder."

Ryan eyed him like he was crazy, then snapped his pencil and threw the pieces onto the newspaper.



A very tired, but enthusiastic, group followed Arthur back through the tunnels to The Hub, not speaking much, each entangled within his own thoughts about

what they had witnessed during the night. Darnell had left to go on home, but the rest filed in quietly, almost with reverence. As they entered The Hub, Esteban spotted Reyna sitting against the wall of one of the tunnels and scowled.

She looked up and saw him mad-dogging her, and leapt to her feet. “Este, what—”

But he didn’t wait for her to finish. He disappeared down another tunnel to change his clothes.

Arthur walked to his throne and sat, exhausted from the night’s exertions.

Lance stepped into the tunnel to face Reyna. She looked tired and drawn, her makeup fading, her hair drooping. She must’ve been awake all night, he decided.

“What you still doing here?”

She shrugged, fiddling with her luxurious ponytail, the unraveling strands giving her a frizzled look. “Wanted to find out what happened, I guess,” she said, trying to sound disinterested, but failing. Her well-trimmed, pencil-thin eyebrows rose questioningly. “Well?”

Lance pushed his own draping hair out of his eyes. Man, was he tired! “The girl’s okay,” he said, smiling, but feeling bewildered. “I don’ know what happened, really. She was like, dying, and then Arthur prayed over her all night. I mean, we all, like, formed a prayer circle, but it was Arthur who did it, Reyna. I don’ know. It was... it was like a miracle or something.”

“Wow,” she whispered. “I never saw a real miracle before.”

“Me, either.” He eyed her appraisingly. “So, why didn’t you go?”

She mimicked shivering and shook her head. “Me? Down there with all *those* people.”

“What people?”

Reyna looked at him like he was stupid. “You *know*, poor people.”

Lance looked her right in the eye, not easy with a girl that intimidating. “You mean people like me?”

Reyna’s mouth became an O, and she protested, “No, you’re not like *them*.”

Lance almost laughed. “Reyna, I practically grew up in that place. It was like going home.”

Her face fell. “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

Lance gazed at her, his eyes searching her very soul. “I thought you said you didn’t wanna be like your parents, you didn’t wanna be a hater.”

“I don’t,” she protested, and fell silent. Just then her cell beeped, and she used the distraction to break eye contact with him.

She glanced at the screen.

Lance noted her expression as she read the text. “Problem?”

Reyna shook her head in consternation. “It’s just Salma wanting to know

where I am. She never leaves me alone.”

“Who’s Salma?” Lance asked. “That actress chick?” He smiled to let her know he was joking.

“No, fool, Salma is my housekeeper,” Reyna responded with annoyance, flicking a few loose strands of hair off her face. “God, she thinks she’s my mother or something.”

“How long she worked there?”

“My whole life. Seriously, since I was a baby.”

Lance eyed her in wonder. Such lavish lifestyles were beyond his ability to comprehend. “She got kids of her own?”

Reyna considered a moment. “No, she’s live-in. She doesn’t have any kids except—” Then she stopped, and her soft brown eyes opened wide. “Except me.”

Lance smiled. “Then maybe she *is* mom. Sounds like she’s just worried ’bout you, that’s all. Wish I had somebody like that growing up.”

He meant it too. He’d have done almost anything to have had a mother who loved him and cared what happened to him, instead of one who’d sold him for drugs. He shoved that memory down his throat and focused on the girl before him.

Reyna gazed at him in astonishment, and then she grinned, lighting up her beautiful face. “You know what I hate even more than a boy younger and prettier who can shoot better than me?”

Lance laughed. “No, what?”

“A boy who’s younger, prettier, and *smarter* than me.”

Lance reddened with embarrassment, and she kissed him on the lips.

He felt a distinct tingle of pleasure suffuse his entire body, and knew he’d turned even redder in the face, and then she pulled back.

“Wow” was all he could utter, not sure what he was feeling, but blushing all the same.

She tossed her head back with that causal laugh of hers. “Thank you, Lance. You’re too young and pretty for me, but one of these days some girl’s gonna snatch you up.”

Lance dropped his gaze. “I hope so. I’m just not, you know, ready yet.” He looked shyly back up to find her still smiling.

Then her smile faded, and her gaze locked on something behind him. Lance turned to find Esteban, back in his regular street clothes, watching them, his expression unreadable.

“Like I said,” Reyna went on, and Lance turned his face back to her. “You’re smarter than me.” She squeezed his arms gently, then released him and stepped

to Esteban.

He gazed at her in silence, his eyes smoldering.

“Este,” she began haltingly. “I’m, like, I’m sorry I didn’t go with you last night. Like Lance said, I’m becoming my parents, and I sure as hell don’t wanna be them!”

Esteban glanced over at Lance—who pretended to be unclasping his leather jerkin—and then back at Reyna. “Whatever. I gotta get home, check on my moms and lil’ sis.”

He turned and started down the tunnel.

“Este?” she called after him.

He turned, annoyance creasing his young, hard face.

“Maybe someday I could meet ’em? Your mom and sister?”

Esteban tossed her a slight smile. “Sure. Someday.” Then he disappeared into the darkness.

Reyna turned to Lance, who grinned at her. She pantomimed punching him, and he laughed.



After Lance went off to find Arthur, Reyna pulled out her cell phone and thumbed in the following message: *Sorry to worry u, Salma. Fell asleep friends house. On way hme. Thnx for caring.*

Feeling as though she’d crossed a major threshold, but not quite sure what it was, she slipped the phone back into her pocket and set off for home.



As Lance wandered about The Hub, he observed various boys practicing with weapons or lifting the weights Jack had found tossed in a dumpster. That reminded him about Jack offering to teach him muscle-building techniques, and he vowed to remind the older boy of his promise. Maybe that would make things better between them. Just thinking about Jack brought Reyna’s kiss back into his mind. He trembled, and a chill ran up his back.

Afraid to even wonder why he’d put those two images together, he shook off the confusion and stopped to observe a few boys practicing the art of courtliness by pretending one was a lady and having the other bow to her. They laughed and playfully punched each other every time.

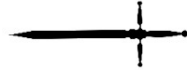
Arthur sat on his throne wearily watching Enrique put the finishing touches on a large banner. It depicted the A symbol with a dragon brandishing Excalibur in the background.

Lance stepped to Arthur's side, and the king smiled warmly at him. "I thank you, my Lance, for thy prayers last night."

"Arthur, do you think that was a miracle when that girl didn't die?"

"Perhaps," replied the king thoughtfully. "But perhaps the true miracle was the joining together of sworn enemies to preserve the life of one lowly child."

Lance considered those words, and grinned.



The next day, Jenny trudged across campus, exhausted and carrying more books from the library to her room.

Her mind was on the story she'd seen on the news yesterday, about Arthur's "miracle" with the little girl. The man confounded her, and she considered herself a good judge of people. But this guy was an enigma. She had to find out more about him. Lance was the key, but he hadn't been to school in forever. With summer break mere days away, she doubted she'd see him again.

Wending her way in and around the caution tape, dodging milling students, she nearly collided with Karla, a fellow English teacher, one of the few instructors around here she really liked.

Jenny looked up, startled, and almost dropped her books. "Oh, sorry, Karla, I didn't see you."

Karla just laughed. "No wonder, girl, with that pile of books blocking your eyes. Let me help."

She grabbed the top four books, leaving Jenny with the bottom four. Thanks, Karla."

As she walked beside Jenny toward Building Eight, Karla asked, "Hey, Jen, you ever see Lance again?" She wouldn't know—she only taught seniors.

Jenny shook her head. "No. And there hasn't been anything new on King Arthur since that gang shooting, either."

They stopped at Jenny's door, and she fumbled with her keys while balancing the books.

"What's that got to do with Lance?" Karla asked.

"A lot, I think," Jenny replied, pulling open the door. As usual, it screamed on its hinges like a banshee. "He's been hanging out with that guy, and I think our missing students, the gang kids, are with him too."

Karla deposited the books onto a student desk and turned to face Jenny, one hand to her hip in consternation. "Honey, I don't care if they're hangin' with the Pied Piper, long as I don't have 'em in my classes."

Jenny set down her own load and frowned at Karla. "But they should be in

school.”

“What for?”

“Karla, you’re a teacher!”

“Honey, I’m a realist. Those kids aren’t learnin’ anything here. Maybe this guy’ll teach ’em somethin’ we can’t, somethin’ useful.”

Jenny wanted to argue, but found she had nothing to say. Maybe Karla was right. She needed to find Lance.



Within The Hub, lunch was coming to a close, and the clean-up began. Since they did not want to pollute the environment where they lived and trained, nor, Arthur reminded them, did they want to make the city at large even dirtier, a group of boys always collected all of the garbage into large leaf bags and tied them off. The bottles and cans were gathered for recycling, since money could be made there.

Every few days, groups of boys would load trash bags onto Radio Flyer wagons they’d brought from home, or shopping carts they’d found abandoned, and take everything to the nearest city dump. Arthur and Lance had it very well organized, and Arthur had put Mark and Jack in charge of making sure the operation was carried out.

Observing the clean-up, Arthur felt good about this campaign, this crusade. Thus far, there were no signs of the splinters that had cracked open his original Camelot. Of course, that Camelot had endured for decades before it fell, and this one was only in its infancy. Still, the signs were positive.

Oh, Merlin, he wondered, if only you could be here to see what you have wrought, forsooth it has to have been put in place by you!

He’d decided some time back that only Merlin could be the explanation for his being here in this era with all the tools necessary for this campaign. Which often caused his mind to wonder why Merlin himself hadn’t appeared in the flesh.

Are you out there, old friend, watching and waiting? Testing me again?

Lance approached Arthur and bowed before speaking. “Arthur, before we begin our discussion time, can I ask you a question that’s been bugging me?”

“You may ask anything, Lance.”

“A couple of times I heard you say the name ‘Lancelot’, which sort of sounds like my name. Who was he?”

“Lancelot was my best friend, and my most skilled knight. Like you, he was good and pure and indispensable to me. Your name is, I be certain, no

coincidence.”

“What happened to him?”

Arthur’s eyes took on a faraway expression as he thought back to those long ago, painful times. “You may recall, Lance, when I spoke of my son attempting to overthrow me, I mentioned my best friend.”

Lance’s eyes bulged with shock. “He’s the one who hooked up with your wife?”

Arthur couldn’t help but smile at the boy’s choice of words.

What a world this is, he mused. Then he nodded. “Yes, they fell in love, my Gwen and Lance, and it was their love—an act of treason under my own laws—that brought Camelot to its knees.”

“Did you love her?”

“I loved them both. That is what made it all so tragic.”

“Well don’t worry, Arthur, *I’ll* never betray you like they did!”

Arthur smiled and placed a hand on Lance’s broadening shoulder. The boy’s soft, eager face gazed up at him so earnestly that Arthur’s own heart lodged in his throat.

How I love this boy!

Should he say it, or might the others be jealous if he showed such favoritism? He hesitated, and the window of opportunity slipped away like the final traces of sunlight dissolving into night.

“Of that I be certain, Lance” was all he said instead.

The boy grinned, and Arthur stepped back from him, calling the assembly to order. He stood before his throne, Lance at his side, before an enormous ocean of children. They spilled out into every tunnel. The little ones sat atop the shoulders of the big ones. More girls had joined and were huddled around Reyna. Esteban and Darnell and Duc and Tai and many, many more of their homeboys were present.

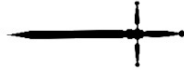
It was time, Arthur knew, to move his crusade forward, time to embark upon their first quest—the quest to win the hearts of the people. He raised Excalibur high above his head for all to see. Lantern light bounced off its gleaming surface in rainbow-like waves. Mark gazed in wonder at Arthur, while Jack’s eyes drifted to Lance.

“In these past weeks, you have all made great strides in the ways of knighthood.” Arthur’s voice boomed through the tunnels for all to hear.

Lance looked up, eagerness plastered to his young face. “Does this mean...?”

Arthur nodded before turning to the crowd. “I have not knighted anyone for centuries. It hath been far too long!” He grinned at the sea of expectant faces, and the crowd erupted into clapping and stomping and hooting.

Arthur raised Excalibur over their heads to signal quiet. “Tonight,” he announced boldly. “It shall be tonight.”



The Griffith Park Boys Camp had never hosted a gathering quite like this one. Unlike Arthur’s previous excursion to this venue, tonight no one present came for the purpose of violence or mayhem. Small lanterns sat on tables illuminating the trees and cabins with their dancing light. Other lanterns had been hung from scattered tree branches, casting yellowish glowing pools of light upon the proceedings.

Arthur stood regally atop the platform holding Excalibur before him, decked out in his finest tunic and pants, his hauberk and crown, his hair smooth and brushed, his beard trimmed and clean.

Lance stood before the platform, his own silky hair trailing past his shoulders, a band of shimmering gold encircling his head, his tunic and pants spotless, his striking green eyes gazing at Arthur with wonder. A sword—Lance’s favorite sword, the one with which he’d bested Esteban—stuck out of a groove in the platform before Arthur, its hilt glimmering in the lantern light.

Behind Lance stood Mark, Jack, Lavern, Esteban, Darnell, Enrique, Reyna, Luis, Chris, Jaime, Tai, Duc, Sylvia and all the hundreds of children who had taken a leap of faith and joined the crusade, each of them with a chosen sword in hand, the line snaking around and back and through the park.

Arthur still did not know the actual number in attendance, but Lance suspected upward of five hundred, a daunting figure. In addition to the unusual act of knighting children, for the first time as king he would grant knighthood to females.

Oh, Merlin, he cast a thought to the wind, *ye wouldst be so proud of me.* The moon cast its own glow upon the eager young faces awaiting their individual moment of triumph.

Arthur looked down at Lance, and his heart swelled with pride.

Ah, my son, he thought, but did not say this. Rather, he waved a hand in front of him. Lance stepped onto the platform and knelt before his sword, before his king.

“Speak the oath, squire,” Arthur commanded, his voice carrying on the breeze.

Lance looked at Arthur solemnly and then bowed his head and placed both hands on the hilt of his sword. “I thank thee, Heavenly Father, for permitting unto me the use of this sword to repress the wicked and defend the downtrodden.

You, who in thy infinite wisdom created the order of chivalry, and who planted goodness within my heart, hereby charge thy humble servant before thee to never strike anyone unjustly, but to use this sword only to protect. Grant me, Lord, the strength to be for now and all time, a warrior, not for might, but for right.”

Arthur grinned at Lance. He couldn't help it. And neither could Lance, who raised his eyes and grinned back. Arthur lifted Excalibur and gently touched its tip first to Lance's left shoulder and then to his right. "I hereby dub thee Sir Lance, Knight of the Table Round."

Lance's entire body shook, and his grin broadened, lighting up his face with pure happiness. As Arthur withdrew Excalibur, Lance leaned forward and kissed the hilt of his own sword before taking it in his grasp and standing.

The newly minted knight turned and held the sword aloft for all to see. The line of expectant children broke into wild applause. Lance turned back to Arthur and bowed. Raising his head, boy and king exchanged a private look.



That look bothered Mark, who was next in line. He, too, was ecstatic at this moment, but he deeply wished Arthur would look at him the way he looked at Lance. Jealousy crept into his heart, but he forced it down.

Not tonight, he told himself.

He knelt before Arthur, who smiled so warmly down at him that Mark forgot his ill will. He stuck his own sword hilt-up within the platform's groove and glanced over at Lance, who tossed him a grin and a wink. Mark grinned and felt guilty for his jealousy, shoving it back down into the darkest reaches of his soul. Lance was his friend, after all, and a good friend, at that.

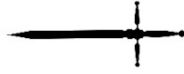
Arthur and Mark locked eyes a moment, and Mark couldn't help but smile.

"Speak the oath, squire."

And Mark did exactly that.

And so the process repeated itself. Over and over and over again, late into the night.

Thus passed a long, but fulfilling, experience, as each and every child stepped forward to swear the oath, and join the Table. For those cast off and unwanted kids, for those ex-gang members who sought a better life, for those abused and beaten and berated by their families, this was a night like no other, a night where they finally felt special, needed, and important. This night, every one of them knew in their hearts, would change their lives forever.



Jenny sat on the front stoop of her apartment building, gazing at the moon hanging listlessly in the sky and fiddling with a crystal dangling from a chain around her neck. Her thoughts swirled around Arthur and what he might be up to. Okay, she told herself, he obviously can't be the real King Arthur. But, he might actually *believe* he is. If that were the case, according to the legend, Arthur would return when Britain needed him most. Except this wasn't Britain. Okay, the guy's a nut and poor on geography. Fine. What would Arthur likely do if in fact he really did return?

A new Round Table. That's what he'd said at the park. The original Camelot had crumbled due to in-fighting and human selfishness. But now, it seemed, he wanted to start a new Camelot, and his new knights would be.... Oh God! Lance! And the children! Why didn't she see it before? No wonder he wanted Lance—the name wasn't a coincidence. But then what? He's building an army. To do what? That was the piece of the puzzle that eluded her.

Should she contact the police? Those detectives handling the case had put their contact info in the paper. Should she call, at least tell them her suspicions, alert them about Lance? Except they couldn't find Lance any more than she could. The address MTS had on file for him had been bogus and his social worker had no new information.

Oh, what to do? At times like this she so wished her father were still alive. Her mother had died when Jenny was four and her father had raised her alone. He'd been the most caring, sensible man she'd ever known and always had sound advice to pass on whenever she was troubled.

Oh, Dad, what should I do?

You don't have a choice, Jenny, she finally told herself with a heavy sigh of frustration, but to wait for Arthur's next move.

Yeah, and I'll be ready when you do, she affirmed in her heart.

Lance would come to no harm if she had anything to say about it.



It was the afternoon following the knighting ceremony, and the excitement level amongst the throng within The Hub was palpable. They filled the chamber and tunnels with exuberant chatter, brimming with energy. Arthur stood near the throne. At his side, Lance wore a bright green tunic and gripped his sword in its scabbard as though daring anyone to take it away.

Lance observed the energy before him. Even Esteban and Jaime and Darnell

seemed almost childlike in their new chain-mail shirts, waving their swords around with giddy joy. Reyna and her posse of girls looked especially striking in their new tunics, waving their swords and bows at each other with the excitement of small children.

Arthur smiled at Mark, who beamed brightly and held up his sword in a salute. Jack, as always, hovered near Mark like a moth to a light bulb, but Mark's eyes remained fixed on Arthur as though Jack was non-existent.

Lance noted this with an odd feeling in his stomach, especially when Jack's penetrating gaze fell on him. Finally, Arthur draped one arm across Lance's shoulders.

"See them, Sir Lance," he said with a sweep of his hand across the vast assemblage. "It be through thine efforts and loyalty that all of this has come to pass. I be truly honored by your faithfulness."

Lance grinned and looked down in embarrassment. He still couldn't get used to compliments, especially from Arthur.

"And I sayeth now that you are—" But Arthur stopped himself, looking uncharacteristically uncertain.

Lance had the feeling that Arthur was about to say something important, maybe about how he felt, maybe even about their relationship to each other.

Instead, Arthur squeezed Lance's shoulder and dropped his hand back to his side, turning to the entire group.

What was he about to say, Lance wondered?

"Knights of the Table, attend!" Arthur's voice echoed through the tunnels, and the kids gradually quelled their excitement and squeezed around him until there was barely room to breathe. "My noble and faithful knights, it be time to embark upon a quest."

Esteban pointed his sword up in the air, his knightly method of hand raising. "What's the plan?"

Little Lavern, resplendent in his chain mail and dark red tunic, elbowed Esteban and glared at him. Esteban almost shoved him back, but then obviously realized his error. "I, uh, mean, what will be the plan, sire?"

"We must check the appalling spread of squalor in thy neighborhoods and in so doing, win the acceptance of the people whose lives we seek to better."

Mark threw up his hand. Lance noted that the sky-blue tunic he'd chosen set off his striking eyes. "These neighborhoods are in bad shape, Arthur. The city don't take care of 'em, and we got nothing to fix 'em up with. What'll we use?"

Arthur asked who amongst the assemblage had mechanical or fixing skills or experience with tools and repair work. Quite a few hands shot up.

"Excellent," the king said, nodding. "Then you shall teach the others." And he

proceeded to lay out the plan he and Lance had hatched. The assembled listened intently. Some began to smile and nod. Others grinned with delight. All of them applauded. Arthur and Lance set up the teams and sent them out.



In groups of four, they fanned out across the city, foraging through and around various dumpsters, in back alleys, anyplace people set out their trash. Grabbing broken furniture, pieces of wood and metal and pipes, everything that could be useful, they dumped all of it into shopping carts and wheeled it back into the tunnels.

A larger group, led by Lance, went straight to the city dump. Darnell brought his homie's pickup truck and met them there, while Esteban drove a truck he'd borrowed from his neighbor. Secretly, Lance hoped "borrowed" really meant borrowed and not stole. Reyna brought her parents' jet-black Escalade with all the seats laid flat, generating whistles and admiring looks from Esteban and Darnell and some of the girls. Lance thought it was cool, but he just couldn't relate to being rich, so he didn't even try.

The director of the dumpsite gawked at the knights' odd medieval clothing, but listened as Lance explained their mission. It sounded crazy, but he showed them the areas that he felt had the most usable stuff, and they went to work.

Esteban and Darnell made up one team, while Reyna and several girls worked a separate area, which left Lance to work with Jack. They found usable window copings, doors, cabinets and chests of drawers, beds and bedframes, and a host of other repairable items. Reyna seemed to have no problem dump diving, as the boys called it, and Esteban kept eyeing her all afternoon. For her part, she eyed him right back.

Jack and Lance were left to load one truck, while Esteban and Darnell and the girls loaded the other two. They'd found a couple of useable bathtubs and dumped them near the truck, along with other pieces of furniture. To someone like Lance who'd grown up with nothing, he couldn't imagine tossing all this stuff.

Lance wanted to talk to Jack about Mark, but the older boy maintained a stubborn silence as they foraged. When it came time to load the truck, however, especially the bigger items, Lance looked at the tall boy with a grin.

"Member you was gonna teach me how to lift weights?"

Jack just looked at him.

Lance indicated the heavy bathtubs and chests of drawers. "Now'd be a good time."

Jack still said nothing. He gazed at Lance as though trying to figure something out about him. As always, the intensity of the gaze made Lance fidget. “Look, Jack, I’m not interested in Mark, okay?”

Jack tensed, but remained silent.

“I know you saw us together that night,” Lance went on, “’cause Mark told me. Nothing happened, okay? I just needed to talk, and he was there. That’s it.”

Jack stepped closer, and Lance froze, his fists clenching, afraid Jack might pound him.

I’m dead meat if he does.

However, the older boy gazed deeply into his eyes—no, into his very soul—and smiled knowingly.

Lance fought to maintain eye contact.

“You *are* gay, aren’t you?”

That caught Lance off guard. “Huh?”

“I knew you was too pretty to be straight,” Jack went on, planting a thick finger hard into Lance’s chest, “Well Mark is *off-limits!*”

Lance wanted to protest, but the fierce look in Jack’s eyes silenced his tongue. And then he saw it, saw the truth in those destitute eyes, a truth that suddenly became so obvious he was amazed he hadn’t seen it before.

“Because *you’re* in love with him, aren’t you?”

Jack’s gaze faltered, and the weakness won out over the hardness. He stepped back to compose himself. He lowered his arms, clenching and unclenching his fists. It took him a few moments, and then he gave a short, hollow laugh. “That obvious?”

“It’s in your eyes, man.” He gazed at the intimidating boy with genuine compassion. “Why don’t you just tell him?”

Jack suddenly looked weak and vulnerable, terror-stricken almost. “I can’t, Lance, and you can’t either.”

“Why not? You guys are great together.”

Jack wilted like a dying flower, no longer muscular and hard and powerfully tall. Lance saw the *real* Jack, the one he probably kept hidden from the whole world. Even from the boy he loved.

Those brimming brown eyes gazed desperately into Lance’s own, and Jack stammered, “I just couldn’t take it if... if he... if he didn’t want me.”

Lance soaked up this new image of Jack, and felt a connection to the older boy he’d never thought could exist. Jack’s soul had been exposed and laid bare to him, and Lance surprised himself by accepting it.

“Okay. But *I* want you—” Jack looked up, startled. “—for a friend,” Lance finished, sticking out his hand. “We’re already brothers in arms, so we might as

well be friends too, right?”

Jack hesitated and then swiped the tears from his eyes before grinning with relief. He gripped Lance’s hand. “I’m sorry, you know, about calling you gay. It was a cheap shot.”

Lance released his hand and leaned closer so no one would hear. “Since we’re friends, *and* brothers, I’ll tell you the same as I told Mark—I don’t know what I am.” He pulled back and searched Jack’s eyes. “You okay with that?”

“Yeah. Took me a while to figure it all out too.”

With a twinkle in his eyes, Lance flexed his not-very-intimidating right arm. “So, buff man, you gonna show me how to get guns like yours?”

“You mean *these* guns?” Grinning rakishly, Jack struck the double bicep pose, except his biceps bulged like grapefruits, even through the long sleeves of his scarlet tunic.

Lance gasped in amazement. “Oh my God, you *gotta* show me how to get those!”

Jack laughed and proceeded to do just that. He taught Lance how to lift heavy objects and focus more on the biceps and back, and how to heft heavy items so as to build up the chest and shoulders, and the two of them loaded all the weighty furniture into the back of the truck, laughing as they did so.

When they were finished, Lance could feel the soreness in his muscles and knew he’d gotten a hard workout.

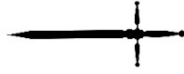
“Thanks, Jack,” he said shyly, dropping his gaze from the older boy’s face. “Oh, that was only the first lesson, my friend,” Jack told him with a painful squeeze of Lance’s left bicep. “We got a *long* way to go.”

Lance groaned dramatically, and both of them laughed.



The MTS football field was located at the rear of the campus and had to be accessed by crossing railroad tracks that were still in use by the rail companies. It had always amused Lance the few times he attended PE when a long-ass train had taken, like, the entire period to go across, and the class would be trapped on the other side. Crazy-ass setup, he’d always thought. But no train was crossing this day as he hurriedly dragged Jenny out to the field.

He’d come to her classroom while she was scrambling to get her grades finished in time for graduation the next day, and insisted he accompany her. She’d asked him numerous questions, but he refused to answer. He just told her she needed to come with him and literally pulled her from the room.



As Lance drew her along a narrow walkway between the baseball field and back of the bleachers, Jenny finally became exasperated and yanked her hand from his (which wasn't easy, she noted – he had an iron grip!)

The boy turned to her in frustration. He was dressed in a long-sleeve green tunic that set off his eyes well, brown drawstring leather pants, and leather boots up to his knees. His odd, but fancy attire made her feel like a slob in her jeans and short-sleeved, blue shirt that she'd bought at Ross.

“You must come with me, Lady Jenny!”

She stood her ground, hands on her hips, and shook her head. “Not till you tell me what's going on, Lance. Where is Arthur? And what's with this *Lady Jenny* stuff?”

The boy turned on the charm and gazed imploringly at her with those eyes and that beautiful face that always reminded her of a Botticelli painting. “All your questions shall be answered, milady, but you must come now. Please!”

She reluctantly followed him. He rounded the corner where the bleachers ended and turned to step underneath them. As Jenny followed she found herself face-to-face with Arthur. His sudden presence startled her, and she gasped.

Arthur bowed courteously then gently took her hand and kissed it. He was dressed in a royal-purple tunic, with light brown leather pants, soft leather boots, his long red cloak, and a circlet crown on his head.

“We meet again, Lady Jenny.”

Jenny jerked her hand back. “What do you want?”

Lance whispered to Arthur, “Told ya she don't trust you.”

“Stand guard, Sir Lance. Alert me at anyone's approach.”

The boy bowed respectfully. “Yes, sire.” Casting a backward glance in Jenny's direction, he hurried to the edge of the bleachers and stood at attention.

Jenny watched him go and then turned to face the man she'd so badly wanted to find. “*Sir Lance?*”

Arthur nodded. “He hath been knighted, milady, as have all the others.”

Jenny felt triumphant. “So I *was* right. You're recreating the Round Table and filling it with children.”

Arthur bowed slightly in deference to her conclusions. “Thou art as insightful as thou art lovely. We must needs talk, Lady Jenny. I require thy help. There be much I must tell and show thee, and methinks we have little time. Be you willing to accompany Lance and myself?”

She paused and considered. This was what she'd wanted. She needed to know what the man was up to. She'd wanted to know that Lance was safe, and Lance

was not only safe, but apparently quite happy from the look of him. Yet, if she went with Arthur to who knew where and told no one, they could easily make her just disappear, and no one would be the wiser. She considered this possibility for a brief moment. No, she knew, that was not this man's intent. Lance would never be with him if the guy were dangerous. Lance was too smart for that.

"All right. I'll come."

Arthur grinned, a look that struck her as very handsome. Though she hated to admit it, he was *very* charismatic. He took her by the arm and led her gently into the shadows Lance was waiting. Then the three of them walked to Jenny's Prius parked in the rear lot that abutted the campus.

Lance sat in the backseat of the compact car and Arthur in front with Jenny. She glanced over when Arthur directed her toward the nearest storm drain entrance. He merely smiled and sat a trifle uncomfortably in his seat. She surmised this must be his first time in a car, and it clearly unnerved him.

Entering through the storm drain grate was the first of many surprises for Jenny that afternoon and evening. Arthur had arranged for Esteban, Darnell, and Reyna to conduct training in his absence, and all was in full swing when the king, Lance, and Jenny arrived.

She gazed about in amazement as they wended their way through the various tunnels. Arthur pointed out the different training areas, sleeping quarters, eating areas, the weapons and clothing storage. Jenny was astonished to see Reyna and her girls teaching teenaged boys how to shoot a bow. Chris especially enchanted her when he latched onto Lance as soon as they entered The Hub, and wouldn't let go.

Mark and Jack, who'd been sparring with swords and shields, ceased their workout when Arthur and Jenny appeared. Arthur introduced her to the boys, but failed to notice Mark's lack of cordiality toward her. Jenny saw it, however, and wondered the reason. She was certain she'd never met Mark before. She could feel his angry gaze on her back while she wandered The Hub, and squirmed with discomfort.

All that she had seen rendered Jenny speechless, but what astonished her most of all was the obvious love and fealty these children felt toward Arthur. In her mind, she'd conjured all manner of nefarious scenarios involving the man and his plans for these kids. But maybe Karla was right. Maybe he *was* teaching them more valuable lessons than they could ever get in school.

Just then, little Chris tugged on Arthur's luxurious tunic, and the man scooped him into his arms.

"What is it, my boy?"

"Is it dinnertime, Arthur?" Chris responded, eliciting an easy, comfortable

laugh from Arthur.

Lance quickly stepped forward and grabbed Chris from Arthur's arms. "I'll feed him," he said, a bit of sullenness in his tone. Then he added, "I mean, you're... busy."

He took off before Arthur could respond, but Jenny had noticed the tightness in his voice and frowned. Arthur led her to his throne and seated her carefully in it.

Jenny felt awkward and out of place, but no one was really paying any attention to her except Mark and his angry looks in her direction. She noted from the corner of her eye that his friend Jack looked upset as he tried to engage Mark, but the blond boy wasn't engaging him back.

What could all that be about?

"Now, milady," Arthur began, interrupting her thoughts, "that ye have seen my new Round Table, what be your opinion?"

Jenny didn't really have a response. This was way too much to process all at once. So she shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it depends on what you plan to do."

He flashed that winning smile, the one that accentuated his good looks, and replied, "I plan to ask you for a favor."

Her eyebrows rose questioningly.



The following day proceeded much the same as the previous one for Arthur's young and exuberant knights. They fanned out across the city, searching for cast-off junk they felt could be reused. Today, they targeted construction sites, inquiring if there was any wood or old fixtures that were being tossed out.

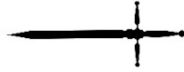
At one large site where several buildings were being demolished in preparation for the raising of new ones, a group led by Lavern and Enrique, dressed in older, less fancy tunics for fear of dirtying the newer ones, explained to the foreman of the site what they sought. He told them that most of the area was "hard-hat" and off-limits to them. However he did point out a spot toward the back of the site that was used for the throwaway stuff.

"You boys are welcome to take whatever ya want."

Lavern and the others, per Arthur's instructions, thanked the man with a courteous bow before heading off in that direction. The foreman and all the workers gaped at the kids in astonishment.

Lavern and his crew found old wood, not-quite empty paint cans, nails, bathroom fixtures, and a host of other so-called throwaway stuff they felt certain

could be used again, and loaded it all into the truck Enrique had driven.



Within the warehouse owned by Mr. R. and Mr. L., Dwayne handed over a large wad of cash and a handgun, setting both onto the table before Mr. R. As always, Mr. L. stood, rather than sat.

Mr. R. studied the slightly jittery Dwayne, eyeing the boy with deep scrutiny. “You seem jumpy, Dwayne. Been sampling my goods again?”

Dwayne’s eyes bulged in fear, and he shook his head. In truth, he *had* been sampling. R.’s meth was the purest around. “No, sir!” he insisted, but Mr. R.’s eyes told him he knew the boy was lying.

The man stared at him for a long, hard moment. “You’re sure they saw you?”

Dwayne nodded vigorously. “They seen me. Prac’ly stuck my whole head out the winda!”

R. nodded. He snapped his fingers, and one of Mr. L.’s Asian footmen hurried over. R. indicated the handgun. “Dispose of this.”

The young Asian, who looked, to Dwayne, younger than him, scooped up the gun and exited the office.

R. gazed long and hard at Dwayne, who was so hopped up he couldn’t help shifting from foot to foot. “Villalobos was the target, Dwayne, not his little sister, and even at that, the girl didn’t die.”

“It was hard, Mr. R., trying ta shoot an’ make sure they all seen me too,” Dwayne protested. “Plus that fool Marquis be swervin’ the car too much fo’ me ta aim!”

He was sweating now, profusely.

Mr. R. drummed his fingers lightly against the wood of his desktop. “I wanted a gang war, Dwayne,” he said with a dramatic sigh. “It appears this *King* Arthur has robbed me of that. He’s becoming a liability, and I can’t have that.”

“That ain’t my fault, Mr. R.!” Dwayne exclaimed, his voice cracking with fear.

R. sighed again. “I suppose not. Mr. L.?”

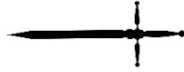
L. stepped forward and pulled a wad of bills from his thousand-dollar suit pocket and handed them to Dwayne. “For selling, and half for the shooting, because you missed the target. Do you have a problem with that?”

Dwayne hurriedly pocketed the cash and shook his head vigorously, anxious to get out of there.

“You may go.”

Dwayne gave a nod to Mr. L., glanced once more at R., who was lighting a

cigar, and then bolted from the office.



Jack and Chris played catch in the river basin near the grate entrance to Arthur's underground kingdom. Much as they enjoyed all the training and sparring with weaponry, the shadowy darkness of those tunnels got to everyone after a while, so they'd go topside and soak up the sunlight or play ball or just walk and hang out.

Arthur would not allow them to practice swordplay or archery outside during the day for fear they would be spotted. While Chris idolized Lance above all others, Jack knew the boy loved him for his muscles and athleticism and because Jack could always make him laugh.

Jack had been teaching Chris how to throw and catch a football for the past hour. The California sun was setting with its usual kaleidoscope of red and orange and gold, and Jack knew Arthur and Lance would likely be at the park with that teacher lady by now. He considered the implications of Arthur's idea. So far, the gathering of materials for Operation Clean-Up—a name Mark had come up with—had been going well.

But tonight, Arthur planned to introduce himself and the crusade to the city at large, and that might change everything for him, Mark and all the kids. Would it change for better or for worse? So far, people had been confused, but nice, when Arthur's knights had asked for their cast-off junk. But what would everyone else say? Would the police and politicians try to stop them? The future, which seemed so clear and joyous the evening he'd been knighted, now suddenly seemed very cloudy and uncertain.

As he and Chris tossed the ball back and forth, Jack's eyes kept flitting involuntarily to Mark, who sat on a concrete balustrade deep in thought and looking forlorn. Jack had told Mark about his talk with Lance and how they were all buds now, and that seemed to please his friend. But there was something eating away at Mark, and Jack felt despairingly certain he knew what it was.

Chris tossed him a long bomb—for a six-year-old—with a perfect spiral. Jack easily plucked it from the air and trotted over to high five the boy.

"That was perfect, Chris!" he enthused. "I couldn't throw a spiral like that at your age. NFL, here you come." Chris laughed with delight, and they high-fived again.

As they did, Jack caught another glimpse of Mark. His best friend hadn't budged for the entire hour. Now was the time.

"Go on in now, Chris," he told the boy, tossing him the football. "It's getting

dark.”

Chris beamed excitedly. “Thanks, Jack, for all the tips. I’m gonna be a big, buff football player when I grow up. Just like you.”

Jack grinned down at the small boy who’d already grown so much in the past few the months. “You know it, little man.”

Chris got that devilish look in his eye that always made Jack smile. “Can I punch you one more time ’fore I go in?”

Jack laughed, as always. “Sure.” Chris had recently discovered how hard Jack’s abs were, and he loved punching them because he said it was like hitting a wall.

Pulling back his small fist dramatically, Chris punched with all his might. His fist impacted with Jack’s solid abs. “Ow!” he screamed dramatically, shaking his hand as though he’d broken it.

Jack chuckled.

“Gonna have those too,” Chris insisted, still shaking his hand.

Jack tousled his shaggy blond hair. “That you will. Now head on in. Almost dinnertime.”

Chris beamed that innocent, trusting smile that melted Jack’s heart and almost made him feel innocent again too.

Almost...

The little boy darted through the grate and vanished into the darkness.

Jack watched him depart and then turned to gaze at Mark, who looked both beautiful and sad beneath the reddish glow of the setting sun. A light breeze ruffled Jack’s unruly hair, and the ever-present sound of freeway traffic in the distance filled the coming night. Sighing, and with a heavy heart, he approached the boy he loved and sat beside him.

Hoping he was wrong, he decided to try a light approach. “Okay, Marky Mark, out with it. You been in the dumps all day, and I don’t mean the ones we been raiding.” He smiled, hoping his joke might elicit some response, but Mark didn’t even react.

“He hardly notices me no more,” Mark stated, his voice laced with hopelessness.

Jack looked at the ground, anywhere but at Mark. Here it comes. “You mean Arthur, don’t you?”

“Course I mean Arthur,” Mark replied as though Jack had asked a really stupid question. “He never hardly talks to me no more, it’s always Lance an’ them gangbangers an’ now that teacher....”

Jack groaned. “So it’s true.” His voice was barely a whisper. “I kept hoping it weren’t.”

“What?” Mark asked, looking at him for the first time.

Jack met his gaze sadly. “You’re in love with him, aren’t ya?”

Mark quickly broke eye contact.

“I seen the way ya look at ’im, Mark. C’mon, this is Jacky here. I’m your best bud, and I know you better’n anyone.”

Mark leapt down from the balustrade and stepped away in frustration. Jack jumped down and grabbed him by the shoulders, turning him around so they could face one another. “Look, Mark—” He stopped short at the sight of Mark’s huge blue eyes brimming with tears.

“I can’t help the way I feel, can I?” the blond boy asked despairingly, tears dribbling down his soft, smooth cheeks.

Those tears felt like acid burning Jack’s heart away. “No, buddy, ya can’t.” He grabbed Mark in a tight hug, comforting the one he loved, his own heart shattering into a million pieces.

“He’s the only man I ever met who don’t want sex outta me, ya know?” Mark went on, crying against Jack’s comforting shoulder. “He jus’ likes me ’cause I’m me.” He pulled away from Jack and gazed at his friend imploringly. “Nobody ever cared ’bout me like him before.”

“I do.”

“You’re different, Jacky.” Mark lowered his eyes. “You’re my best friend.”

But I wanna be more, Jack thought. Lance’s words rang through his mind: “*Why don’t you just tell him?*” and the words were there on the tip of Jack’s tongue. The “L” word was there, and he wanted to confess it, he wanted Mark to know, desperately wanted Mark to love him back. But now, standing there before Mark, knowing he needed to say just three simple words, Jack melted like a snowman under a warm spring sun and dropped his gaze in shame, so Mark wouldn’t see the pain tattooed across his eyes.

But Mark hadn’t even noticed. “It’s like he don’ hafta care, but he does.” He paused, and Jack looked up. “You think, Jacky, ya think maybe it’s possible he could...?” He stopped in frustration. “Hell, Jack, I don’ know what ta do! Every time I see the guy, I wanna tell ’im how I feel.”

Despite his broken heart and the tightness in his chest, Jack wanted the best for Mark. “Maybe ya should tell him, ya know? He’s cool, Mark. Lance said he don’t care if a guy’s gay or straight. He says we’re all God’s children. He’ll understand.”

Mark’s face looked as lost as Jack felt. “But he likes that teacher—I seen it in his eyes. ’Sides, he’s got too much honor, Jacky. No way he’d ever touch a kid *that* way, gay or straight. He’s too good.”

Jack agreed. He knew Arthur was attracted to the teacher, and he knew Mark

was right about the rest. But he still felt Mark should tell the king how he felt.

Fool! Like you're telling how you feel?

"He can't love you the way you want, Mark," Jack told him, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Tell him you can. Confess it now, before it's too late!

But all he said was, "But he'll help you through the pain, just like he did with the smack."

Mark merely shook his head. "That was different. Hell, Jacky, I don't want 'im to hate me!"

Trembling with sorrow, and desire, Jack gently wiped the tears from Mark's cheeks with his thumb, caressing the soft skin, biting back the almost overwhelming urge to kiss him. "He won't, man. He couldn't hate anyone."

Mark threw his arms around Jack's protective shoulders as he'd done so often on the street when a john had beat him up or raped him. "I can't, Jacky, I just can't. But it hurts so much to be around him, ya know?"

Jack nodded, his breathing almost stopped, his arms encircling the most precious person in the world. "Yeah, I do know, Mark." It was but a whisper of breath. "I know how that feels."

And so they stood that way for a long time, together in despair, until the reddish-gold light of sunset settled into the black inkiness of night.



Eucalyptus Park swarmed with media personnel and vans, operators setting up the cameras, lighting techs putting the light stands in place and plugging lights into generators. Residents of the neighborhood, drawn by all the lights and noise, had gathered round to see what was happening.

Helen Schaeffer, the *Channel 7 News* reporter, stood with her cameraman, giving him last minute instructions and going over notes. Jenny had called her and set up the interview with Arthur, as per the king's request. Other news outlets were on hand to film the proceedings, but Helen had the exclusive interview all to herself.

When Arthur made the request to Jenny, she at first wondered why he'd want so much publicity since the police were after him. But when he explained his purpose, the purpose of his entire crusade, her jaw had dropped in amazement, and respect. He may be crazy in thinking himself *the* King Arthur, but his goals were so ambitious, so lofty and positive that she couldn't help but admire him. Despite her initial reservations, she realized that her first impression of the man she'd met in this very park had been correct. He was a good man who aimed to

do good things.

She stood to one side with Arthur and Lance, eyeing the curious spectators and the entire media circus with uncertainty. Would the public respond positively or negatively to Arthur's message, she wondered? She'd soon find out.

Arthur shifted nervously, eyeing the huge cameras and electric lights with uneasy anticipation. He looked resplendent in his purple tunic, knee-high boots, and burgundy-red cloak, his circlet crown rounding his brow and restraining his long hair against a gentle breeze. He wore Excalibur in its sheath from a sword belt strapped around his waist.

Beside him, Lance stood attired in similar fashion: bright green tunic, freshly scrubbed boots, clean drawstring pants, and a princely gold circlet that framed his luxurious long hair around his face. His own, slightly smaller sword, dangled from its sheath around his small waist. He looked nervous, but he'd often told Jenny that one day he'd win a gold medal in the X Games and had to learn how not to be shy in front of people.

Well, Lance, I have a feeling what you're doing now is bigger than any gold medal could ever be.

"Ye seem very relaxed, Sir Lance," Arthur told him, readjusting his cloak and fiddling with his crown, *again*.

Jenny noted how uneasy he was. Clearly, being on television was new to him, whatever his background.

Lance laughed gently. "Don't be so nervous, Arthur, it's only TV."

Arthur glanced at the boy with an anxious smile. "For someone of my time, it doth be tantamount to sorcery."

Lance grinned, and Arthur returned it.

Jenny, standing beside them, observed the exchange with wonder.

So like father and son.

Arthur noted her gaze. "Now it be thy turn to stare, Lady Jenny."

Jenny, who was not to be on camera and had dressed casually in Dockers and a long-sleeved blouse, blushed at being caught. "Sorry. I was just thinking how much you two... oh, never mind. I do wish you'd just call me Jenny, though."

Arthur gave a slight bow. "As you wish. Jenny. Do you still doubt me and mine intent?"

"Not your intent, no. I think what you're trying to do is... well, incredible. But you *were* right about me. I love *what* I teach more than who I teach. It didn't use' to be that way. When I started teaching, I really loved those kids and wanted to get to know every single one of them." She frowned and sighed. "But, I don't know, the system wore me down. It's so one-size-fits-all and so focused on narrow outcomes that I guess I lost the kids along the way. When I saw you with

those boys, and how much they admired you, cared for you... especially you, Lance, how much you've changed, well... I'm in awe." She looked into Arthur's sincere brown eyes. "You're a better teacher than I'll ever be."

Arthur offered a gentle smile. "Do not doubt thine own capacity to grow and learn. Nor mine."

Uncertain how to respond, she gave Lance's attire, especially the sword dangling from his belt, another critical appraisal. "I do worry about you, Lance. You're a special kid. I saw that from the beginning."

Lance smiled shyly and fought back a blush. "I'm not important, Lady Jenny. The needs of the whole company be worth more than the needs of the one. Right, Arthur?"

Lance gazed admiringly upward at Arthur, who nodded, but didn't respond. Jenny noted the love and devotion Lance felt toward Arthur, and fought down a touch of jealousy.

Helen stepped forward, microphone in hand. "We're ready, Arthur. I'll introduce you and then ask the questions we discussed."

Arthur smiled. "I be ready, Lady Helen."

Helen tested her microphone and did a quick sound check while the cameraman framed her face against the park as a backdrop. The red lights went on, and the cameras began rolling.

Helen introduced herself and announced, "We have an exclusive interview with the mysterious King Arthur, who has raised many questions with his bizarre episode two months ago on Santa Monica Boulevard. Here to tell his story is King Arthur."

The cameraman turned his camera on Arthur, and the other camera operators followed suit. The lights and faces staring his way clearly unnerved the king, but he kept his composure.

"King Arthur," Helen asked in a crisp, professional voice, "why don't we begin with the basics. Are you in fact *the* King Arthur of legend, and if so, how is it possible that you're here, in this country, in this time?"

Arthur smiled shyly, shifting slightly as he looked into Helen's expectant face. "Yes, Lady Helen, I am indeed the same King Arthur. As to how I arrived here in this place and time, I be not completely certain, though I have my suspicions. I do know that I arrived here with a purpose."

"And what is that purpose?" Helen asked professionally.

"To rescue the lost children of this land."

"Like the boys with you that night on Santa Monica Boulevard?"

"Yes."

"Let's talk about that incident we all saw on TV. What happened out there?"

“The boys I found that night are but a mere fraction of the lost and abandoned children on your city’s streets, Lady Helen. Your police officers did not arrive to assist those lost ones, but rather to punish them. And me for helping them.”

“The police insist those boys were male prostitutes and were breaking the law by being there,” Helen replied, her voice steady and without emotion.

Arthur shook his head sadly. “Those boys are children, Lady Helen, cast into the streets by their parents, forced to degrade themselves in order to survive. Do you believe they belong in jail for that?”

“That’s not for me to say, King Arthur,” Helen responded smoothly. “That’s for the authorities to decide.”

“Children are a gift, Lady Helen, and the hope of this world. Your country professes within its Constitution that all people are created equal, yet those words only apply to adults, not to the children who have no rights under that sacred document. These cast-off youth, whom your authorities seek not to aid, have become my new Round Table, dedicated to the cause of justice and the use of might *for* right.”

“From our earlier discussion, you explained that many of these children you’ve recruited have been, or currently are in gangs, and have been actively defiant of the law. How do you plan to change their behavior?”

“By example, Lady Helen,” Arthur replied with confidence. “And by giving them a purpose in life that befits their humanity. Measure my success not on what these youths have done in the past, but on what they do now and in the future.”

“And what would you say to your critics who’d likely claim that these gang members you’ve recruited, while a sizable number, are not the most violent, hard-core ones out there, nor do they represent the real heads of the most dangerous gangs that plague this city?”

“Milady, criticism without alternatives and a commitment to change is the purview of feckless people who, rather than make changes for the good, would maintain what be called in this era the status quo. Thus, their claims be without merit. As in all human history, it is the few who always step forward to effect real change, who make real improvements in the lives of others. That requires a measure of sacrifice the adult leaders of this city seem not willing to give.”

He paused and guided Lance into the shot with him, arm around his slender shoulders. Lance blinked a moment under the harsh lights, but kept his eyes on Arthur.

“Are not the children with me now, like my Lance here, who seek a new and better way of life, *sufficient*? Are they not the beginning? Perhaps the beginning of the end of this war against children? Must I turn the hearts of *all* to be in thine

eyes a success? Thee and thine have not yet beheld what my knights can do.”

“And what will that be exactly?”

“Firstly shall be the restoration of the very neighborhoods which spawned these youth, neighborhoods savagely neglected by those of your people in power.”

“And how do you plan to carry out such an ambitious plan?”

“I appeal to the good people of this city,” said Arthur earnestly. “Thy waste be our want. Anything thou can spare will aid greatly our crusade. We should be grateful to accept any donation of whatever you may be discarding. All shall be put to good use.”

“And what will you do with all of this discarded stuff?”

Arthur grinned. “You must wait and see, milady.”

“You do know,” Helen went on in a deliberately cautionary voice, “that if the police find you, they’ll arrest you.”

“Alas, the law and justice do not always match up, Lady Helen. My knights, methinks, engender justice more than those who are supposed to.”

As planned ahead of time, Helen now turned to Lance and shoved the microphone under his chin as the cameras focused squarely on him.

Watching his face on the TV monitor, Jenny again thought how beautiful Lance looked, how charismatic, how radiant.

“Any final words, Sir Lance?” Helen asked expectantly.

Lance looked at her soberly. “Yeah, I do got somethin’ ta say. I grew up with no family. When I’s a baby, my mom sold me for drugs. I don’t even got a real last name. DCFS put me in foster homes where I got locked in closets and beat up and abused and... worse stuff, too.” He paused to compose himself and then gazed back into the camera, eyes shimmering beneath the lights. “I had nuthin’ growing up ’cept my skating, and I kill on a board. I’m goin’ to the X Games one day, an’ I’m gonna win a gold medal, so mark that all you people watchin’ out there.”

Helen gave a laugh of support.

“Arthur, he been everything to me. He took me in, he saved me, and he’s savin’ all these other kids, too. You grownups out there who say you care about us kids out here, well, you’re lying, ’cause if you did care we wouldn’t be out here on the streets in the first place. *Arthur* cares, and he’s doin’ somethin’ about it. *We’re* doin’ somethin’ about it. You all like to pretend we’re adults when we get in trouble out here, and then you throw us in prison. Well, if we’re so adult, how come we can’t vote or drive a car? I’m fourteen years old. I can go to prison, but I can’t drive a car.”

He paused a moment to let that sink in, pinning those piercing green eyes right

to the camera lens.

“This Round Table we got going, we’re gonna show you all that we can *be* somethin’ in this world, that we’re important, that we can be better’n all the adults who been hating on us. Arthur—” He glanced at the king and grinned. “—well, he’s the once and future king, and us kids like me—we’re his future.”

The onlookers watching the interview burst into spontaneous applause. Lance beamed broadly, his face positively radiant under the camera lights.

“Well, I can’t top that, Sir Lance. This is Helen Schaeffer with King Arthur and Sir Lance for *Channel 7 News*.”

The cameras ceased, their red lights going dark. Helen gushed over Lance, as did all the other adults, praising his poise and his impassioned speech, clapping him on the back.

“Thank you, Arthur,” Helen said excitedly. “You were great. I’ve got to get back to the station so we can get this on air.” She turned to leave, and then hurried back. “On a personal level, I think what you’re doing is awesome and any time you need some coverage, just call me.” She slipped a business card into Arthur’s hand.

He gazed at it questioningly, and a laughing Lance took it from him. “I’ll handle that, Lady Helen,” he told her with a sly smile. “Arthur don’t got the hang of cell phones yet.”

Helen smiled and hurried to her van. In what seemed like minutes, all the news vehicles were packed up and pulling away.

Arthur gazed at Lance, his eyes brimming with pride. “Thou art truly my greatest treasure, Lance.”

Lance blushed. He looked like he might hug Arthur, but held back. “Thanks, sire,” was all he said.

At that moment, the onlookers from the neighborhood swarmed over and surrounded the duo, asking questions, shaking Arthur’s hand, offering encouragement, offering donations of stuff they didn’t need, all of which pleased the king. Some of the kids knew Lance from MTS and marveled at his clothes and wanted to hold his sword, asking what seemed like a thousand questions at once.

Jenny fell back, away from the crowd. Crowds made her uncomfortable. While happy for Arthur, and especially moved by Lance’s powerful speech, she’d developed a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach that, great as Arthur’s crusade was in theory, in practice it could easily spiral out of control. And what would happen to these kids then?

So mobbed were Arthur and Lance by the neighbors that they didn’t even see her slip away into the night.

CHAPTER 8: THE FRUITS OF THY HANDIWORK

AN HOUR LATER, THE INTERVIEW aired after numerous promos piquing viewer interest in the story. Within the Hollenbeck Station, Ryan and Gibson sat before the flat-screen TV, along with every other detective on duty. Ryan scowled with disgust as Arthur's interview unspooled before him. Gibson stood beside him, absently sipping from his Diet Coke, shaking his head in amazement. And, he had to grudgingly admit, admiration. This guy might be outside the law, but at least he was trying to *do* something. That's more than could be said of the mayor and city council.

When Lance's interview came on, the murmuring that had accompanied Arthur's answers ceased, and silence fell over the cops. The officers listened to every word the boy spoke, and many grudgingly nodded.

"Hellfire!" Ryan spat when the interviews ended. "Get that woman on the phone. I wanna know where this interview was shot!"

Gibson, stunned by Lance's harsh indictment of him and all the other adults in power, had to pull himself back into the moment. "Huh? Oh yeah, you got it." He turned toward his desk, set down his Diet Coke, paused, and then turned to face Ryan, his thoughts conflicted. "Say, Ry. You ever wonder something?"

"What?" Ryan grumbled.

"What if this guy really *is* King Arthur?"

Ryan glared with disdain, and Gibson slunk back to his desk.



By the time Arthur and Lance returned to The Hub, the overnights had already seen the interview streamed on their cell phones (at night WiFi service, always sketchy in the tunnels, was better than during the day.) They all burst into applause as Arthur rode Llamrei into their midst. The moment Lance leapt down from the horse, Chris threw his arms around him.

"You were the best, Lance!" he gushed.

"Thanks, Chris," Lance responded, embarrassed by all the attention and wanting to direct it away from himself. "What have you been doing, 'sides

watching our interview?”

“Jack been showin’ me how to throw a football,” Chris went on excitedly. “Man, he’s the best player I ever seen. You ever try punching him in the stomach? It’s like hitting a wall!”

Lance laughed and caught Jack’s eye. He and Mark stood apart from the welcoming committee. Mark gazed at Arthur intently, and Jack caught Lance’s look. “Thanks, Jack,” Lance said sincerely.

Jack left Mark and stepped over to them, inspiring Chris to innocently grab the two boys and hug them both, pulling them toward each other, practically pressing their faces together.

“Hey, he’s a great kid,” Jack said quietly. “So’re you, Lance. What you said out there, well, you almost made me cry, man.”

The closeness of his face to Jack’s made Lance very uncomfortable, with those eyes and especially those lips nearly touching his, so he forced a nervous, breathy laugh. “A big, buff guy like you?”

Jack also forced a laugh.

Chris finally let them go.

Lance stepped quickly back, his breathing ragged.

What was that?

He shuddered with fear.

Jack’s thick brows were knitted with confusion, his lips curled into an expression of puzzlement. But then he shook off the moment and pointed a finger threateningly at Lance, smirking in that confident, rakish way Lance admired. “Keep making fun of me and it’s another thousand crunches for you.”

Glad for the distraction, Lance put a hand to his midsection and made an exaggerated grimace. “No way, man, my abs are still killing me from yesterday.”

Jack gave a lopsided grin. “Soon those abs’ll be a wall like mine.”

Lance laughed again, his heart beginning to slow. “Not even.” He paused a moment, then added, “Thanks, you know, for everything.”

Needing to change his focus, he let his eyes drift over to Mark, who stood alone, gazing helplessly at Arthur. It was obvious the blond boy wanted to approach the king, but held back, his eyes pooled with shame. Lance recognized the look, but didn’t understand it, and gestured toward him.

“He okay?”

Jack sighed despairingly. “No, but there’s nuthin’ we can do about it.”

Lance frowned, wondering what the problem was, but then Arthur’s commanding voice drew his attention toward the throne.

The king stood before them and asked for silence. Mark moved forward to stand beside Jack. When the excited chattering died, Arthur said, “As you all

have seen, I've made our appeal to the people, as did Sir Lance. Tomorrow, my knights, tomorrow our crusade shall *formally* begin."

The boys erupted with enthusiastic cheers and applause. Jack elbowed Mark, and the blond boy raised his fist into the air with the others. Jack threw his arm around his friend's shoulders.

Lance looked around him at the energy, the excitement and enthusiasm, and hoped with all his heart that this new venture would indeed turn the tide for all of them.



Boyle Heights basked in the warm sunlight, its streets calm after the recent shooting, but the squalor of its dwellings, when laid bare to the glaring summer sun, always cried out for attention. On one such street, nestled within Esteban's neighborhood, two small children, a boy and a girl, tossed a dirty Frisbee back and forth, when suddenly the sound of approaching vehicles caused them to leap in fear for the sidewalk.

Crouching hurriedly behind a battered blue mailbox, the two dark-haired kids peeked out to see what was coming. Their mother frantically dashed across the street to crouch with them, sweeping both children protectively into her arms. Curious residents, drawn by the noise, stood behind the young woman and her children, gawking in disbelief at what was approaching.

Arthur, on Llamrei, trotted lazily down the street toward them. Behind him followed numerous junk-filled vehicles and hundreds of his knights in their medieval garb walking alongside or riding battered bikes or skateboards. Most of the knights did not carry their swords, but many, led by Reyna, carried bows and arrows for protection.

This very odd procession marched past the curious residents, many of the knights waving and bowing as they passed. The two small children, delighted at the sight, jumped from behind the mailbox and waved frantically. Lance, Mark, Jack, Esteban, Jaime, Darnell, Luis, and Enrique, all of whom flanked Arthur, waved to the children as though they were part of a parade.

To Lance, that was what this felt like—being in the Rose Parade or something. Since this was Esteban's own 'hood, he was the most recognizable celebrity, but his reputation up until now had been violent and criminal, so many of the locals scowled distastefully as he passed.

More and more residents spilled from the shabby apartment complexes, storefronts, and houses to gape in wonder at this most curious spectacle. Arthur stopped in what looked to be the center of this particular neighborhood, and his

army halted with him. The young knights quickly began unloading their tools, which Arthur and the kids had purchased from Home Depot, and the “junk,” while the king pointed to various groups and indicated which area of the ’hood each should attend to.

Several groups, led by the more artistically minded Enrique and Lavern and Luis, hauled numerous paint cans out of the truck beds, grabbed brushes or rollers that they’d scavenged and cleaned, and began painting over the graffiti that littered the area. Because there were only little amounts of paint in each can, the walls quickly took on a rainbow-like appearance as one color blended into the next.

As the eager knights worked furiously to turn these buildings into multi-colored works of modern art, more residents emerged and stared in amazement. Arthur noted that the graffiti clean-up was proceeding apace and dropped down off Llamrei, handing the reins to Mark with a smile.

“Care for her, Sir Mark.”

“Anything you want, Arthur,” the boy replied, but Arthur had already started down the street with Lance, gazing about him for other needed repairs. The other knights followed, leaving Jack to shrug at Mark, slap him on the back, and then follow. Mark led the massive animal along after them.

Arthur spotted some broken fences and pointed them out to Darnell. “Sir Darnell, take some men and repair these.”

“Sure, Arthur,” replied the husky boy who liked being in charge. He called out to some of the others still waiting for an assignment, “You guys there, come wit’ me.” They headed toward the truck that carried tools and cast-off pieces of wood.

Arthur pointed at the trash strewn about the streets, and Reyna took charge of the group who set about collecting it and filling the local dumpsters. One house clearly needed a new door—there was a large hole in the current one. It looked like someone had tried to kick it down, and his foot went through instead.

Arthur waved, and another group led by Esteban ran to one of the trucks to retrieve an old door they’d gotten at the city dump. Bringing tools and hauling the door over, the boys set to work installing it as best they could.

The Hispanic lady and her young son initially kept their distance from Esteban, but when he flashed a disarming smile, they somehow sensed he was different from the gangster they used to know and happily assisted him and his team with the repair.

Still more stuff came out of the pickup trucks. There were beds and bedframes, furniture that was useable, even one of the heavy bathtubs Lance and Jack had unearthed at the city dump. When one of the locals told Lance in

Spanish that she needed a bathtub because hers was leaking, Lance translated for Jack, who had some prior experience helping out his uncle, a plumber. The big boy grinned devilishly at Lance.

“Okay, Lance, more weightlifting, like I promised.” He flexed his biceps and laughed.

Lance groaned in mock horror and laughed with him. “Let’s do it, buff man.”

And so they hefted and heaved and got the tub into the tiny, two-bedroom house. Taking the old tub out strained muscles in his arms and back that Lance didn’t even know he had, and when they had to tilt the new bathtub upright to get it through the bathroom door, his biceps screamed in protest. He grunted to Jack as they inched it in, “Much more of this and my guns’ll be... ugh... bigger’n yours.”

Jack laughed, but Lance was happy to hear strain in his voice. “In your... uugh... dreams, little man!”

Once they got it into the bathroom, installing it was a pain because the pipes were old and rusty. Both boys streamed with sweat, their tunics plastered to their backs and arms as they used old wrenches to tighten the joints. Jack made Lance do half the tightening.

“That’s how you get massive forearms like mine,” he said with a snicker as Lance looked at him in annoyance.

“Remind me never to work out with you again,” Lance said with a grunt as he strained against the rusty old pipe.

“Too late, Lance. You made me promise to give you guns like mine, and I *never* break my promises.”

Lance muscled that last pipe into place and swatted dripping hair from his face. “I was afraid you were gonna say that.” They cracked up and high-fived each other, feeling good about what they’d accomplished.



Reyna and her posse of girls had cleaned up the trash and helped hang window coverings, blinds, and curtains and had passed out damaged, but still useable household appliances to residents who desperately needed them. Reyna had never been around poor people in her life—her parents wouldn’t hear of associating with such as them. Thus, until Arthur, she had always had a stuck-up attitude toward “those” people.

But now, talking and laughing in Spanish with these nice, sweet moms who loved their children and fawned over Reyna and her crew, offering them food for their efforts, her eyes were opened to reality, one hidden from her by her parents.

Poor people were no different than rich—some were jerks, but most were very cool. These ladies in one day felt more like moms to her than her own had in seventeen years.

Having finished hanging curtains for a nice grandmother who was raising her two young grandchildren by herself, Reyna once again found her eyes searching for Esteban. This was his 'hood, after all, so his *familia* must be around here somewhere. She'd been a snooty bitch before she'd joined up with Arthur, and after, too, but she'd truly felt bad about not going to the hospital with everyone, and now she wanted to tell Esteban how much she loved his neighbors. And she wanted to meet his mother and sister.

After wandering a bit, almost giving up hope of finding him, Reyna finally spotted the muscular teen just down the street, painting a single-story house with a little girl, whom Reyna deduced must be his sister. Suddenly, butterflies filled her stomach, and she hesitated. For the first time she could remember, she was nervous, because she actually cared what someone other than herself thought.

Smoothing out her hair and tugging on her tunic to accentuate a bit more of her lithe figure, she crossed the street and stood behind Esteban. His back was to her as he helped the adorable girl—who looked to be three or so—move a small paintbrush up and down. The color was purple, of all things. A line of mostly empty paint cans sat beside them.

The little girl turned and saw Reyna.

“Who are you?” she asked, causing Esteban to whirl around protectively.

He gave her the head nod and returned to painting.

“That’s just Reyna, Rosa,” he told the little girl, his voice deep and emotionless. “She thinks she’s better’n us.”

Reyna smarted at that, but knew she deserved it.

“I think she’s pretty,” the girl said, pulling away from Esteban to approach Reyna, who squatted down so she could look the little girl in the eye. “Can I touch your hair?” the little one asked, and Reyna laughed.

“Sure, sweetheart,” she said and felt real joy as the tiny hand caressed her silky ponytail.

“Wow, smooth,” the little girl gushed.

“I think your hair is pretty too,” Reyna assured her with a warm smile.

Esteban stayed in his crouched position, scowling at the exchange.

“You can hold me if you want,” the girl offered, so Reyna scooped her up and stood, the light-as-a-feather child grabbing her around the neck in a big hug of joy. “I like you, Reyna.”

Reyna felt almost giddy. She'd always wanted a little sister and now it felt oddly as if she'd just acquired one. That seemed to be how this neighborhood

worked. “I like you too, Rosa,” she replied sincerely. Then in a conspiratorial whisper, which she knew Esteban would hear, she said into the girl’s ear, “I like your brother too, but don’t tell him I said that.”

Rosa laughed. “Okay, I won’t tell Este you like him.”

Reyna cracked up, and Esteban actually smiled. She gazed down at him, her eyebrows raised questioningly.

“Well,” Esteban said with mock harshness, “don’t just stand there. Grab a brush and get to work... *Lady Reyna.*”

She grinned. “Thought you’d never ask.”

And so they sat and painted and laughed at Rosa’s funny yammering about everything under the sun while they finished turning Esteban’s residence into a multi-colored something that vaguely resembled a gingerbread house. For the first time in her life, Reyna felt like she was home.



The graffiti-cleaning operation continued throughout the afternoon, with residents and storeowners assisting with the painting. There was so much graffiti and scrawling and tagging on walls and fences and buildings and the bus stop benches that the majority of Arthur’s knights wound up working this detail. As the day wore on, the entire neighborhood began to look like an acid trip gone bad. But it was clean and fresh, rather than dirty and rundown, and that energized both knights and residents alike.

On the large wall beneath the “Pray for Peace in the Barrio,” painting, which they’d left intact after scrubbing off some of the tagging, Enrique, Luis, Lavern, and some other artistic members of the group painted a simple mural of Arthur with his sword in hand and the knights crowding around him. It was not worthy of an art gallery, but given the short time they’d spent on it, they were pleased with the result. And so were the locals. They clapped and cheered as the boys added more and more detail to the scene.

The day turned into a kind of street party, with everyone pitching in to clean and rebuild and repair. And always center stage was Arthur directing this group or that, praising this effort or that, encouraging, patting his knights on the back, helping to load or unload, chatting amiably with the residents. His charm, and the efforts of his knights, won over the entire neighborhood.



Gibson sat at his desk texting Justin again, angry because his son had not responded, when the call came in. He snatched up the landline phone.

“Yeah, Gibson!” He listened a moment, and his mouth went dry. “You sure? Okay, get every available unit out there ASAP.”

Ryan walked in swigging from a large bottle of liquid antacid. “Damn, I hate ulcers,” the older man spat.

Gibson made eye contact with his partner and listened a moment more. “Yeah, don’t move till we get there. Ryan and I will lead you in. Don’t blow this!”

He hung up and looked at Ryan’s raised gray eyebrows. “We have him, Ry. He’s got hundreds of kids over in Boyle Heights, probably gangbangers. I’ve called for backup. Lots of backup.”

“Let’s roll.” Ryan slipped the antacid bottle into his pocket, and they ran from the room.



Exhausted, but satisfied, Arthur and his knights stood in the center of the neighborhood late in the afternoon and looked around at their handiwork. The streets were cleared of trash and debris, the homes and businesses now multi-colored, but graffiti-free. At least, on the surface, the neighborhood had been transformed, like Cinderella’s pumpkin turned into a golden carriage. The happy, grateful residents and storeowners, whose excitement was palpable, stood with the kids in awe of what they had done, and their gratitude and hopefulness was the real gift to this community.

Esteban stood beside Reyna. Each held Rosa’s hand, with Esteban’s mother beaming beside them. The painting crew, led by Enrique and Lavern and Luis looked like walking rainbows with splashes of myriad color splattered all over them. They grinned at the freshness their hard work had brought to this place and these people.

Lance and Jack stood beside Mark and Chris, next to Arthur, who sat astride Llamrei once more. Lance flicked his eyes at Jack, who caught the movement. Quickly, so no one would see, Lance did a quick flex with his right arm, tapping his sore, biceps. They both laughed silently, and Jack patted him on the back.

Mark and Chris had not done as much of the heavy lifting as the others, because they’d been entrusted with the care of Llamrei, lest the noise and distractions spook the animal. But the two of them had washed her down, scrubbed and brushed her mane and tail, groomed her coat, fed her, and even tied to her bridle some ribbons the local children had given them. Many of these youngsters had helped bathe and groom and feed the horse, allowing Mark to have fun and also feel a sense of accomplishment by day’s end.

Arthur gazed around in wonder, along with the locals. These were *his* kids,

and this is what they had accomplished in just one day. Might *for* right. It *did* work, and it *would* work. Today was only the beginning.

“Methinks, my noble knights,” he called out to the throng, “you have much to take pride in. Behold the fruits of thy handiwork!”

The locals applauded and cheered as Arthur’s multitude of knights erupted with gushing excitement, clapping each other on the back, high-fiving each other, truly proud, some for the first time in their young lives, of having accomplished something great, something meaningful, something that helped other people, rather than hurt them.

Reyna turned and joyfully kissed Esteban on the lips. He was so startled that when she pulled back, his mouth dropped open comically, and she burst out laughing. He grinned and shook his head in wonder, and Rosa giggled with delight.

The mural of Arthur and his knights on the area’s largest building, directly below “Pray for Peace in the Barrio,” stood out strikingly in the background and accented exactly what this moment signified. Hundreds and hundreds of kids, many of them enemy gang members, had descended on this neighbourhood, not to make war, but to bring peace. And it had worked.

Chris reached up and tugged at Arthur’s leggings, and the king looked down at the small boy. “Yes, Sir Christopher?”

Chris grinned, but rubbed his tummy dramatically. “I be hungry, sire.”

Everyone who heard the comment laughed, including Arthur, who reached down to put a loving hand on the boy’s blond head. “Methinks we all be, lad.”

He and his knights had actually been eating all the while. The local ladies had been cooking and serving them food throughout the day as a gesture of good will and gratitude, but there had been no real respite. The kids had worked from the moment they’d arrived until now, and Arthur knew they just needed to sit and eat and bask in the glow of their achievement.

However, he hadn’t planned on where such a multitude could actually do that. He still had crown jewels to use for money, but where to use them? Trusting in God to give him that knowledge, Arthur turned his regal, grateful gaze to his troops.

“We feast heartily this night, my most noble and blessed knights!”

Once again there was an eruption of cheers and clapping and backslapping. “Follow me, my lads and ladies!” he called out, and the crowd began reforming a marching line similar to their arrival, with the drivers hurrying to their trucks. There was good-natured jostling and shoving as the hundreds of kids queued up behind Arthur.

Lance, suddenly remembering, ran to Enrique’s pickup and grabbed

something from the back seat, hurrying up the line to Arthur.

“Arthur, wait! Methinks we should carry this.” He unfurled the large banner Enrique had created—the “A” symbol with a dragon in the background. It was attached to a pole, and Lance held it up before the king expectantly.

Arthur grinned down at him. “Well done, Sir Lance, and I can think of no one more suited to the task. Lead on, my boy!”

Lance winked at Jack, who smiled back with a quick little flex, and hefted the pole high so all could see the banner as it wafted gently in the late afternoon breeze. Another cheer arose from the knights and the locals, and Lance began to march. Arthur followed, then Jack, Mark, Chris, Reyna, Esteban, Darnell, Lavern, Luis and the others on foot, the bicyclists and skaters, and lastly the vehicles. As the triumphal procession marched nobly up the street, it was hailed by the residents and storeowners and children who lined the sidewalks to wave and gush and give thanks once more.

As the procession prepared to exit the neighborhood, it found itself blocked by a large, portly Latino man standing in the middle of the street.

Lance stopped marching, as Arthur shouted behind him, “Halt, my knights!”

The procession ground to an unexpected halt, with kids at the rear craning their heads to find out what was going on.

Arthur gazed down at the newcomer expectantly. “May I be of assistance, sir?”

“You already have, King Arthur,” the middle-aged man said with a slight bow. “I got to say I ain’t never seen a man wit’ yer heart, *señor*. Thanks to you, *mi barrio* be fixed up real nice. I don’ care if I go broke, for you and yer knights all the food you can eat. No charge. I say thanks to you.”

He bowed courteously, and Arthur felt genuinely moved by the man’s offer. “Sir, thy generosity humbles me. Where is thine establishment?”

The man pointed up a small side street. “Just up there, *señor*.”

Arthur turned his gaze in the indicated direction, and did a double take. Just ahead, set off the main drag was a strip mall surrounded by some trees. At the corner of the mall, standing out with its colorful shield logo, stood a Round Table Pizza.

Arthur looked at the man, who grinned, and then at Lance.

Lance shrugged. “Works for me,” he said with a grin, and Arthur laughed.

“To the Table, Lance!” he called out for all to hear. Beaming with pride, Lance led the procession up the street toward the pizza parlor, leaving the cheering locals behind to bask in their good fortune.



Ryan navigated their unmarked cruiser through heavy traffic as safely as he could manage. His red light had been placed atop the car, but no siren accompanied it. Several black and whites zipped in and out of traffic in pursuit, also with flashing lights, but no sound.

As always, the bumper-to-bumper traffic in and around downtown bordered on horrific, and Ryan became frustrated, cursing under his breath. Gibson sat beside him with the radio in hand to issue orders to the other units as needed.

“Tell the backups to surround the area, but stay away from direct contact. Those kids are dangerous—we don’t wanna spook ’em,” Ryan said, taking another swig from the antacid and then dropping the bottle into his cup holder.

“Already taken care of, Ry,” Gibson replied with surprise.

“Sorry, Gib. I know you got it covered.”

Gibson nodded.



The Round Table Pizza was fairly old, but clean and well-kept, but the strip mall, which it anchored, had clearly fallen on hard times. There was a dingy-looking *lavanderia*, a small liquor store, a hair and nail salon, and a tiny tattoo parlor. At the moment, exhausted, but exuberant, boys and girls dressed in medieval clothing filled the parking lot and surrounding area, sitting in groups on the pavement, all munching on pizzas. The owner had instructed his staff hours before to begin preparing the pizzas, having planned, early in the afternoon as he told the king, to surprise Arthur and his kids as a thank you for their hard work.

Inside the brightly lit pizza parlor, which sported a corner housing old-school video games, Arthur watched in amusement as Lance, Jack, and the others dove into their pizzas with gusto. He marveled at this new kind of food, which he’d never heard of in old Britain.

“What be this food called?” he inquired of the owner. “Pizza, sir,” the burly man replied with a wide grin.

“I think you can hang with it, Arthur,” said Esteban around a mouthful, sauce dribbling down his chin, causing Reyna to elbow him with a laugh.

Arthur grinned. “I shalt trust thy word, Sir Esteban, and I thank you for thy hard work today.”

Uncharacteristically, Esteban looked flustered with emotion. “Uh, thanks, sire.”

Arthur eyed the seventeen-year-old appraisingly. “You have made great strides, Sir Esteban, in overcoming thy past. Can you now see a future without criminal activity, but rather one of hope?”

Esteban nodded. He looked like he'd seen some huge revelation, like people do in the movies.

Lance, sitting beside Mark, Jack, and Chris found himself scowling at the attention Arthur seemed to be lavishing on Esteban, and, as always, hated himself for feeling that way. Esteban had done great work today, more, probably, than he'd ever done for his neighbourhood, so it was right for Arthur to praise him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Arthur gingerly lifting a slice of pepperoni to his mouth and biting into it. His jealousy turned to mirth as a long pull of cheese stretched from Arthur's mouth when he attempted to disengage the slice. The cheese stuck to his beard, and everyone laughed, including Lance.

"I like it," announced the king with a cheesy grin.

He wiped his mouth and took another bite, careful this time to pull the cheese apart with his fingers.

Lance watched him eat, watched him charm the owner and the other kids, and sighed.

You need to stop being so selfish, he told himself once again, and then shook off the feeling by laughingly elbowing Jack beside him. He feigned a powerful struggle to lift something heavy as he shakily raised his own slice toward his mouth. Jack laughed and pretended to help Lance lift the pizza. They cracked up again, and Lance tried to get Mark into the fun.

"Hey, Mark, we got somebody here with unlicensed guns."

Mark pulled his gaze from Arthur. "Who?" And he looked around the place to see who it might be.

Lance pointed conspiratorially toward Jack's upper arms. "I think we should call the cops."

Mark actually laughed at that feeble joke. He mockingly flexed his own skinny arms. "Hey, Jacky's not the only one with unlicensed guns, man. Check out these water pistols."

Jack almost spit out his Coke, and the three boys dissolved into laughter. Suddenly, Jaime burst into the restaurant and hurried to Arthur. "The cops, they be coming!"

The restaurant owner looked surprised. "How they find out? Nobody called."

Jaime shook his head. "Don't know, *señor*, but my *jaina* text me from my neighborhood. She seen 'em coming this way."

Arthur stood instantly, strong and commanding. He'd planned for something like this, and his knights knew what to do. "You all know thine instructions. Alert the others and position yourselves."

Without hesitation, everyone was up and out of the restaurant, leaving Arthur

and the owner staring after them.

“I regret we must depart without cleaning thine establishment, *señor*,” Arthur told the man, who waved the apology away as if it were nothing. But Arthur reached into a small leather pouch attached to his belt and pulled out one of the precious gems he’d found when he’d awakened. “Take this, my friend, and *muchas gracias por la comida*.”

Before the dumbfounded owner could even gasp out a reply, Arthur had flown out the door with a flourish of his red cloak. The owner opened his hand to gape at the almond-sized ruby in astonishment.



The drivers hurriedly ran to their trucks and got behind the wheels as others snatched swords and shields from the truck beds and scattered to their positions. The drivers then drove the trucks away, so a police roadblock wouldn’t trap them. The archers grabbed their quivers and bows and took up positions atop the roof, behind mailboxes, in all available trees. Each slipped out an arrow and fitted it expertly to their bows, taking aim at the street and the parking lot.

If the cops want a fight, we’ll give it to them, thought Reyna as she clambered up a tree to the roof of the *lavanderia*. From that vantage point, she scanned the surrounding area and checked the positions of her other archers. *Good, they have it down*.

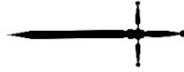
Within minutes, the parking lot, which only moments before was filled to capacity with children, now stood virtually empty. Everyone was in place, ready and prepared for a fight, just as they’d planned it out. Only Arthur and a small group remained standing before the restaurant entrance. Llamrei whinnied in anticipation. With Arthur stood Lance, Esteban, Mark, Chris, Jack, Tai, Duc, Darnell, and Jaime. All had their shields raised and swords at the ready. Even little Chris brandished his sword, taking a fighting stance between Mark and Jack and glaring gravely.

Arthur eyed his “bodyguards” appraisingly. They were children, he knew, but under his new order they were also warriors. Most, he knew, had been at war their entire lives, so death was, sadly, nothing new to them. Still, he considered their youth and the approaching danger.

He’d been told often enough by the gang kids that cops today shot to kill at a moment’s notice. They often didn’t even shout out a warning before they fired. Alas, his crusade sought to promote peace and justice, but the authorities might choose to overlook that fact. Probably *would* overlook it, unless the minds of those in power had changed significantly over the centuries.

What if one of your children is shot? How will you feel then?

“Lord of all that is good and pure, watch over my knights this day,” he whispered, and the boys flanking him each made his own hurried sign of the cross. Then they waited anxiously, weapons ready, hearts thumping, hope unfurling.



Gibson was on the radio as Ryan drove furiously through Esteban’s neighborhood, red lights flashing, followed by a long line of black and whites with their own lights blazing. The residents once more returned to the streets to watch, but this time they looked angry.

“Repeat,” Gibson reiterated into the radio, “nobody fires unless ordered to do so by myself or Sergeant Ryan. Defensive positions only!”

Ryan spotted the strip mall just ahead, the Round Table Pizza place coming into view through the windshield.

“There it is,” he announced anxiously. He floored it. Ryan glanced over at Gibson. “Tell the men to—”

He never finished his order, for just at that moment both men heard a loud *thump* sound, and Ryan lost control of the car.

“Hellfire!” he cursed and spun the wheel hard, fighting to regain control as the car screeched and lurched. The *thunk, thunk, thunk* sound of a flat tire clued him in to the cause. Hitting the brakes, Ryan spun and skidded the car into a sideways spin, where it came to a stop at a ninety-degree angle to the road.

The archers ensconced within the trees let loose a volley of arrows at the approaching police cars. Their aim was perfect. Tire after tire blew out with loud popping sounds as each was punctured, and the cars squealed and spun and swerved and struck each other, twisting themselves into a black and white pretzel. Some veered off the road to crash into a retaining wall or drop into a narrow ditch, while others in the far back slammed into those already immobilized.

Within seconds, accompanied by a chorus of rending and crumpling metal, every car had been incapacitated and a weird, almost end-of-the-world kind of silence enveloped the area.

Cops of varying ages scrambled from their vehicles, weapons drawn, and took up defensive positions behind their now-useless cars or behind the low stone retaining wall surrounding the Round Table parking lot.

Ryan and Gibson stumbled shakily from their vehicle to take up positions behind it. Neither had drawn his gun as yet, but Ryan had the foresight to grab

his bullhorn as he'd leapt from the car.

They paused, catching their breath, glancing cautiously around them at the trees and other buildings. Then they focused their attention on Arthur and his knights standing calmly in front of the restaurant, gawking at the huge swords and shields and medieval garb.

"Hell, Ry, they look like they're going to war!" Gibson exclaimed, clearly taken aback by the scene before him, and by the fact that he and his men were already on the defensive.

Ryan kept his gaze locked on Arthur. The king and his kids stood rock solid and resolute, even the tiny little boy. Astonishment welled up within Ryan, something he hadn't felt in years.

Gibson looked at Arthur and then back over his shoulder at all their men crouching behind damaged police cruisers, guns drawn, awaiting orders. "It's like we got two rings of a circus out here, Ry, us and them. All we need now are the frickin' clowns!"

Suddenly, several TV camera-crew vans roared up behind the wrecked police cars and began disgorging camera operators and reporters. Helen leapt from the *Channel 7 News* van and pelted toward the scene, microphone in hand. The crouching police officers waved the reporters down, and Helen ducked calmly behind a sagging black and white. She waved at her cameraman to film the arrow sticking out of the front tire.

Ryan cursed loudly. "The clowns just arrived."

Glancing at the scrambling camera operators pointing their cameras toward himself and Ryan, Gibson furrowed his brows with worry. "We better talk fast, Ry, 'fore we got a major public incident on our hands."

Ryan shook his head in disgust. "We already got that." He raised the bullhorn and spoke into it as calmly, but forcefully, as he could. "This is Sergeant Ryan of the LAPD. We do not want bloodshed. Tell your boys to drop their weapons and nobody'll get hurt."

Arthur called back in a commanding voice, "Methinks, Sergeant Ryan, that it be thee and thy men who wage war against us. We have no quarrel with thee."

Ryan raised the bullhorn again. "You, sir, are wanted for questioning regarding an assault on two officers. If you surrender yourself, these children will not be hurt or arrested."

Gibson leaned toward Ryan. "Great diplomacy, Ry. Why not just tell the man we're gonna put him in jail too?"

Arthur remained unfazed by the demand. He called out in a calm, gentle voice, "In my previous encounter with thy men, Sergeant Ryan, I acted in self-defense *after* being assaulted by one of their weapons. Would you this day use

such weapons against children, in full view of this city?” He pointed to where the TV cameras were rolling away, capturing every dramatic moment.

Ryan and Gibson soberly glanced in that direction, and Helen waved to them. Ryan lowered the bullhorn and turned to Gibson, feeling as disgusted as he must’ve looked.

“We’re screwed, aren’t we?”

“Maybe not. Depends on how you handle it.”

“Sergeant Ryan!” Arthur called out.

Ryan raised the bullhorn a third time but did not stand up. “Yeah?”

“Can we not stand face to face like men?” Arthur offered in a nonthreatening tone. “Thou hast my word as a knight and a king that there shall be no bloodshed this day unless it be initiated by thee and thine.”

Ryan considered everything he’d heard about this guy, and reflected on the research he’d done. The King Arthur of legend had been about justice and peace and avoiding conflict whenever possible. If this guy really believed he was *that* King Arthur, then he hopefully believed in the same things. He handed Gibson the bullhorn.

“Are you sure?” Gibson asked.

“Whatever else this nut is, I hope he’s a man of his word.”

He stood up and stepped around his car so he was in full view of Arthur, and a prime target if anyone should get trigger-happy. Cautiously, hearing bodies shift position, and feeling twenty service revolvers at his back, Ryan took several steps into the parking lot and stopped ten feet from Arthur and his boys.

He eyed the kids, at their set expressions and their formidable weapons, and almost gasped at some of the young faces. He’d arrested a few of them, many times. And was that, my God, *Esteban*? The boy who’d practically grown up in juvy and had probably been Ryan’s most frequent collar, smirked at the sergeant as if to say, “And you thought I was just a punk, didn’t you, Ryan?”

Ryan met Arthur’s eyes. For a moment, his resolve faltered. What had he seen in those eyes? Sincerity? Truth? He shook the feeling loose. “Why? Why involve these kids?”

Arthur’s intense gaze met the sergeant’s. “They were already involved, did you not know this?”

“What’s your point?”

“That we be on the same side, thee and I.”

“The same side?”

“Is not thy purpose to uphold justice?”

“My purpose is to uphold the law, which you’ve been ignoring.”

“And from whom does the law arise if not from the people? Are not these

children people, too? Methinks, Sergeant Ryan, that the *people* do not agree with your idea of justice.”

He raised a gauntleted hand and waved it over the heads of the cops and camera crews.

Ryan turned. Surrounding the police in a perimeter were angry-looking local residents, armed with kitchen knives, baseball bats, broom handles, metal poles, and tools. This standoff had now become three layers deep.

“Hellfire!” Ryan cursed and marched back to Gibson, allowing Esteban and Darnell time for a quick high five before raising their swords once more to a defensive posture.

Ryan grabbed the bullhorn from Gibson and turned it toward the newcomers. “You people go back to your homes. This is not your business!”

“Ry, you gonna get us killed,” Gibson muttered, eyeing the angry crowd with trepidation.

One of the tiny little ladies, a wrinkled, white-haired grandmotherly type, stepped forward, a wooden rolling pin clutched tightly in one gnarled fist. “The hell it ain’t! King Arthur an’ his knights dun too much fer us to let you pigs try an’ bully ’em! So *you* better get the hell outta here ’fore we kick you out!”

Cheers erupted from the ring of angry locals, and from the boys surrounding Arthur.

Ryan groaned, his ulcer attacking with a vengeance, and dropped down beside Gibson.

“Now we’re screwed,” Gibson confirmed in disgust.

Ryan eyed his partner, uncertain what he should do next.



Arthur glanced toward a tree flanking the road, and Lance followed his gaze to where Luis and Enrique crouched on a branch. Arthur nodded almost imperceptibly.

Luis had an arrow cocked, its tip wrapped in a gasoline-soaked rag, and Enrique squatted beside him brandishing a lighter. Enrique whistled like a bird, and four other duos in strategic trees around the perimeter of the parlor did exactly the same. Simultaneously, five rags were lit by five different hands, and then five flaming arrows shot forth from the trees toward the police barricade.

The arrows struck gas tanks on the police cruisers farthest from the people and cops. Arthur had been crystal clear in his directives—no matter their feelings toward cops, *no one* was to be hurt. To do so would destroy their crusade.

Five cars around the outskirts of the standoff exploded into massive fireballs,

shooting flames skyward and sending cops and locals diving for the ground in fear.

Pandemonium ensued as the smoke from the burning vehicles blanketed the entire area, choking everyone with noxious fumes and effectively hiding Arthur and his knights from view.

“Knights, away!” cried Arthur, and the mass exodus began. He deftly leapt atop Llamrei and yanked Lance up into the saddle behind him as the boys scrambled from their positions and pelted through the smoke, some dodging choking cops along the way, and headed for their waiting cars and trucks. Those on bikes leapt into action, wheeling in and out of crashed and flaming police cars, past the confused local residents, and out to the freedom beyond.

The organization and speed of the exodus was astounding, especially since this was the first time it had been implemented. The kids, however, had assured Arthur that they all had plenty of experience running from cops, and he had taken them at their word.

Arthur did not budge, determined that every one of his knights should escape unscathed. As the cops recovered themselves and raised their guns toward the fleeing children, the locals rose up and stood between the police and the retreating kids, blocking any shot they may have had. The camera operators and reporters ran here and there, fighting to capture as much of the mayhem as possible.

Their swords now sheathed, Arthur sat calmly, with Lance nervously fidgeting at his back, until he saw no more of his knights trapped anywhere within the perimeter. Ryan and Gibson were on their feet, coughing and choking like the rest, but trying to contain the out-of-control situation.

“Don’t shoot, for God’s sake, they’re civilians!” Gibson barked as the locals pressed in more tightly.

Ryan gazed around him in despair and turned to peer through the billowing smoke at Arthur, still seated on Llamrei, calm and confident.

“Until our paths again cross, Sergeant Ryan,” Arthur said with a slight bow and then he spurred Llamrei into a fierce gallop, straight at the two men, almost dislodging Lance in the process. The boy gripped Arthur hard around the waist and clung for his life. The move was so sudden that Ryan and Gibson were forced to dive for the ground.

Ryan looked upward as Arthur’s horse muscled itself up and over them like an enormous white dove. The horse sailed clear over the men and the car before landing lithely on the other side. Both men jumped to their feet, Gibson pulling his gun and pointing it at the retreating horse and rider.

Ryan reached out and shoved Gibson’s hand down. “You crazy? He’s got a kid

on the back!”

Gibson glared angrily at Ryan as Arthur disappeared through the smoke and out of sight. Then Gibson stalked over to the driver’s side of their car as Ryan simply gazed in amazement at the disappearing horse. Gibson reached into the car and snatched up the radio.

“This is Sergeant Gibson! King Arthur is heading for First Street, due west. He’s on horseback, and he’s got a kid with him.”

The dispatcher’s voice crackled over the radio. “Did you say he was on horseback?”

“That’s what I said!” Gibson repeated furiously. “Be careful of the kid, but get his ass!”

He threw the radio mic back into the car and glared over the roof at Ryan, who continued to stare at the spot in the smoke where Arthur had disappeared. He ignored Gibson completely, so astonished was he at the turn of events. How had one man done so much damage to the established order of the city in so little time?

He barely even noticed the news vans screeching out of the area in pursuit of the king. It didn’t matter, he knew. He and Gibson would hear from the mayor on this one.

Better refill that ulcer medicine.



As Arthur and Lance galloped furiously out of the neighborhood into the heavy traffic along First Street, astonished drivers actually stopped talking or texting on their cell phones to pause and gape in wonder. Shrieking police sirens alerted Arthur that they were under pursuit.

He glanced back over his shoulder and spied four police cars roaring into traffic from two different side streets and weaving erratically among the same startled drivers, who attempted to get out of the way. Some, however, made it a point to block the oncoming cops since, they’d apparently decided, a guy on horseback had to be worth helping.

Arthur spurred Llamrei on to an even faster gallop, deftly maneuvering between cars and trucks to put a little distance between him and his pursuers.

Clinging tightly to Arthur’s back, Lance kept glancing nervously over his shoulder, eyeing the flashing red lights and wondering how they could possibly get away.

“You want me to shoot at ’em?” he called to Arthur. He had his bow and arrows, after all.

“Nay,” Arthur called out, without turning his head. “Merely retain thy grip.”

Lance didn't have to be told twice about that. Yeah, he'd been on this horse plenty of times, but never when they were fleeing for their lives, never when Llamrei was going *this* fast! As the horse pounded along the pavement and the wind whipped hair into his face and threatened to dislodge him, he decided this was *much* crazier than skating.

Arthur weaved and zigzagged through the heavy late-afternoon rush-hour traffic. A freeway overpass lay dead ahead. He spurred Llamrei, and they passed beneath the it.

On the freeway above them, people had stopped their cars along the shoulder to gawk at the strange sight. Some were even out of their cars cheering as horse and riders passed underneath. Many had their cell phones out, snapping pictures or shooting video. One teenaged boy flipped the middle finger at the police cars that followed.

As they approached a street called Pecan, Lance spotted two more police vehicles heading straight for them. Arthur quickly yanked the reins to the left and aimed Llamrei down the much smaller, less trafficked street. He steered Llamrei straight down the center line. To their right was a large expanse of grass and some buildings, with people, both old and young, out strolling or playing games. They stopped to gawk as Arthur and Lance flew past on a streak of white.

The next street, Lance saw, was Third. Arthur whipped Llamrei to the right and galloped full tilt past the Spanish-style Dolores Mission Catholic Church, where a wedding was in progress. The bride and groom and their families, standing on the steps of the famous landmark, turned to casually observe the horse and riders galloping past.

Arthur pelted down Third Street, dodging light traffic. Lance knew Arthur had no idea where to go or how to elude the pursuing police cars, and neither did he.

“Do you have thy cell phone?” Arthur shouted against the wind.

“Yeah,” Lance called back, releasing his right hand from Arthur's back and cautiously slipping the smartphone from his pocket. He gripped the king tautly with his left hand and fought for balance as the up and down bouncing motion threatened to dislodge him. “What now?”

“Use your Internet wizard to locate where we be and what may be near to us!” Arthur called back, the wind practically yanking his voice away. “We need a place to hide.”

Lance opened the Internet and used the satellite map to locate their position. It seemed to take *forever* as the sound of sirens echoed all around them, and the up and down pounding motion of Llamrei's galloping strides gave Lance the

beginnings of a splitting headache.

Finally, their location appeared on the screen, and he studied it as best he could with his head bobbing up and down. “Not good, Arthur. We’re coming up to a dead end, and after that’s the river!”

“Be it possible, ye think, to jump the river?” Arthur called out, very serious.

Lance’s mouth fell open, his heart in his throat. “No way, Arthur, not less Llamrei can fly!”

“What else did you find?”

“There’s railroad tracks right before the river,” Lance shouted back, an idea forming in his mind. “Hey, Arthur, they got big-ass train cars out there! We could hide in one a them!”

Arthur nodded.

Lance slipped the phone back into his pocket and clutched Arthur tightly with both arms. Just in time too. As they reached Mission Street, he spotted a huge steel factory just on the other side and more police cars plowing down Mission to cut him off.

“Hang on, Lance!”

Before Lance could even respond, Llamrei was airborne, soaring upward with a thrust of her powerful legs. As Lance looked down he saw her left rear hoof crack the flashing red light of a police car passing directly beneath them. Then they were down, off the road, and into the steel company parking lot. The police car they’d jumped slammed on its brakes and ended up colliding with the oncoming cars from Third Street in a crescendo of crunching metal and screeching tires.

“What now, Arthur?” called Lance.

“Into that building!” Arthur yelled, pointing to a massive warehouse looming ahead. The truck doors were open, and Arthur easily navigated Llamrei through them. They found themselves within a large, machine-filled warehouse with towering shelves for finished products and massive machines for grinding, cutting, and welding of steel. It was late in the day, so most of the workers had apparently gone home. The one man they encountered gaped in astonishment as the white horse carrying two riders galloped frantically past his workspace.

Exiting the back of the building, Lance spotted the railroad tracks just ahead and an idle freight train comprised of many cars. But what caught him completely off guard was the man standing in front of an open boxcar waving frenetically to them.

Arthur galloped toward the gesticulating man and pulled in Llamrei’s reins. There was a ramp leading up into the boxcar, and the man was gesturing wildly for them to go up. “Hurry, man, ’fore the cops see you!” And he winked.

Arthur grinned before trotting the frothing horse up into the boxcar and into the cool shadows within. Instantly, the ramp was pulled up, and the heavy sliding door slammed shut.

Within the silence of the boxcar, Llamrei's heavy rasping was the only sound. Arthur and Lance looked soberly at one another, and Arthur patted the trembling boy on one shoulder. Then he lovingly stroked Llamrei's neck, calming the animal with his touch.

Lance heard voices outside and lots of feet tromping on the dirt around the railroad track.

"Did you see a guy on horseback?" a voice asked.

"Sure as hell did," the trainman replied. "Damnedest thing I ever saw. Imagine that, a—"

"Which way did they go?" the first voice interjected.

"Up that way," the trainman replied. "Toward Myers. Say, what's goin' on, officer?"

Lance had no idea what "Myers" was, but the cops seemed to know because the heavy footsteps pounded off, and stillness returned. Lance's shadowed face reflected the dread gripping his heart, and Arthur grinned to reassure him.

In a few moments, the heavy wooden door slid back and the trainman's swarthy face appeared. He grinned, showing a front tooth missing. "Sent 'em north. You guys better head south and lay low somewheres."

He lowered the ramp and stepped back to watch Llamrei trot down to the dirt ground outside.

Lance both gazed in wonder at their savior, baffled as to why he'd helped. "Ye have my gratitude, sir," Arthur told him with great deference. "We be in thy debt."

The man waved the thanks away. "No, I'm in yours, King Arthur. I seen you on TV and what youse gonna do, and I'm all for it."

Arthur smiled. "Thank you."

The man grinned and reached up to grab Lance's hand. "And I wanna shake your hand, Sir Lance, 'cause what you said near cut my heart out. What a great kid ya got there, Arthur."

Lance blushed and looked down in embarrassment.

"He be the greatest I have ever known," Arthur confirmed, flicking a pride-filled look back at Lance, who smiled and nodded his thanks. Arthur turned back to the trainman. "Your name be, sir?"

"Walter Mills, at your service, King Arthur. You ever got use of a train, my friend, just look me up." He grinned a moment and then glanced back nervously over his shoulder. "You best skedaddle. They might come back."

“Good night, Master Walter.” He turned Llamrei and trotted around behind the railroad cars to walk along the river side of the tracks, just in case more police came snooping around.

Lance knew they’d soon find a way down into the riverbed where they could enter the storm drains, where they’d be safe.



The setting sun bathed Esteban’s neighborhood in shimmering auras of red and gold as Ryan and Gibson stood in the middle of the street near the building with the mural. Behind them, billowing clouds of smoke from the flaming police cars still reached skyward to clutch futilely at the vanishing sun. Both men gazed around the area in shock. The local residents, having calmed down after Arthur’s escape, now stood with them.

“*This* is what they did all day?” Gibson exclaimed, unable to believe his eyes.

“*Sí*,” said a young woman clutching her two children to her side. Everyone else nodded, including the elderly *abuelita* with the rolling pin.

“Hellfire!” Ryan glanced again at the renovated homes and businesses and the energized people, and simply couldn’t believe his eyes. Who the hell was this Arthur guy anyway?



City Hall was one of the most famous buildings in Los Angeles. An imposing edifice, its art deco styling and impressive thirty-two-story tower and Romanesque archways made it almost like going to a movie set for anyone ascending the massive flight of steps and entering the historic landmark. It served as home base to the mayor of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles City Council.

As city lights twinkled all around the building, Mayor Villagrana and Police Chief Murphy sat in the mayor’s lavishly appointed office in front of a large, flat-screen TV. They watched with irritation as Helen Schaeffer spun the pizza parlor standoff with gusto on *Channel 7 News*.

Villagrana was in his second term, a career politician who’d actually begun his career in San Francisco, and had become memorable for his obsessive photo ops and expensive travel extravaganzas. Middle-aged, of Mexican descent, handsome, and photogenic, Villagrana knew he hadn’t done anything substantive for the residents of LA during his six years other than raise water rates and trash collection fees, but the cameras loved him and that’s what mattered. Politics was much like Hollywood – appearances were always more important than

substance. Fortunately for Villagrana, there had been no major disasters or calamities to shake up his tenure in office.

Until Arthur.

LAPD Chief Murphy had been promoted up the ranks, having spent his entire adult life with the Los Angeles police department. He was quiet, introspective, middle-aged man with a balding pate and bushy eyebrows who usually kept enough order that Villagrana didn't look bad in the press.

"Yeah, I got it on right now," Villagrana barked into his phone. "Yes, the chief's with me. For once we agree. I'll tell him."

He slammed the phone down, glaring at the exploding cop cars and scrambling officers on TV.

"Council Pres, I bet." Murphy sighed.

"Your men look like idiots out there."

"What did you expect us to do, start shooting?"

Villagrana glared at him fiercely. "From now on, you do nothing. You don't do a thing."

Murphy bristled with indignation. "What? Mr. Mayor, that guy torched five of my vehicles and wrecked four more near the river!"

"You're lucky he didn't turn those kids loose on you," Villagrana retorted. "And it was your own men who crashed the other cars. Now hear me good, Murphy! This guy's already getting too much public support for you to go muscling in on his parade. Watch him and wait, but don't interfere. That's an order."

Murphy swore to himself, but grudgingly nodded. "You're wrong, but I'll do it."

He shook his head with anger as he stepped from the office, mumbling under his breath, "Bureaucrats!"

Villagrana ignored the dig and turned back to the television, dropping slowly into his lush, leather chair and fixing his eyes on the screen. This Arthur was becoming a media darling, something he could not allow. He pushed the pause button just as Arthur galloped through the smoke and leapt directly toward the camera. He studied Arthur's face carefully. He liked to know his enemies before he struck.

CHAPTER 9: NOW SUDDENLY I AM SOMEBODY

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE first Boyle Heights clean-up, Arthur and his knights repeated the operation in other neighborhoods, fanning outward from various Boyle Heights communities to surrounding areas. The reception in every neighborhood gratified the king. The people not only welcomed Arthur's help, but also pitched in and worked alongside the kids. Camera crews followed them everywhere, always led by Helen Schaeffer. Arthur liked her and felt comfortable speaking with her, so Helen tended to get far more face time than any other reporter with the biggest newsmaker of the moment.

Some of Arthur's kids laughingly called her Lois Lane, which she seemed to find both endearing and amusing, though the mystified king had no idea who Lois Lane was, and Lance had to give him a crash course in pop culture references.

Angelenos had taken Arthur's initial plea for cast-off junk to heart. Local trucking companies, who often had idle drivers due to the slow economy, offered their services to anyone in the city—they gladly collected donations and delivered said items to Arthur in whatever neighborhood he chose. Contributions poured in by the truckload. And not just junk, either. People donated new items as well. Furniture, wood, fresh cans of paint—a *lot* of paint—clothing, shoes, appliances.

The stuff poured in, and Arthur's kids doled it out, neighborhood by neighborhood, painting, repairing, replacing, cleaning, and always removing graffiti wherever it defaced buildings or homes. Those knights with repair and mechanical experience coached and guided those without, and the city residents added their own skills and tutelage.

Arthur's popularity among the populace soared higher with each passing day, infuriating the mayor and city council members, but invigorating the people of Los Angeles. Arthur and his children had given the people something their elected officials never even attempted to offer: hope.

Enrique, Luis, Lavern, and a few other knights always found a visible spot in every neighborhood for a small mural depicting some aspect of Arthur's crusade, always assisted by enthusiastic residents, many of whom possessed

extraordinary artistic talent.

Unlike political campaign slogans, Arthur's "A" crest became a genuine symbol of hope and change.

Lance continued to lead the procession into and out of every locale, banner held high, snapping in the breeze along with his flowing hair. While he had once thought his hair a Samson-like asset to his skating, he soon realized, as his face popped up on every news broadcast and Internet site, that his striking hair had become almost as recognizable as the banner he hefted.

Residents lining the streets chanted his name as the procession marched into each neighborhood, and representatives of shampoo companies began waylaying him along each daily route, offering him print ads and commercials highlighting their products. Helen took it upon herself to run interference for him so he could work unmolested. She instructed him to merely smile and say he'd think about whatever offers these companies tossed his way.

Because of the long days and exhausting work, Lance seldom had time alone with Arthur anymore, which bothered him intensely when he wasn't too worn out to care. It almost seemed to him that he spent more time each day with Helen and those shampoo guys than he did with the man who had chosen him as First Knight. Arthur suddenly belonged to everyone, not just him, and not even to the other knights, but to *everyone* in the entire city. As such, the demands on the king's time had become more and more extreme.

The group, Lance soon realized, *had* become more important than the individuals in it, individuals like him. The "needs of the whole" philosophy suddenly loomed large and monstrous before Lance's lonely eyes, almost blocking out the sun, and it filled his heart with gloom. His mind understood that it had to be this way, but his heart, the heart of the one—him—felt bereft and, despite the presence of his fellow knights, very much alone.

Likewise, Mark continued to mope and brood whenever they weren't working, his despair deepening with each passing day, expanding like a balloon slowly filling up with poison.

Jack sought to direct Mark's feelings toward him. He made it a point to touch Mark as often as he could, to joke with him, play with his hair. What he *didn't* do was the one thing he should've done—tell Mark the truth. Alas, fear always won out and he said nothing.

One thing Jack hadn't expected was drawing closer to Lance as they worked side by side and learned more about each other, something he knew would likely *not* have happened if they'd met in high school. Whenever Jack's thoughts drifted back to his school days, he realized he'd be a senior now, and Lance a sophomore.

The social pecking order of most high schools would've made associating with a sophomore out of the question, unless the sophomore was a fellow jock. But within the chivalric order of the Round Table those social standings, which almost overpowered and smothered kids in the "real" world, blurred and lost all meaning. Here they were equals, even the jocks and the nerds and the queer boys. Here they were family. Despite his despair over Mark, Jack really liked his new family and almost felt sorry for those kids out in the "real" world.

Mark had begun working with Lance and Jack on a daily basis and, in an effort to distract all three of them from their personal demons, Jack coached both boys on the fine art of "gun building through the use of heavy objects." The long hours and exhausting work mostly kept their jittery emotions in check and softened the individual pain each of them felt.



Despite all their inner struggles, the three boys still had lots of fun together. Mark and Lance often rolled their eyes at one another when Jack would show off by lifting some crazy-ass heavy weight, and then they'd take him down in a two-man tackle that set them all to laughing, which felt both buoyant *and* cathartic. Lance realized once again how good it was to have friends, even though those friendships had opened him up to real hurt and vulnerability.

He so desperately yearned to tell Mark he loved him for keeping his secret, for not even telling Jack when he easily could have. He felt Mark deserved those words, maybe even needed them to help with his sadness, except Lance had never spoken *those* words in his entire life. Not to anyone. And he wasn't even sure he knew how. He also didn't even know if a boy was *allowed* to say them to another boy without being... *that* way. So he just let Mark be, the words unsaid, and would later come to hate himself for that decision.



On the whole, Arthur's crusade was succeeding beyond his wildest dreams. With each new interview, the king reiterated his views on justice and fairness, how these children that society deemed worthless had more than proven their worth and then some, each and every day.

Reporters clamored to interview Lance at every turn, recognizing the boy's looks and charm were a sure ratings-grabber. And they were. His face showed up on nearly every broadcast, if only as a backdrop. Within a matter of days, Lance's face, silky brown hair, and crown-like circlet around his brow had become the national symbol for Arthur's new Camelot.

Being smart, Lance knew the media fawned over him because of his looks, and he desperately *didn't* want the crusade to be all about him. It was so much more important than that. So he made a point of dragging other kids on camera with him, often Mark and Jack because they worked together, to accentuate Arthur's point that every child had value and should be nurtured, not abused, and should be given more rights by the government to make sure they weren't abused by adults.

Being kids first and knights second, they also loved to clown for the cameras. When one lady reporter told Lance he was cute, he mischievously pulled Jack on camera and yanked up the older boy's shirt. "Yeah, but Jack's got the abs," he announced, "and guns like M16s!"

Jack grabbed Lance in a headlock, both boys wrestling and laughing, all caught on camera, all for the enjoyment of the people.

And the people were smitten.

It seemed almost every day Helen told Arthur and Lance they'd gotten tons of calls and e-mails from people who wanted to adopt Lance or Mark or Jack or this one or that one, even the aloof Esteban.

As was usually the case with human nature, suddenly the people woke up and took notice of the lost children who'd been in their midst the whole time, simply because their plight had become so visible and inspiring.

But how long would it be, Lance wondered, before they forgot again and went back to their own little lives? He wasn't so young that he hadn't seen that happen before.

He asked Helen almost daily if either Mark or Jack's parents had contacted the station, wanting to get in touch with their sons, and it shattered his heart every time she said no.

Reyna, ever the showboater, loved to preen before the cameras whenever possible, showing off her bow and arrows, her fancy hairstyles, her designer tunics she'd ordered online, which to her credit, she had toned down of late, probably, Lance had observed, to fit in better with Esteban and his simple street style.

For his part, Esteban would not allow himself to be dragged on camera. He *loved* helping people—he never known how much he liked it until Arthur's crusade, had never even considered how good something so simple could make him feel. But he didn't like the media attention and, despite his handsome good looks and poster-boy physique, he steadfastly resisted being photographed or taped.

One time when he had a television camera shoved in his face while he and Reyna were fixing a broken window, Reyna goaded him into speaking because it

was *Helen*, after all.

Slick as he might have been talking with the homies in the old days, and always smooth with the females, until Reyna, anyway, Esteban felt tongue-tied looking into that creepy camera eye that always seemed to be mad-dogging him. Still, he managed to give perhaps the most important message yet, and it came from the heart.

“I been banging all my life,” he told Helen in a deep, flat voice, “’cause there weren’t nuthin’ else in my ’hood ta do or be. Everybody had me pegged. He’s a gangster, he’s a criminal, he’s gonna do life or die in the streets. I heard that at home, in school, from the cops, and the dumbass judges when I’d go to juvy. But nobody ever give me another *choice*, not till Arthur. Now I *got* a choice, now suddenly I *am* somebody, somebody with a camera stuck in my face asking me questions. But you wanna know something, Lady Helen? I was somebody when I was a gangster too. Just nobody but Arthur could see that, or give me a chance to prove it.”

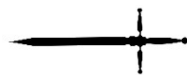
He turned back to the window. Helen waved the cameraman off and stepped over to Esteban.

“Thank you,” she said honestly, “for saying that. People need to hear it.”

Now that the camera was gone, Esteban flashed that handsome smile that almost melted Reyna’s heart, and Helen returned it with sincerity. She knew she wasn’t supposed to get personally involved in any story—second rule of journalism, the first being you never editorialized in a news story. But these kids and this man leading them and what they stood for—well, she’d never seen anything like it. And it was... exciting!

Of course, videos of Arthur and his “Knights of Mercy” as they’d been dubbed by one news station, had become an Internet staple. Footage of the standoff and escape from Round Table Pizza, tagged “Battle for the Round Table,” had gone viral within hours. Inside of a day, virtually every kid at every school had that video on his or her phone. This prompted them to view Arthur and Lance’s initial interviews, which got many teenagers nodding their heads in approval.

Local news ratings jumped as Arthur and his kids swept through Los Angeles on their Operation Clean-Up Tour, and the story quickly went national. Via the Internet, the story jumped international boundaries, and within a week King Arthur was the talk of the entire world. His crusade was so new, so hip, so exciting, and so unprecedented that it trumped all other news.



In their fourth week out, Arthur's parade, followed by scores of television cameras, marched into the Watts area of Los Angeles, marked by the landmark Watts Towers, an unusual series of interconnected structures, two of which reached ninety-nine feet in height, and which had taken thirty-three years to complete.

Reyna, the only one of Arthur's kids with a legitimate driver's license, drove an enormous moving van, donated to the cause in a big media event by a prominent moving company. In this truck Arthur and his knights could haul most of the materials they would need for a one-day operation. Of course, Esteban rode shotgun with Reyna, not, as he told her, because he thought she was hot, but only to make sure she didn't "crash the truck or something." She smirked and tossed him that mocking laugh she'd perfected. He grinned and settled in for the ride.

Arthur seemed pleased that the two seemed inseparable. Of course, both being cool and hard, neither wanted to acknowledge how much each liked the other, but to everyone who saw them together, the attraction was obvious. Lance was happy for them. He just prayed they wouldn't get into a huge fight and break up. He needed both of them.

As always, Lance marched at the head of the procession, excitedly waving the banner from side to side, Arthur following on Llamrei. An added element had become music, as those knights with the ability glommed onto donated instruments so they would have musical accompaniment. They usually played stuff they'd learned at school or at home, rousing marches that got the knights excited as they processed. Today they blasted the *Star Wars* theme from trumpets, drums, trombones, and flutes. The music brought residents streaming from apartments and storefronts to gather along the sidewalks and wave at the ebullient kids.

Grinning at these local residents who had pooled along the sidewalks and in the street, Lance suddenly looked ahead and sucked in a startled breath. He slowed and caught Arthur's attention.

"Looks like trouble," he said, a chill of fear creeping up his spine.

Arthur eyed the road ahead and then held up Excalibur, his signal for the company to halt. The music slowly died away as the massive moving van eased to a stop, and the vast parade of young knights ceased their forward movement. Reyna and Esteban squinted through the windshield of the truck, while those in back rubbernecked as best they could to see what was happening.

Ten black youths, most looking to be sixteen or older, led by Dwayne and Justin, blocked the street ahead of Lance, making entry into the area impossible. All wore baggy, sagging pants and muscle shirts, and glowered menacingly.

Dwayne wielded a shotgun, while many of the youths brandished handguns, knives, or pipes. Arthur's archers, always near the front of the procession, instantly slipped arrows into their bows, and the foot soldiers drew their swords. Lance shifted the banner to his left hand and unsheathed his sword. They would fight if need be, despite the fact that the enemy had guns.

Arthur sat calmly on Llamrei and gazed down at Dwayne and Justin. "Good morning, lads," he offered calmly. "I did tell thee, did I not, when first we met, that we should meet again?"

Dwayne spat angrily on the ground in front of Lance, who glowered back. "This be our turf, Jack, and we don't want no honky king an' his gang be comin' in here!"

"Thou hast more powerful weapons, Dwayne, and could no doubt harm or even kill one of my knights. But my archers would have you all down before a second shot be fired."

Justin eyed the archers, poised and ready. He clearly understood the danger.

Arthur went on, "You art woefully outnumbered, Dwayne. I wonder if thy fellows would rather die for a dirty, vermin-infested 'hood, or a clean and recreated one. What be thine opinion, Justin?"

Justin said nothing, but involuntarily glanced at the squalor surrounding them and the anxious residents pooling on the sidewalks. Some looked dirty, clearly street dwellers, but the others were simply poor people struggling to live their lives. The buildings around them had been hopelessly tagged up.

TV cameras were rolling, recording the whole scene. Justin looked from the cameras to the knife in his hand, and suddenly didn't appear puffed up with confidence as he had moments before.

"Don't listen ta him, homies!" Dwayne screamed. "He don' know nuthin' 'bout us!"

Suddenly, from somewhere to the side, a gunshot rang out, and the bullet struck Dwayne in the upper arm, causing the shotgun to clatter to the ground and crimson blood to spurt from the wound like water from a busted pipe.

Dwayne screamed in pain, throwing his uninjured hand around the damaged arm in a futile attempt to staunch the bleeding.

The other youths whipped around instantly, aiming their weapons, only to find themselves facing a large crowd of local residents, mostly African-American, massed behind them, a few armed with their own guns aimed straight at them. An older gray-haired man, who looked to Lance like somebody's kindly grandfather, limped out front with his rifle trained on Dwayne's head.

"We don' want you filth roun' here no more, Dwayne," he announced to the accompaniment of many head nods from the crowd. "So you kin git yo' drug-

dealin' ass outta here an' don' come back!" Then he mad-dogged the other boys. "An' you other punks kin either go wit' him, or stay wit' Arthur an' us an' fix up this place. What's it ta be?"

The youths suddenly deflated, all their bravado of the previous moment gone as quickly as it had appeared. They eyed the old man, the crowd, the TV cameras, and Arthur's knights aiming weapons at them. Needing someone to decide, they all turned to Justin, eyes wide and imploring.

"Okay, man, you win," Justin said, tossing his switchblade to the ground.

The other boys quickly threw down their guns and knives, and the older man winked at Arthur. The king gave a slight bow.

Justin walked slowly over to stand beside Lance, who squinted at him uncertainly. Seeing Justin make the move, the other youths quickly did the same until all stood beside Llamrei and Lance.

Dwayne stood alone, blood forcing its way through the splayed fingers of his hand and spilling onto the cracked and pitted asphalt, his face twisted with fury and betrayal. He cursed them all. "Mr. R. gonna be pissed!"

Justin turned a cold stare toward Dwayne. "Let 'im. I don' think I need him no more."

Dwayne hopped back and forth, twitching with need, and Lance could clearly tell he was high as a kite.

The grandfatherly man limped forward and snatched up Dwayne's shotgun before the kid could make a grab for it. "Get out, Dwayne. You ain't welcome here no more!"

Dwayne began backing away from the crowd, away from Arthur, away from everyone. "Who needs youse all anyways? I got friends that'll take good care a me. They'll take good care a you too!"

He practically spat out this last threat then turned and stalked off down the street, leaving a thin trail of blood as his legacy.

A cheer arose from the crowd of people as Arthur's knights lowered their weapons, but still eyed Justin's posse with suspicion.

Lance vividly recalled the night he'd first met Arthur, when Justin had threatened to kill him, and eyed the bigger boy with caution. He was no longer afraid of him. Didn't matter that the black boy was taller and buffer than him. In a fight, Lance knew he could cut the young thug to ribbons. No, he searched Justin's face and delved into those flinty brown eyes for truth.

"You really in with us, Justin," Lance asked with conviction, "or you lying? Cause if you are, I'm gonna kick your ass." His eyes flared, and he raised his sword for emphasis.

Justin flinched at the sight of the blade so near his throat, but his eyes met

Lance's straight on. "No lie, man! I's gettin' in too deep wit' R. anyways. And besides...." He trailed off, glanced at his feet, looking embarrassed.

"Besides *what*?" Lance watched him intently.

Justin squirmed, flicked his eyes toward his posse of boys, who waited to take their cue from him, and then settled them squarely on Lance. "I ain't never been part a no winning team before."

He broke eye contact with Lance to gaze up at Arthur. "My dad thinks youse dangerous, Arthur, but I think yo' dangerous is bad. And on the street that means *good*."

Arthur nodded, and Justin turned to Lance. "That okay by you, Pretty Boy?" He stuck out a hand.

Lance hesitated. Silence ruled as he studied Justin's eyes, searched the boy's face. The hardness, the anger, had vanished.

He sheathed his sword and clasped the offered hand. "It's *Sir Lance* to you." He tossed off that winning smile the media so loved to highlight.

"Hey, cuzz," Justin replied, his voice sounding small and relieved, "that's cool wit' me. *Sir Lance*."

They shook vigorously, and a cheer arose from the knights as Lance turned, flanked by Justin and his boys, to raise the banner once again. He resumed the march, the band began playing, and the parade continued amid cheers from the locals.

Justin reached out a helping hand for the banner. "Can I—" he started, but an intimidating glare from Lance made him pull his hand right back. He dropped a few steps behind, apparently deciding it might be best not to push his luck. Arthur smiled in amusement. The media people, catching every dramatic moment, looked ecstatic.



With nowhere else to turn, alone and wounded, Dwayne went to the only place he believed he belonged—Mr. R.'s warehouse. Yeah, the guy was Mexican, not black, but he'd given Dwayne a job when nobody else would, and he pretty much let the boy run the streets the way he wanted. Hell, Dwayne controlled the traffic from Watts to Inglewood, a big turf. He was important, and he felt sure Mr. R. would understand that what had happened wasn't his fault.

He was wrong.



Mr. R. regarded Dwayne with disdain.

“I couldn’t do nuthin’, man!” Dwayne stood before his polished oak desk, shifting and shaking, clutching his wounded arm in pain. “They dun bailed on me. Justin too. They all joined that fool king. An’ I got shot, man!”

Mr. R. examined his fingernails. Mr. L. stood off to one side, behind the whimpering teen.

“Yes, I know. You’re dripping blood on my Persian rug.” His voice was icy cold, his eyes scrutinizing his fingernails. Dwayne shifted anxiously. “I shall deal with the police officer’s son in my own time,” R. continued, finally looking into the boy’s wide, fearful eyes. “You, Dwayne, have outlived your usefulness.”

Mr. L. slipped a handgun from his expensive jacket and fired a bullet point-blank into Dwayne’s head. The youth barely had time to register his shock before dropping dead to the floor beside Mr. L.’s two-thousand-dollar shoes. Mr. L. casually replaced the gun inside his coat and turned to Mr. R.

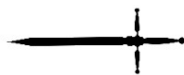
“What do you propose we do about this King Arthur?”

Mr. R. sat back in his thick, leather chair and considered the matter. “Undetermined, Mr. L. If he succeeds in wooing enough sellers away from us, we shall be forced to take action.”

“He could cost us millions.”

Mr. R. thought about it. “Yes, but never forget my influence in this city. Already our illustrious mayor is calling me for help with this so-called king. But I find the man interesting. He’s making the power brokers in this city look like chumps, which they are, of course. And since I’m the real power here, this Arthur could give me an opportunity for even greater control. After all, I’m the only one who can *really* stop him, aren’t I?”

He grinned at Mr. L., who remained impassive, as always.



Over the ensuing weeks of summer, Arthur’s Operation Clean-Up Tour spread from around downtown Los Angeles to encompass communities in Compton, Gardena, Hawthorne, Lawndale, Lennox, Inglewood, and Venice. The media continued its onslaught of coverage, and the public ate it up. Donations to Arthur’s cause flooded in, from all over the country, mostly in the form of monetary support.

With Helen’s help, and despite being an illegal alien without a valid birth certificate, Arthur set up a bank account for all the donated money—fame and celebrity often trumped details like birth certificates. Between Helen and Lance, he learned the use of an ATM card, but preferred to let Lance do the withdrawing. He continually marveled at the inventions of this century but still

felt dwarfed by most of them.

With the money rolling in, Arthur and his knights were able to buy more cleaning supplies and paint, and ordered new manufactured clothing that replicated the tunic-style of old, but felt more comfortable, less rough-hewn, more easily washed and dried.

The mayor and city council continued to monitor the situation, and when questioned by reporters always praised the king and his efforts, always flashed their best public relations smiles for the camera, while secretly meeting behind closed doors to discuss ways Arthur could be undermined.



Following the debacle at Round Table, the two sergeants had been “formally” removed from the “Arthur matter,” as the Chief called it, and were told to focus strictly on gang activity. But that had been the problem—gang activity had slowed considerably. Just how many gangbangers might have joined up with Arthur was impossible to determine, but apparently those who hadn’t were taking a watch and wait approach to the king and his crusade.

Gibson now spent most of his time sulking and brooding over the embarrassment of their failure. Adding insult to injury, he’d been stunned to see the footage from Watts, with his own son affirming allegiance to Arthur. Ryan had tried to help him through it, but the exchange had become a bit heated.

Ryan had walked into the station that day, swigging his antacid, and spotted Gibson staring intently at the flat-screen TV, the other officers silently watching with him. Ryan almost gasped aloud when he saw Justin but said nothing until the news story played out, and Gibson killed the volume. A couple of the officers patted him on the back, but Gibson didn’t respond.

“I’m sorry, Gib,” Ryan said, looking pained. Justin had virtually admitted on TV that he’d been selling drugs. “What’re gonna do?”

Gibson wilted into his desk chair in despair, his shoulders sagging. “How, Ry, how did I lose my own son?”

“This job,” Ryan replied, sitting on the desk beside his partner. “It killed both our marriages, and now it’s killing your kid. You know what this whole Arthur business has shown me?”

Gibson shrugged.

“That maybe *I* been wrong about kids all these years. You neglect ’em or abuse ’em, they go bad. But you give ’em a purpose, and they seem to shine.”

Gibson flared with anger. “You tellin’ me I’ve been neglecting my own kid?”

“Not on purpose. But you’ve been so obsessed with keeping other people’s

kids out of gangs that you're missing out on your own."

"Back off, Ryan. You're outta line!" Gibson had vowed to be a good father, to be a father, to *not* be absentee, like his old man had been.

Ryan gazed at the younger man intently, his craggy old face more serene than usual. "Don't you see, Gib, what this Arthur's trying to teach us, all of us, the good men like you and the narrow-minded jerks like me?"

Gibson raised his eyebrows.

"That every kid needs individual attention and a helluva lot of it, or else they'll go to the streets to get it. And that's when we get involved, but then it's too late."

Gibson didn't respond at first, digesting for a moment Ryan's observation. "Hell, Ry, you're the guy who wants to throw 'em in prison at age ten and toss the key."

"As much as an old fool hates to admit it—" He sighed heavily. "—I think I was wrong."

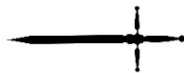
Now Gibson felt like he was the bad cop and Ryan the good. "This guy's violating every law in the book. And he's made us look like chumps. *You* sound like you admire him."

Ryan looked his partner in the eye. "I do, Gib. And I'm almost beginning to believe what you said that day."

Gibson looked confused. "What'd I say?"

"That he might really *be* King Arthur."

He patted the startled Gibson on the shoulder and ambled off to the men's room.



Mayor Villagrana's generously appointed office was, at the moment, a bit crowded. In attendance for this latest King Arthur meeting were the mayor, City Council President Ronnie Sanders, several council members, Police Chief Murphy, Sergeants Ryan and Gibson. They had been debating how best to deflate the positive publicity being generated by Arthur and his efforts.

"How the hell should I know what to do?" the mayor responded, annoyed with the direction this discussion had taken. "Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"It is most unprecedented, even by Populist movement standards," Council President Sanders replied.

Villagrana's mysterious supporter and campaign contributor had called again today, demanding to know what was going to be done to this upstart, as he'd

referred to Arthur. What would the mayor do about it? This man, whose real name Villagrana didn't even know, expected action, but what could he do without pissing off the voters?

"Why is one man so popular?" he threw out, not expecting an answer.

But Ryan spoke up. "Maybe because he's doing everything the people elected you to do."

Villagrana cast Ryan a look that would've cracked a camera lens. "Out of line, Sergeant Ryan. Despite being removed from the case, you were brought in here because you've had the most contact with this joker, not to be a smart ass!"

Gibson flashed his partner a "what the hell're you doing" look, and then said, "This whole crusade of his is nothing but a time bomb waiting to explode in his face. With that many kids, and especially that many gangbangers, something will go wrong. We just have to wait for it."

Ryan shook his head. "Sergeant Gibson is wrong. The only way it's gonna explode is if we fumble the ball."

Council President Sanders asked, "What do you mean, Sergeant?"

"This guy's making real changes for real people out there, and now they're gonna demand that kind of action from us. We better be ready to deliver the same or more when the time comes, or else *we're* the bad guys."

Villagrana suddenly got a wily look in his eyes, and he snapped his fingers. "I know! We'll get some of those kids of his to paint a mural for the city, right here on one of the downtown buildings. We'll give 'em the paint, talk it up in the press, steal a little of his thunder. It'll be our goodwill gesture."

"Aren't we just throwing him a bone?" asked Sanders, and the other council members nodded in agreement.

The mayor laughed that phony PR laugh he'd practiced ad nauseam so he could master it in front of a camera. "'Course we are, Ronnie. But I agree with Sergeant Gibson. This entire crusade is gonna collapse under its own weight, and then we'll look that much better when we step in to clean up what's left."

Ryan flashed a disgusted look Gibson's way as his partner received a slap on the back from the mayor. Gibson had a very smug look on his face.



The day following Ryan and Gibson's meeting with the mayor and his cronies, the "Mural Project" press conference was set up without a hitch. Helen, who knew how to contact Arthur by cell, had relayed the mayor's proposal to him and asked if he could attend with however many kids wanted to be part of the mural undertaking.

Arthur informed her that he would be in a place called Panorama City doing restoration with the main body of his knights, but he would send those kids who wished to take part in the project so they could begin.

With Lance nowhere about, Arthur asked Esteban and Reyna, Lavern, Luis, and Enrique what they thought of the mayor's idea.

Reyna made a rude gesture and said, "That guy's an ass—my bad, Arthur, he's a jerk and a phony. I seen him on TV enough to tell. If he's doing this, it's 'cause he thinks it'll make *him* look good."

Arthur nodded. Much like the authority figures of his own day.

Enrique liked the idea of creating a gigantic mural "so the people wouldn't forget what we done for them." He also agreed with Reyna about the Mayor. "He don't care about no one 'cept himself. But I think Sir Rique be right. How long you think it'll be 'fore the people forget what we done and go back to their old, careless, selfish ways, huh? I seen it happen in my own 'hood lots a times."

Luis and Lavern agreed. For a twelve-year-old, Lavern not only had prodigious drawing and painting and archery skills, but a very level head on his shoulders. "The mayor prob'ly be doin' it to make hisself look good, but if it helps our crusade, shouldn't we be doin' it?"

Arthur smiled at the small boy with the Michelangelo hands. "Ye be wise beyond your years, Lavern. It be settled, then. You, Enrique, and Luis gather whomever you wish and meet with this mayor at the appointed time."

Lavern grinned, and they set off to do the recruiting.

Arthur noted a pensive look on Esteban's face. "What be troubling thee, Sir Esteban?"

Reyna leaned forward, her forehead crinkled.

Esteban shook his head, as though clearing cobwebs. "Not sure. A feeling that the mayor and his homeboys are up to something, like they want to bring us down."

Arthur placed a hand on the boy's brawny shoulder. "It be the nature of men like him—the do-nothings, to hate and despise men like us—the doers," he explained. "It hath ever been so throughout human history. I have no doubt he seeks my destruction and the ruination of our crusade."

That worried Esteban, and Reyna. "What will you do to stop him?" she asked, her brows furrowed with anxiety.

"As long as we please the people, we shall win," Arthur replied.

Both teenagers nodded, but their fears clearly remained.



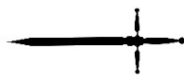
The front of City Hall at three o'clock that afternoon became the proverbial media circus. The mayor and city council had moved fast, Helen noted, eyeing the enormous scaffolding already rising along the City Hall side of the U.S. Courthouse building. The mayor obviously had some pull with the feds, because they'd agreed to erect a gigantic canvas eleven-stories high that would cover the Temple Street side of the courthouse. In that way, the completed mural could best be seen from City Hall across Temple Street and maximize the attention Mayor Villagrana could milk out of it for himself.

Helen knew the mayor was a narcissistic camera hog who did nothing if there wasn't some personal gain in it for him. However, she honestly believed this mural would benefit Arthur's cause and be a powerful reminder of what the man and his message had been. And what better place to erect it than the United States seat of justice within the city?

Enrique, Luis, and Lavern brought with them almost thirty of Arthur's kids of various ethnicities and ages who already had mural experience from the neighborhood clean-ups. Most were boys, but several of Reyna's girls chose to be part of the mural crew.

The mayor and the entire city council posed for the cameras in front of the scaffolding, flanking the kids and making an extra big show of profusely praising them. Lavern and Enrique exchanged a knowing smirk, as the mayor flashed his phony PR smile and personally handed each child a "brand-new paintbrush!" Then he turned to the cameras and grinned, revealing those expensive, capped teeth. "Aren't they just the greatest kids you've ever seen?" he gushed.

Helen wanted to vomit.



The summer flew by and the Mural Project rapidly took on real form and substance. A massive, billowing sheet hid the work in progress from curious onlookers, all the better to make the grand unveiling another huge media event. Or so Villagrana hoped. Arthur and his knights had continued to parade throughout the city, cleaning, improving, removing all the urban blight the mayor had allowed to fester for six years.

If this thing didn't crash and burn soon, his mysterious benefactor, Mr. R., would be forced to take action. He'd told the mayor he was monitoring the situation, but Villagrana still worried. Another public relations disaster like the pizza parlor could damage his reputation beyond repair. Not to mention cut off the money he'd been promised for his senate run in two years, leaving him just

another washed-up public servant who wouldn't have a clue how to get a job in the private sector.

As for Arthur, he'd become embroiled in managing all the daily affairs of money and donations and moving his vast company from place to place, supervising the repairs and painting, chatting more often than he liked to media personnel, and paying more attention to new recruits who chose to join as they wended their snaky way throughout the city.

Even into September, kids from all over Los Angeles eagerly folded into Arthur's crusade, which seemed to them like one big, never-ending party. A few, after long hours of hard work, dropped out, realizing this party required too much personal effort. But most welcomed the sense of accomplishment and showed up each day, often ditching school, wherever the knights were to be found, and eagerly did their fair share of the work. Others joined the clean-ups after school let out each day.

So busy had Arthur become juggling all these disparate matters that he'd begun spending less and less time moving amongst his kids and chatting with them individually.

Lance struggled the most with Arthur's newfound responsibilities. He was still in charge of swordsmanship training, and he always carried the banner into and out of each neighborhood. And Arthur put him in charge of major portions of each clean-up they undertook.

But when's the last time he just sat and talked with me, like we used to?

Lance couldn't remember. It might have been when they'd talked about Lancelot. Arthur would often pat him on the back and compliment him in passing, and there were times he felt sure the king wanted to say more, maybe something personal about just them, but then Arthur always froze up and fell silent. That confused Lance even more about where he stood with this man he idolized above all others. His friendship with Mark and Jack, and his big brother role to Chris, helped distract him, however slightly, from the king's lack of personal attention.

And yet, despite the fact that Jack and Mark were awesome friends, deep down, Lance didn't want to be *like* them, didn't want to be... *that* way. It scared the hell out of him! His greatest fear, the one he'd harboured since fleeing from Richard's abusive home always hovered at the edges of his soul. If he was like Mark and Jack, could he also...

No!

He pushed those thoughts aside whenever they appeared.

At night, however, within the almost suffocating quiet of the storm drain, fidgeting uneasily on his bedroll, Chris breathing softly beside him, Lance's

thoughts sometimes drifted back to the “g” word, and his breath tightened in his chest.

His eyes would settle on the small blond boy nesting beside him, the little brother who idolized him as a hero. Even though Lance never saw himself in such grandiose terms, Chris did. What would Chris think if Lance turned out to be... *that* way? Would he still admire him as an awesome big brother? Hell, would Chris even wanna be near him anymore? Or would he suddenly be... afraid?

And what of Esteban and all the others who had accepted him and willingly agreed to follow him and take orders from him? What would they think? He’d gained Esteban’s respect and that of the other hard guys through strength and force. He knew the macho mentality of Mexican guys, and *most* guys, for that matter, when it came to gay boys. At best, they were held in contempt and at worst they were shunned or beaten up.

Arthur said he didn’t care if Lance favored girls or boys, that he’d chosen him for his character. But the others *would* care. He knew that.

Lance desperately wished he could talk with someone about his worries, but Arthur was too busy. He couldn’t tell Jack either because Jack was already suffering too much pain over Mark and didn’t need any more. Mark wasn’t an option, either, obviously. Despite opening his heart to him that one night, Mark had since shut himself off from the world, and from him. He had all too quickly lost the friend he’d gained, and that hurt, too. A lot.



It was now October and Lance was tired of the gap between he and Mark. It had gone on too long. He’d grown up apart from friendships and didn’t really know how to navigate his way through issues like this, but he felt a desperate need to do *something*. He knew from hints Jack had given that Mark’s melancholy had something to do with Arthur, and suspecting Mark’s feelings toward the king similar to his own, he sought the boy out one night when everyone was asleep, and a peaceful silence blanketed the tunnels.

He found Mark seated on the cold concrete in one side tunnel, resting dispiritedly against a wall beneath a hanging lantern, which framed his blond head in a glowing halo.

Lance let out a nervous breath, then approached and cautiously slid down the wall to sit beside his friend, who didn’t even acknowledge him. The *drip, drip* of water was so omnipresent that it no longer even registered as sound.

Lance’s eyes swam with memories as he gazed at the brooding boy beside

him, wild blond locks tumbling loosely about his gentle face and draping his shoulders like waves of falling snow. How many months had it been since he and Mark had become friends, since he'd confessed his long-suppressed secret, and Mark hadn't laughed or mocked, but just accepted him unconditionally? Lance wanted *that* Mark back—needed him back—but didn't know how to do it.

"Arthur's been super busy, Mark," he tried lamely, as much for his benefit as Mark's. "You know that. I miss him more than you."

The emptiness in his soul, the absence of Arthur's smile and words of encouragement, coupled with his other doubts and fears, often pulled tears from his eyes when he least expected them. He fought them off now. Mark needed his strength, not his weakness.

Mark's legs were pulled up and pressed against his chest, his arms wrapped tightly around them. His deep blue eyes brimmed with tears. "I don't think so."

His reaction confused Lance. "Well, I mean, in the beginning it was just him and me, remember, and... well, you know, I kind a started to think of him like my—" He stopped himself, and dropped his head between his own knees, feeling small and awkward.

Mark looked at him forlornly. "Like your what?"

Lance let his hair fall like a curtain across his face, his old defense mechanism, and eyed Mark from behind it. "Nothing. It's stupid." He tried for that smile the media loved, but Mark's expression of profound loss pierced his soul, and the smile faltered. "Look, Mark, I know it seems like he's ignoring us, but—"

He stopped when Mark leapt to his feet abruptly and ran off into the darkness. Lance gazed after him, mystified, wondering what he'd done wrong.

A cleared throat drew his eye to a different tunnel, and out of the shadows stepped Jack, dressed for sleeping in his drawstring pants and no shirt. Lance forced his eyes up to Jack's face, and then cleared his own throat. "Did you see all that?"

Jack nodded, padding his way across the chamber to drop down beside Lance. Even though *he* was fully clothed, he felt oddly exposed next to the shirtless Jack.

He wanted to move away, but then he didn't want to. He forced himself to focus on Mark.

"What's wrong with him, Jack? You know, don't you?"

Jack pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them. "Yeah."

When he didn't say anything more, Lance prodded, "Well? I thought we were all buds."

"We are. It's just... you can't tell Arthur, okay?"

“Okay.”

“Mark’s in love with him.” It was almost a whisper.

Lance took a moment to process that, and then his lower jaw dropped.
“Arthur?”

Jack nodded, his breathing almost coming in gasps.

Lance was stunned. He knew Mark idolized Arthur like he did, but he’d thought it was for the same reason. That’s why he’d been a little jealous. But this? He’d had no clue. It made him feel... he wasn’t sure, but his heart beat faster.

“But,” he began, almost stammering, “but Arthur’s a grownup, and not, you know, gay.”

“I know. So does Mark.”

“It sounds crazy, I know, but Mark and me, well, we hadn’t, you know, had sex with anyone before being out there on the streets, so all the guys we been with were older, like Arthur, you know... grown men. So that’s what Mark’s used to, ’cept he’s used to men treating him like crap. I never got as much crap ’cause I’m big, and the johns figured I might beat ’em up. But Mark, he’s small and sweet-natured and... anyway, Arthur’s a good man who treats Mark like he’s special. So, Mark fell for him.”

Lance turned away, dumbfounded by this news, but suddenly replaying in his mind Mark’s up and down moods these past months beneath the light of these new revelations. He shook his head with incredulity, thinking how horrific these guys must have had it out on the streets, and feeling deep down a powerful kinship with them because of his own past. But at least *his* torment had ended when he was nine.

“What can we do for him?”

Jack shrugged, and his eyes welled up.

Despite his skittishness at touching Jack, Lance guardedly slipped his arm over his friend’s shoulders, and they sat together. The closeness felt good to Lance, natural and necessary. After all, pain needed to be touched before it could be healed. “You still haven’t told him, have you?”

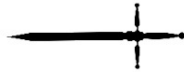
Jack shook his head again and threw his arm over Lance’s shoulders and pulled him in tightly.

Lance shivered, both loving and hating that embrace, that press of Jack’s strong arm wrapped around him, the warmth of Jack’s skin seeping through his tunic.

But he couldn’t push Jack away, not in his hour of need. And he didn’t want to, anyway. He liked comforting Jack. He liked the closeness.

No, he *needed* it.

And so, like Lance had done with Mark so many weeks before, they sat huddled together in mutual pain and despair, pondering what the future held for all of them.

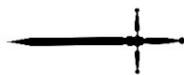


Jenny sat on a newly refurbished bench, courtesy of Arthur's crusade, in Eucalyptus Park under a mournful crescent moon, lamenting the fact that she hadn't spoken with Arthur, or Lance, since the night of their first interview. She gazed sadly at a brand-new mural painted on the retaining wall before her. It depicted Lance proudly holding up the banner with Arthur on horseback behind him.

She knew she'd made a connection with Arthur. She'd felt it, and so had he, and she'd been hoping he'd call her, ask her to help, make her part of his campaign—not because she needed the attention, but because *he'd* want her near. Because he felt... well, *something* for her.

She knew she could call him—she'd called many men in her time. If she wanted something, she went after it. But it's not like Arthur had a cell phone... or did he? She supposed he might by now, so his kids could keep in contact with him. And it's not like she didn't know where he lived. With all the media hovering about, she marveled that his hideout hadn't been discovered. The police had been called off; she knew that. The sleazy mayor had assured the public that the incident at the pizza parlor had been “an unfortunate misunderstanding, and would not happen again.” Yeah, Jenny had snorted at the TV, *because he made you and the LAPD look like idiots*.

Arthur was busy too—that was more than obvious. *Swamped* would be a better word. He just didn't have much time—no, he didn't have *any* time for socializing. That must be why he hadn't called on her. She'd give him a little longer, she decided. Then, if he still didn't call on her, well, she'd just have to call on him.



The following morning, Lance drifted out of sleep into an uncertain wakefulness, forgetting for a moment, where he was. Then he felt the heavily muscled arm draped around him and remembered. He nudged Jack, and the older boy awoke, his face still streaked with dried tears. Disengaging themselves stiffly, they rose to stretch their legs, and Jack flexed and unflexed his arms to get the circulation going.

As Lance stood up, two envelopes dropped from his tunic and fluttered to the

ground by Jack's bare feet.

Jack noticed also. "What's that?"

"I don't know." Lance stooped to retrieve them. "Two letters. One's addressed to Arthur, and the other... to you."

He handed Jack the plain white envelope with "Jack" written in florid, almost calligraphic style on the front.

"That's Mark's writing!" Jack tore open the letter and began to read, his mouth dropping open in shock, his face dissolving into sorrow.

"What is it?" Lance asked breathlessly, fear gripping his heart like a clenched fist.

Fresh tears dropping from his eyes, Jack handed over the letter.

Lance took the paper. He could almost hear Mark's gentle voice in his head.

Dearest Jacky,

I know you're gonna be pissed at me for ditching you, but I gotta get out, and you know why. I just can't be around him no more. I'm goin' back to the streets where I'll get treated like the lousy stinking queer boy I am. That's all I deserve. My parents were right about me—I'm worthless.

Arthur was way too good for me. But you, Jacky, you're a real somebody, and you got a home there with him and the rest. You got a future. Oh, and Lance, tell him I'm sorry, too. He's a good friend, like you, better'n I deserve. And he's really awesome, and I know you think so, cause you told me. So if it turns out, you know, that he's gay, you two would be good for each other.

Lance blushed at that part, but Jack didn't even notice.

Have a good life. I love you, too, Jacky. You'll always be my hero. Never ever forget that.

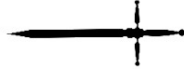
Your best bud, Mark.

Lance's eyes welled with grief. "I'm sorry, Jack. I'm so sorry. We gotta tell Arthur."

Jack nodded but didn't move. Lance gently put a hand to his friend's bare back to nudge him along, but Jack whirled and enveloped Lance in a crushing hug, sobbing into the smaller boy's tunic, holding on as though fearful of falling. Lance held him and comforted him and allowed the tears to flow. His own regrets filled his heart and pressed him into Jack's body more tightly, almost with desperation. Guilt washed over him in waves of anguish as Jack's tears brushed against his neck and soaked into his tunic like rain.

Lance thought of Mark, of the boy's gentle, shy little smile that had always tickled something deep within him; thought of the way Mark had so readily kept his secret, even from Jack. He'd come to love Mark for that loyalty, that goodness, but had never said it, had never truly made the blond boy a part of him.

So he stood, feeling empty and heartless, clutching tightly to Jack, supporting the boy's profound sorrow, and allowing his friend some time to cry out the pain before they had to go and tell the others about Mark.



In The Hub, there was the usual bustling activity of boys rushing around, grabbing items of clothing, prepping their weapons, gathering supplies for the day's march. A number of them were polishing armor or swords, while others hung wet laundry on the lines or took dry laundry down, folded it, and passed it out to those just emerging from the sleeping tunnels.

Arthur sat on his throne enjoying a calm moment, tossing a football to a delighted Chris.

Lance and Jack entered soberly, Jack still shirtless and tear-streaked, Lance rumpled and sorrowful and afraid.

"Arthur, Mark's gone." Lance announced.

Arthur's face clouded at once and he handed the football to Chris. "Go on and get ready, Sir Christopher. We'll be leaving soon."

"Okay," chirped the small boy. He looked at Jack and saw the boy crying. "It's okay, Jack, I was just playing with Arthur 'cause I couldn't find you. You're still the best player I ever saw."

Lance nodded to the little boy. "Thanks, Chris, but he'll be okay. Go get ready now."

"Sure, Lance." And off he went.

Arthur eyed the two boys with concern. "What hath happened to Mark?"

Lance glanced at Jack, but the older boy remained silent. "He ran away. We found these letters this morning." He held one of them out. "This one is for you."

Arthur slipped out the paper and gazed a moment at the beautiful flowing script. He read the letter aloud,

"Dear Arthur,

I never met no one like you. You got me off a drugs, which I was glad about cause they really dragged me down. And I know you love me like a nephew or something. But I love you more than that, see, and it hurts so much to be around you knowing you can't feel the same way. So I gotta bail, Arthur, an'

I'm sorry. Methinks thou hast been the best thing in my life, and the worst. I love you, Arthur, with all my heart. Farewell.

Your errant knight, Mark”

Jack broke down, and Lance reached out to enfold him.

Arthur dropped into his throne in shock. “Thou didst know of his feelings?” He looked at both boys. Lance shook his head, but Jack nodded weakly.

“Yeah.”

“Forsooth, Sir Jack, why did thou not tell me?” Arthur exclaimed, his voice tight with emotion. “Why did Mark not come to me? I would not condemn him for feeling love.”

“He was embarrassed, Arthur.” Jack sniffled. “He knew you couldn’t love him like he wanted, and he was afraid that... you might hate him. I told ’im you wouldn’t but....”

Arthur stood resolutely, his expression one of determination. “This cannot stand. I must find him.”

“You can’t, Arthur,” Lance insisted, still cradling the hopeless Jack. “You got the crusade ta run and all these other guys to watch over. The needs of the whole company, remember?”

Arthur sighed deeply, looking like he’d suddenly realized the flaw in that philosophy. “Thou art right, of course, Sir Lance. But at times like these, it be a difficult precept to hold fast to.”

Jack pulled his face away from Lance’s comforting shoulder and turned to the king. “I’ll go after him,” he said, releasing Lance and swiping tears away with the back of his hand. “I know the places he’d probably go. I’ll find him.”

“I’m going too,” Lance insisted, and Jack looked over at him, gratitude filling his poignant eyes. “If that’s all right with you, Arthur?”

Part of Lance hoped Arthur would say no, that he was much too valuable, that he was *needed* to lead. *The selfish part*, he told himself. No one is indispensable to the cause, Arthur had said before. *Even me*.

The king looked grave, his mind clearly distracted. “Of course, Sir Lance. Anyone can carry the banner.”

Lance flinched as though he’d been slapped *and* punched at the same time, and the blood drained from his face.

Is that what he’d been reduced to—banner carrier? After all he and Arthur had shared?

But Arthur was too distraught to notice Lance’s reaction. “Find him, my knights. That be thy quest. Find the lost sheep and return him to us.”

Jack padded quickly out of The Hub.

Bowing stiffly to Arthur, Lance haltingly followed.



That same morning, Gibson rose early, had breakfast, dressed casual for a change—just slacks and a pullover shirt and fancy basketball shoes—and hurried out of his one-bedroom apartment. He had to see Justin, and that was that. His ex-wife, Sandra, told him the boy was gone all day every day with “that pretty awesome King Arthur guy” and the only time she ever saw him was early in the morning. She didn’t even care that Justin was ditching all or part of school most days, along with hundreds of other teens, to work with Arthur on the clean-ups. That had started *another* argument.

“He didn’t do anything in school last year but sell drugs,” she’d told him pointedly over the phone, “and don’t tell me you had no idea.”

Actually, he *had* had no idea, not until he’d seen Justin admit it on television that day. How had he so lost touch with his own boy? Hell, he knew some criminals better’n he knew his own kid! Rather than argue, he sighed and said, “I just want to see my son.”

“Good luck with that,” Sandra had said and hung up abruptly.

Gibson stood beside his expensive BMW parked outside his former Hancock Park, two-story house and anxiously drummed his fingers on the dark blue roof of the car. He’d thought for weeks what he would say when finally he got together with Justin. He’d practiced, promising to listen and not argue and *not* lose his temper.

The front door opened, and Justin excitedly leapt down the brickwork stairs and headed for the street. *He looks so happy*, Gibson thought. *I never saw him look happy to be up this early in his life*. The boy’s hair had grown out, and he looked good, healthy, and content. But then Justin spotted his dad, and the smile dropped, the mood darkened.

Afraid the boy would take off, Gibson said, “Morning, Justin.”

Justin frowned and gazed at his father, who stood stiffly with both hands thrust into his pockets. “I got things to do, Dad.”

“I’ve been trying to see you for weeks, son. Please, let’s talk a few minutes.”

Reluctantly, but obviously curious at his nonthreatening tone, Justin strolled over and stood awkwardly before Gibson, shuffling his feet uneasily.

“Wow,” Gibson said with a whistle, “you’ve grown.”

Justin glanced away. “Yeah, thanks.”

Gibson eyed the boy’s attire: long-sleeved, black tunic, the standard brown leather pants and leather boots of Arthur’s army. “Changed your look,” he said

conversationally, choosing his words with care so as not to anger the boy. “I like it better than the sagging style,” and then realized when Justin glared at him that it was a dig. Why did he always do that?

“Uh, listen, son, I thought we might do something today after school,” Gibson tried again, “but your mom tells me you haven’t been going to school.”

Justin laughed. “Good one, Dad. You already know I’m not ’cause you been seeing me on TV. Mom tole me. So just cut the crap and say what’s on yer mind. I got people waitin’ on me.”

Gibson frowned, his temper rising. “You mean him, that crazy-ass *King Arthur*?”

“Yeah, I mean *King Arthur*, a man who done more for this city in six months than you done your whole life!”

“You know that’s unfair, Justin. You know I became a cop to help people, to help kids stay outta gangs and drugs because I saw too many of my friends go down for that. I did it for you, son, and your generation.”

Justin sneered. “And how well did that work out for ya, huh, Dad?”

Gibson glared at him, and then relented. “I know about the drugs, and Dwayne. I did see that on TV.”

Justin laughed hollowly. “That when you finally figured it out? Some cop! I been sellin’ for almost a year, Dad, and hangin’ with the homies for three. Ever since you left!”

Gibson didn’t understand. “Son, if you needed money...,” he tried lamely.

Justin shook his head in frustration. “No, Dad, I didn’t need the money. I needed you! But all I heard my whole life was this gang member or that gang member and how I’d better never get involved. Hell, Dad, you knew them gangsters on the street better’n you ever knew me!”

Gibson tried to interrupt, but Justin put a hand on his chest.

“Let me finish, Dad. That’s the trouble—you *never* let me finish.” He lowered his hand slowly. “When you and mom split, and you kept missing your visits ’cause somethin’ came up at work—always an ‘emergency’. God, how I hated hearing that!” His young face blazed with pent-up anger.

“Finally, I figured the only way my dad would pay any attention was if I was a gang member too. Then at least you might arrest me, and I’d get five minutes with you while you booked me! But no, you’re such a fantastic cop, you couldn’t even see the gang member in your own family.”

He laughed bitterly. “You know why Arthur’s better than you and all the cops and all the mayors and lawmakers put together? Cause all you guys think up are ways to arrest us and lock us up for life *after* we join gangs or otherwise screw up. Arthur’s out there giving us a reason *not* to do those things.”

Gibson stood, stunned, for once in his life not angry at being criticized, not even embarrassed if any of the neighbors might be watching. But he did feel ashamed, because he saw the truth in Justin's words. *Every single word*. He'd wanted so badly to be super cop that he'd dropped the ball where it counted most. His son was right, and *he* was wrong.

"I'm sorry, Justin." It was practically a whisper. "You're right."

Justin looked stunned, but smiled cynically. "I know I am."

Gibson bristled, recognizing that thread of arrogance as his own DNA in the boy. Sandra never had that quality. He cleared his throat. "So, uh, you're... you're not selling anymore, right?"

Justin's mouth dropped open in amazement. "No, Dad, I'm not, 'cause I don't need to. Arthur has time for me."

"Sorry," Gibson tried again, cursing his stupid rigid fixation on the law. "I just don't want you doing the wrong—"

But Justin cut him off with a raised hand. "And another thing about Arthur, Dad, not only does he *want* to hang out with me, but he sees the good in me too. He doesn't always suspect I'm doing something wrong. Like *you* do!"

He turned and stalked away down the street. His walk turned into an angry run, and he disappeared around the corner. Gibson watched, furious with himself, turned his head, and caught his breath.

Sandra, looking lovely as ever in her pink brocaded bathrobe and fluffy slippers, stood in the doorway watching. Their eyes met. Then she shook her head with disgust and closed the door, leaving him to curse his narrow-minded stupidity. He slammed his fist down on the car hood in anger, then got in and drove away, wondering if he'd lost his son for good.

CHAPTER 10: IS THAT WHAT WE'VE BECOME?

SOMEHOW, HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD LOOKED EVEN sleazier to Lance as he and Jack strolled up and down the always-busy thoroughfare dodging the tourists. The boys were attired in their usual tunics—Lance's green and Jack's scarlet-red—leather pants and knee-high leather boots, and Lance sported his trademark golden circlet around his head to restrain his lengthening tresses, which now spilled halfway down his back.

Maybe it was all he'd learned from Arthur about right and wrong, but now he saw so much wrong around here, so much that seemed almost designed to corrupt kids like him: the tattoo and piercing parlors, the sexy billboards, the bling, the sordid little hookah places, not to mention stores like Frederick's of Hollywood and Victoria's Secret. It all reeked of temptation and pleasure and greed. He actually felt a little dirty just being out here.

As they ambled down the street, Lance also discovered just how big a celebrity he'd become. People stopped and gawked. Cameras and phones flew up, and pictures were snapped. Everyone wanted to chat and get his autograph. Some just wanted to shake his hand. Jack's, too.

Two teen girls, dressed in unbelievably short shorts and practically non-existent halter tops, recognized Jack as “the buff one with the abs” and batted their long lashes at him, each grabbing one arm for a group photo. As the picture was snapped, one girl yanked up Jack's shirt to display his abs. Jack blanched in surprise. Afterward, the girls made sure to thumb their numbers into his phone before swishing their hips in departure.

Had the circumstances not been so grave, Lance would have laughed, but Jack was so engrossed in his fears for Mark that the irony of two pretty girls hitting on him went over his head. It was nothing new, anyway. Jack had told him hot girls in high school had been all over him because he was a football player, and pretty built even was a freshman, but he'd never told them the truth, at least not until his own father outed him to the entire school. After that, the hot girls eyed him with disdain, as though it were *his* fault they'd flirted so shamelessly with him.

As the boys passed by the famous Chinese Theater with its lavish, ornate

architecture and handprints-of-the-stars concrete entryway, a double-decker Starline tour bus rolled to a stop near the parked cars. They could hear on a loudspeaker, “And here, ladies and gentlemen, is the world famous Chinese Theater and, oh look! We have a celebrity sighting, ladies and gentlemen, right over there.”

Lance wasn't paying too much attention as he glanced disinterestedly at the handprints embedded within the concrete beneath his soft leather boots. He didn't care at all about celebrities and didn't even know who most of these people were, anyway. He was just trying to keep his head down, appear inconspicuous, and *not* be noticed. But then he heard the tour guide continue, and he froze in place.

“It's Sir Lance and Sir Jack,” the female voice squealed excitedly, “of King Arthur's Round Table! You've seen them on the news and the Internet, cleaning up our fair city.”

Lance grabbed Jack and pointed at the bus. Everyone was leaning out open windows or over the top deck railing snapping pictures with their phones or cameras. Lance stared in amazement, heart in his throat, fixed to the spot like a wax statue.

“Let's hear it for Sir Lance and Sir Jack!” one of the tourists shouted, and the entire bus erupted in applause and more shutter snapping.

Lance wished he could disappear into the sidewalk. “What are we supposed to do?”

Jack shrugged. “I don't know. Wave?”

And so they waved, and smiled, and waved again, as more pictures were snapped before the bus finally trundled on down the boulevard and left them behind.

Unfortunately, the tour guide's “outing” them drew many of the tourists perusing the foot and handprints, and suddenly admirers young and old again swamped the boys, smothering them by turns with selfishness and affection. More snapping of pictures, more girls hanging all over them, more glad-handing.

Lance felt oddly exposed in this crowd, as though the crush of people knew his innermost fears and insecurities, and he desperately wished to be somewhere else, anywhere else. Jack, he could tell, was equally squirmy, but his days as a football player had somewhat prepared him for this kind of shallow adulation.

Two tween girls who couldn't have been older than twelve, and dressed even sluttier than the two who'd accosted Jack, roughly pulled Lance in front of the theatre and flanked him for a picture. The moment their friend raised the camera, the girls each planted a kiss on his cheeks. Lance was certain that photo would show his face turning crazy-ass shades of red, and rather than feel flattered, he

felt almost queasy.

These two slipped Lance their phone numbers on a tour bus brochure one girl had scooped off the ground. They told him if he wanted a girlfriend, he could have them both, *at the same time!* That made Lance blush three shades of scarlet, and even Jack shook his head in disbelief as the two giggled their way down the street.

Before meeting Arthur, Lance would've taken such behavior as normal for girls today. But now he recognized it as another symptom of adults poisoning children at younger and younger ages.

As they continued down the boulevard, Lance saw a Metro bus cruising slowly past in the heavy traffic. Plastered across the side of the bus was an enormous ad for *Channel 7 News*. It displayed a massive headshot of him! The ad proclaimed "Get the latest on Sir Lance on Channel 7 News." And beneath the picture was written, "Is He Dating Anyone Special?"

That last part actually made him gag. "My God, Jack," he choked as the bus rolled past them. "Is that what we've become? Just another reality show?"

"Guess so."

That bus ad really disturbed Lance, numbing his body with shame and a deep sense of failure. That kind of exposure, that "who's he dating" crap, was exactly the sort of thing Arthur was fighting against. Were they losing their battle after all? Would the next thing really *be* a reality TV show about them?

Lance observed his brooding friend standing at the corner, brushing back dark, untamed curls, anxious eyes roaming. So big and strong, so toweringly beautiful, so capable and athletic, and yet so sad. So lost and weak and helpless without Mark.

Is this what it means to be in love, he wondered?

If so, love looked pretty scary *and* painful. Maybe that's why he'd steered clear of it his whole life. As he eyed Jack, he realized that maybe he'd just been too fearful of *whom* he might fall for, so he never let himself get close enough to anyone to find out. He'd made sure never to even *look* at anyone, male or female, that way, so he wouldn't give them any ideas.

Despite his best efforts, however, he'd often found himself at school sneaking surreptitious glances at this girl or that guy, noting the way the hair draped or the muscles flexed, and then he'd shoved it all down deep inside where it couldn't get out. At least until the next time he'd peeked from beneath his sheltering hair and had thoughts he didn't want to have because they confused him. Because they brought him back to *that* time... back when he was six. Back to that first time.

"*You like that, don't you, my little fag boy...?*" came Richard's breathlessly

excited voice whispering from the charred ash heap of his memory.

Lance shuddered, despite the warmth of the sun, as the searing pain that had torn open his small, young body once more ripped its way through his consciousness.

From that moment on, he'd never trusted anyone, never allowed a single soul into his emotions, or into his heart.

Until Arthur came along. And then Mark.

And now Jack.

Watching Jack morosely search up and down the busy street, Lance felt a chill ripple through him, and sweat break out on his forehead. He so desperately yearned to reach out and take Jack's hand in his and just relish the warmth of that basic human contact. The intense desire scared him so much, he began to tremble.

Jack turned his eyes on him. He must've looked ill, because Jack asked, "You okay, Lance?"

Lance gulped and nodded, shaking off the deadweight of his past, and the confusion of his heart. They had to focus on Mark. "Yeah, I'm good. Let's keep looking."

Jack eyed him with uncertainty but nodded and continued down the sidewalk, Lance by his side.

Jack stopped a few creepy-looking guys along the street wearing long overcoats and asked about "Blue Eyes," but they hadn't seen him "since he got all famous on TV."

"Blue Eyes?" Lance asked as they left one of those creeps behind in a shadowy alcove and strolled past junky tourist shops.

Jack nodded, all roving eyes and uncertain steps. "You never give your real name on the streets, especially to dealers like them."

"You got a nickname too?"

Jack nodded, his eyes scanning every face they passed. But he didn't answer.

"Well?" Lance asked.

Now Jack stopped and looked sheepishly at Lance. He raised his right arm and flexed the massive biceps. "Great Guns," he whispered, embarrassed.

Lance squeezed the biceps. Rock hard, as always. "It fits," he said, trying to ignore that little shiver tingling up his back.

They continued the search up and down the boulevard, stopping more often than they liked for their "fans." Everyone, it seemed, wanted a photo with the two most famous boys in the world, and all the adulation began to wear them down as the day wore on.

After checking a few more of Mark's old haunts, Lance wearily suggested

they get something to eat. His stomach had become a growling lion.

“Not hungry,” Jack mumbled, disconsolately. “We gotta keep looking.” Lance stepped in front and put both hands on Jack’s chest to stop him.

“Look, Jack, you gotta take care of yourself. For Mark. You heard him in his letter. You’re his hero.”

Jack stopped and quickly dropped his gaze to the dirty sidewalk, to the star of some actor Lance had never heard of. Jack’s body hitched with emotion, and Lance feared he might start bawling right there on Hollywood Boulevard. *That* would be hard to explain to their fans.

“Mark gets so depressed, you know, Lance?” Jack said, gazing helplessly into his eyes as Lance squinted against the harsh sunlight. “Without me and you and Arthur... he’ll go back to the junk. I just know it.”

He sounded so stricken and guilty and lonely that Lance’s heart ached, and his own anxiety about Mark swelled. The mention of Arthur also brought back the knife to his soul that were those hated words, “*Anyone can carry the banner.*” His stomach lurched at the memory. Forcing himself to focus on Jack, he placed a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“We’ll find him, Jack. I promise.”

Jack’s handsome face dissolved into a mosaic of twisted pain, and Lance quickly pulled him off the sidewalk and into a small hollow between buildings so they wouldn’t be as likely to be noticed.

“Mark feels worthless, Lance,” Jack stammered, almost choking on the words. “He said so in his letter. You saw it. I love him so much, and he doesn’t even know that!” His eyes pooled with shimmering anguish, and Lance’s own heart seemed to pull into his throat. “Why couldn’t he see it in my eyes like you did?”

Lance shook his head, struggling with his own fears and haunted by his past. He hadn’t been a loner his whole life just to avoid his conflicted feelings and all their complications. No, he’d always felt deep down that he wasn’t *worthy* of anyone’s love. Not him. He wasn’t that special. He was just... well, *nothing*. The nothingness he’d fueled his entire life now rose within him and took on the massive proportions of a Greek god straight out of Olympus, except now that god wore Mark’s soft, delicate, and ever-so-sad features.

And suddenly Lance understood.

Mark had felt the exact same way, and that’s why he ran. He didn’t *believe* he should be loved, just like Lance didn’t believe it about himself. But Mark *did* deserve love—oh my God, did he ever! He’d accepted Lance with all his screwed-up history and contorting emotions and uncertain sexuality, and had kept his secret when he could’ve used it against him. But Lance had never *told* him, had never told the other boy he loved him. That he *was* worthy of love.

Jack wasn't the only one standing in that alley with guilt painted on his face in permanent ink.

Lance gently placed his hands on Jack's thick upper arms. "Mark couldn't see it, Jacky, 'cause he didn't think he was worthy," he said almost in a whisper. "I guess we can only see the love we think we're good enough to have, and he didn't think he was good enough to have any."

Tears of remorse cut little pathways of pain along Jack's cheeks to pool at the edges of his lips before dropping to the ground at his feet. He nodded, comprehension rising like the sun, enlightening his face with the truth.

Lance wrapped his arms around Jack's shoulders and held him tightly, letting their individual pain and guilt melt together like chunks of ice dissolving into each other beneath a hot summer sun.

Finally, they separated, wiping their faces dry with the sleeves of their tunics.

Lance managed to pull up that angelic smile that seemed to have charmed the whole world, and he let it fall upon Jack like sunlight. "We'll find him, Jack, and we'll both tell him how much we love him."

Jack nodded and offered a crooked, rakish little grin.

Lance turned to look at the sidewalk. Several people had stopped to gawk, but hurried away when they saw he had noticed them.

Whatever!

Then he spotted a pizza-by-the-slice place on the boulevard across from their location. "C'mon, Jack, we need to eat."

He pointed to the pizza place, and Jack reluctantly nodded.



Outside City Hall, with the Mural Project underway across the street, Mayor Villagrana had called a press conference. He and the council had decided to challenge Arthur and the public who supported him on a very crucial subject: school. It was now mid-October, and Arthur's kids were still not attending school on a daily basis. In fact, hundreds of other middle and high school students continued ditching their own classes to join him on the daily clean-up campaigns.

The Los Angeles School Board was furious with Villagrana for not saying something sooner—since school had officially begun in August—and had berated him publicly for aiding and abetting the king by having those "Mural Kids" continue skipping school to do the painting. This controversy was exactly what the mayor had been waiting for. The cracks in the king's armor were beginning to expand, and Villagrana was determined to split them wide open.

Since Helen Schaeffer seemed to be Arthur's chosen Lois Lane, as he'd heard her called, the mayor made certain to invite her, but all the local media were also present. Villagrana made sure the cameras caught the out-of-school mural workers clearly behind him as he addressed the reporters. He felt grand and in charge, wearing his best designer suit and affecting his most concerned look.

"Thank you all for coming down here today on such short notice," he began. "Welcome, Helen, Phil," he said, pointing to some of the regulars. Helen scowled. "As you can all see, the city's mural project is moving along, and we hope to have an unveiling soon. These kids have been working nonstop, and they won't even let me see the work in progress. Is that gratitude or what?"

He flashed a smile.

"However, we have a problem. My office has been flooded with calls—*not true, but these fools don't know that*—from parents of kids who've been skipping school to join Arthur's little parade. And the school boards of Los Angeles and surrounding cities are understandably upset because the schools are showing an increasingly high absentee rate. As you know, every school receives ADA money from the state based on average daily attendance, and Arthur has upward of a thousand kids out there who are not attending school on a consistent basis."

He failed to mention that most of them weren't attending *before* they'd joined up with Arthur, but that was a minor detail the press didn't need to know.

"And while I admit a certain gratitude to Arthur for what he's done in some of our less fortunate parts of town, the fact is, in clear violation of the law, Arthur's kids are ditching school."

One reporter shot up a hand.

"Yes, Jane?"

"Mr. Mayor, aren't you doing the same thing by hiring these children to paint your mural, rather than attend school?"

The mayor affected his most pained expression. He wanted to look as guilty as possible, though he'd secretly hoped someone would bring that up. "Exactly my point, Jane. Like you and everyone else in our fair city, I'd gotten so caught up in what this amazing man has been doing that I, too, forgot our priorities. Yes, of course these kids behind me should be in school. And starting tomorrow, that's exactly where they'll be. No work on the mural will be allowed until after 3:00 p.m. I'm only calling on Arthur to do the same."

Now Helen raised her hand, and Villagrana reluctantly pointed to her, flashing his most welcoming smile. "Yes, Helen?"

"But isn't what Arthur's kids are doing just as important, or more so, than school? Even the kids working on the mural? Aren't they learning more valuable lessons doing what they're doing than they would in a classroom?"

“You may well be right, Helen. But may I remind you that it is the law for children to be in school until the age of eighteen.”

“And who voted for that law, Mr. Mayor, the children or the adults?”

Now Villagrana gritted his teeth, visibly annoyed.

Leave it to that woman to screw everything up!

“I’m not here to debate the semantics of our legal system, Helen. The law is the law.”

“But weren’t you a strong supporter of the state laws that have sent fourteen-year-olds to adult court and thereafter state prison? Do you feel fourteen-year-olds should have the right to vote on such matters, like that, or school attendance?”

Several reporters echoed Helen’s question.

Obviously Arthur’s lunacy about kids being treated as adults was rubbing off on these hacks, Villagrana realized.

Sensing this press conference was spiraling out of control, he said, “That is not the matter before us. I hereby issue a challenge to King Arthur to uphold the law and make his children attend school. Thank you all for coming. Good day.”

He turned and stepped down from the podium amidst myriad follow-up questions tossed his way in vain. Furious at Helen for starting trouble *again*, Villagrana stomped up the steps of City Hall in a huff. Despite the way it had ended, however, the mayor felt confident he’d made his point about school. Now the ball was in Arthur’s court.



To her journalistic credit, Helen had anticipated that the school issue would arise and had already been interviewing parents of Arthur’s knights. Upon returning to the studio, she had her editor put together a short montage of comments by some of these parents, to run as an accompaniment to the mayor’s pompous press conference. Most of the parents, especially those of former gang members, expressed nothing but gratitude toward Arthur. Often through translators, many Latino moms expressed sentiments such as, “This is the first time my son do something good. School never helped, and he didn’t go anyway.”

Darnell’s mother, a jowly woman wearing a flowery housedress and curlers in her mop of hair, enthused about her son’s exploits. “School? That never did no good. Since he be small he never wanted to go. Always runnin’ the streets with them gangsters, always in trouble. Can’t tell you how many trips I done made to juvy court fer him. No, he be much better off with Arthur than he ever done be in school.”

To be fair, however, Helen also aired comments from parents of nongang members whose kids had been ditching school to work with Arthur. While they admired what the man was doing, they worried about their kids not getting an education. However, rather than have Arthur change what *he* was doing, they wanted the school system to change *its* hours so the kids could do both.

Preparing her montage for air, Helen chuckled to herself.

Chew on that, Mr. Mayor!



Lance and Jack had searched all day, up and down Hollywood Boulevard and all the side streets and little spots Jack knew Mark had been known to frequent. A couple of the locals said they'd seen him walking around, but had not spoken with him. Both boys were physically and emotionally frayed by the time they reached the one place Jack dreaded above all others—Santa Monica Boulevard.

It was late at night as they approached the corner where Jack and Mark had first met Arthur. Jack's body trembled, and he paused to compose himself.

Lance stopped beside him. "What's wrong, Jack?" Having never lived in this area, Lance didn't realize the significance of where they were.

"This...", Jack began haltingly, his voice almost a whisper, "this is the place where, you know, Mark and I... worked. The streets." He dropped his gaze in embarrassment.

Lance sucked in a sharp breath and looked up at the corner. Now it made sense. Now he saw the three teen boys, their tight undershirts and pants, the cars cruising back and forth.

"Oh God!" he whispered. "Please don't let us find Mark here."

Jack looked at him in helpless abandon. "This is the only way to survive out here, Lance." His voice choked with apologetic emotion.

Lance nodded, his stomach tightening into a knot.

They continued on to the corner, and Jack made hesitant eye contact with a skinny redhead.

The redhead recognized him. "Didn't think I'd see your ass back out here, since you're so famous now. And you brought the pretty one, too."

Lance blushed again—man, he had to break that habit!

Jack gazed sadly at the redhead. "You know you don't need to be out here anymore, Sam. Arthur will take you in."

The boy smiled a desolate, hopeless smile. "Maybe. But I'm kind a addicted, you know?"

"To drugs?" Lance asked.

The boy shook his head. “Sex.”

Jack nodded, clearly understanding. “You seen Blue Eyes out here tonight?”

“Thought he was with you.”

“Long story. Listen, you wanna join up, you’re welcome any time. Arthur don’t judge us the way most people do.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Jack patted him on the back, and he and Lance strolled off down the street. The other two boys told pretty much the same story, except they were relatively new to the street, and didn’t even know Mark except from the news. But they genuinely seemed excited about joining Arthur’s crusade.

“All you gotta do is just show up and you’re in. Tell ’im Lance and Jack sent you,” Jack informed them distractedly.

Lance found himself drawn to one of the boys, a well-built, longhaired Latino named Ricky, who looked remarkably like him in size and appearance, and who bashfully asked for an autograph.

As Lance hesitantly signed the front of the teen’s white muscle shirt, Ricky gushed quietly, “I’ve wanted to meet you for so long.”

Stepping back, Lance wasn’t quite sure how to respond. Unlike all the girls who’d flirted with him so shamelessly, this wide-eyed boy seemed genuine and sincere. His open, expectant face, and homeless plight, touched Lance to the heart.

“Uh, thanks, man. I hope you join us.” Lance felt oddly connected to this boy he’d only just met, as though they’d known each other forever.

Ricky looked both joyful and miserable, but he nodded.

Lance offered his best smile. “We gotta bounce, Ricky.”

As they left Ricky behind, Lance leaned in to Jack. “That kid looked *my* age!”

He wondered why he felt so close to a total stranger. He stopped and looked back. Ricky stood beneath the pool of streetlight looking like he wanted to follow, and Lance was tempted to invite him. But then he thought of Mark, and their mission, and sprinted after Jack as he hurried along the busy street.

“He probably has parents like mine,” Jack offered matter-of-factly when Lance re-joined him. “Or Mark’s. He was only thirteen when I met him out here.”

Thirteen!

Lance tried to imagine how Mark must’ve felt out here, all alone, having to live under such horrific conditions.

Sometimes I’d pretend they loved me, you know, just ’cause I was so lonely. Mark’s words came back to haunt him because now he understood what his friend had meant.

And you never told him you loved him, did you?

Jack pointed out that there were hardly any boys out selling themselves, and that made him feel good about what they'd accomplished with Arthur.

Lance had noted the same thing. "But where's Mark?"

Jack shrugged, his face clouded with worry.

Lance watched some of the cars cruise slowly past, the drivers obviously checking them out. A chill rippled through him. "Are all these cars, you know?"

"Johns, looking to do us?" Jack spat out with more vehemence than he'd planned. "Yeah."

Lance shivered with revulsion. They stopped at an unoccupied corner and looked around.

"Well?" Lance asked. "What now?"

Jack shuddered a moment, and then stripped off his shirt and tied it around his waist. "This," he said, disgust in his voice.

Lance gaped. "What're you...?"

"It's the only way, Lance. I gotta act like I'm selling to talk to these creeps. When they stop, I can ask about Mark. You go over there—" He pointed to a dark alcove. "—and hide."

"Hell, no! I'm not leavin' you out here alone."

"You got to, or nobody'll stop."

"Why not?"

Jack pointed to Lance's clothes. "Cause you don't look like you're selling."

Lance considered but a second, and then stripped off his own shirt, tying it around his waist. "Now I do."

Jack shook his head, turning red as he gazed at Lance's naked torso. "Hell, no, Lance! I can't let you. Some of these guys are dangerous."

Lance stood firm, his muscles tight with anticipation. "I can take care of myself. Now let's do this!"

Jack looked long and hard at him, looking ready to protest, but Lance met his gaze head on, and never wavered. Reluctantly, Jack nodded.

And so they stood and waited. Jack flexed and unflexed his chest and arms as a lure, and Lance couldn't help but stare. He couldn't bring himself to look anywhere else, despite his best efforts.

Fortunately, they didn't have long to wait.

A dark sedan cruised past and made a quick U-turn back in their direction.

Jack tensed up. "Let me do the talking."

As the car slid to a stop at the curb, Jack stepped forward, shielding Lance and giving him only a partial view of the man in the car.

But as the guy leaned his head out the open window, Lance saw he was

middle-aged, with professionally styled hair. He looked ordinary, like a doctor or lawyer.

The man looked at Jack, and his face lit up. "Well, if it isn't Great Guns!"

Jack groaned.

The man glanced around, saw the street was essentially empty of boys, and turned back to Jack. "My favorite muscle stud is back. I thought you retired, buff boy, off to join *the crusade*. Missed me, I bet." He winked lasciviously, and Lance's stomach did a flip-flop.

"I'm looking for Blue Eyes."

"I can do you much better than that little boy can." He laughed. "And I pay, too." He wiggled his eyebrows seductively.

Jack stepped forward with clenched fists, but Lance pulled him back, catching the man's attention. His eyes bugged out of his head. "Whoa, what have you brought me?"

"No one! He's not for sale!" Jack tried to push Lance behind him, but it was too late.

The man practically leapt from the car. He was dressed in a button-down shirt, sports jacket and slacks, and looked like he'd just come from a board meeting.

Lance stood his ground as the man came around the car and virtually drooled at the sight of him, undressing every inch of him with his eyes.

"You are the famous *Sir Lance*, the most beautiful boy I have *ever* laid eyes on," the man cooed, his wide eyes pooling with hunger. "God, the things I've dreamed of doing to you."

Lance recoiled.

Jack pushed the man back. "I told you, we're not selling. We're looking for Blue Eyes."

Now the man looked cannily from Lance's bare torso to Jack. "And what if I know where he is."

Jack grabbed him by the lapels, his muscles bulging.

The man eyed him as though Jack were pond scum. "Take your guns off me, boy, or I'll have your ass in jail so fast, your head will spin."

Jack released the man and stepped back. "Sorry, Mr. D., I'm just worried about my friend."

The man's icy-hard eyes flicked from Jack to Lance. His eyes seemed to brim with lust, and he licked his lips.

Lance shuddered, frozen with terror.

Suddenly, he was six years old again....

"*You like that, don't you, my little fag boy....*"

Holding his breath, Lance crossed his arms across his torso and cowered as

Mr. D. tugged his ravening eyes away and turned them back on Jack. “And what’s it worth to you to find him?”

“No,” Jack insisted. “You can’t have him. I’ll go with you.”

Lance stepped forward recklessly, shaking off his past. “No, Jack, he’s lying. He don’ know nuthin’ about Mark!”

The man smirked. “Maybe, maybe not. See, Sir Lance, Great Guns, here, is a *great* lay, let me tell you. Awesome ass, unbelievable stamina.” Jack lowered his head in humiliation, and anger swept over Lance in waves. “But I’ve had his ass before. I *want* yours, and I’m willing to pay. I’ll clue you in on your little boyfriend and pay you, say, a thousand for the both of you? We’d make an awesome sandwich, don’t you think?”

Lance blanched with revulsion, and fury. How dare this prick talk about Jack like that?

“No,” Jack said firmly, swallowing his fear. “We’re done here.”

“We’re not done till I say so, *bottom* boy. I’m talking to *Sir* Lance here. How about it, pretty one?” That hungry gaze swept over him once more. “I *have* to have you. I’ll up it to two. Now that much money could certainly buy a few trinkets for this beautiful bod, eh?” And then he made his mistake. He reached out and placed one hand on Lance’s chest.

Lance unwrapped his arms and whipped out one of Arthur’s dirks, pinning it to the man’s throat so fast that even Jack stepped back in fright.

“Touch me again, you prick, and I’ll cut your throat!”

The man’s eyes bulged again, not with lust this time, but with terror.

“Now get your child-raping ass out of here before I cut off your balls and throw ’em down the sewer!”

Lance lowered the weapon just enough for the terrified man to slide down beneath it. Then Mr. D. was into his car and peeling off down the street before Jack could barely blink.

Lance held out the blade, though the man was long gone, his breathing ragged, his nerves thrumming.

“Lance?” Jack whispered uncertainly.

Lance turned to his friend, lowering the knife to his side. “I don’t like being touched.”

Jack blew out a breath. “Remind me never to piss *you* off.”

Lance slipped the knife back into the sheath inside his pants. His shaking had begun to subside.

“You’re pretty badass, Lance.” Then Jack’s face darkened, and the words seemed to choke in his throat. “About what he said, about me....”

Lance waved it away. “You’re my friend, Jack. That’s all I care about.”

Their eyes met, the moment awkward and uncertain, and then Lance impulsively hugged the bigger boy, partly to feel some basic human contact after such a disturbing episode, but also to reassure Jack that everything that prick said meant nothing to him.

He pulled away, and Jack smiled, slipping his tunic off his waist and pulling it over his head.

Lance did the same.

“We’re not doing that anymore,” Jack announced. “Too dangerous.” Then he grinned. “You might kill someone.”

Lance tried for a smile, but his heart pounded with dread. He *might* kill someone, he suddenly realized, and that truth terrified him. A lot.

“We’ll just keep looking till we find Mark,” Jack continued, glancing up and down the street once more. “He’s out here somewhere.”

Lance flinched when Jack placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, and flicked his eyes onto the older boy’s face apologetically.

“Sorry,” he gasped. “A little jumpy after that, I guess.”

Jack guided him to a strategic, but shadowed spot that offered a clear view of the strip. They sat up against a building, shoulder to shoulder and waited. But Mark never appeared.

Late into the night, Lance received a text on his phone. When he slowly pulled it out, he saw it was from Arthur. Should he open it?

“Aren’t you going to check it? Maybe he’s heard something.”

Lance opened the text, which read: *Any word yet on Sir Mark?*

Jack deflated when he saw that. “Damn.”

Lance hesitated again and did not thumb in a reply.

“Aren’t you gonna answer him?”

Lance frowned, and gloom overwhelmed him.

Anyone can carry the banner.

“Yeah.” He thumbed in *No* and then added, *not yet*. Then he slipped the phone back into his pocket.

“You okay, Lance?”

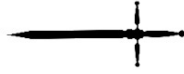
Lance nodded sadly.

“Aren’t you curious about how things are going back there?”

“Naw. They got it covered. Don’t need me.”

Jack opened his mouth to protest, but Lance turned away.

After several fruitless hours with no sign of Mark, the boys finally drifted off to sleep beside one another, and mercifully Lance did not suffer unpleasant dreams.



Once Arthur got wind of the mayor's challenge, he called together a meeting of his most prominent knights. And he invited Jenny. She'd been surprised, but pleased to receive his phone call. She had been correct—one of the cellular carriers set him up with a phone and a family plan to include many of his knights whom he'd placed in leadership positions. Arthur seemed nervous speaking on the phone when he invited her to the meeting. It had to do with the mayor's challenge, he'd said. Had she seen it on TV? She assured him she had and would attend that meeting the following day.

When she'd hung up, she'd gone to her closet and begun rooting through her clothes. She actually did something she hadn't done in ages—fretted over what to wear.

She finally settled on dress slacks and a long-sleeved blouse that had a tunic-like feel to it. She decided she wanted to be one of Arthur's group and not separate from it.

When she arrived the next morning, Arthur was seated on his throne nervously drumming his fingers on the armrest. Seated around him were Esteban, Reyna, Enrique, Luis, Lavern, Darnell, Tai, Duc, Jaime, and Justin. Chris sat beside Arthur's throne, absently tossing a football up and down, looking lost and forlorn.

Arthur looked up and leapt to his feet when Jenny entered. "Good day, Lady Jenny," he offered with an almost nervous bow.

The boys rose and bowed and said, "Welcome, Lady Jenny." Reyna tilted her head in greeting.

So taken aback was she by the welcome that at first she failed to notice the absence of Lance. But as she collected herself and tilted her head to acknowledge the greeting, her face clouded. "Where's Lance?"

Chris piped up, "On a quest, milady."

A chill crept up her back. "What kind of quest?"

Arthur waved her over to sit beside him, in the large wooden chair normally reserved for Lance alone. "Alas, milady, one of our knights, Sir Mark, has gone missing."

"You mean he ran away," Chris mumbled with a sullen toss of the football.

Jenny instantly became concerned. "What happened?"

Arthur fell silent, and Jenny felt certain she detected guilt, maybe even embarrassment, in his eyes. "It be complicated, milady. A misunderstanding. Sirs Lance and Jack have gone in search of him."

"Has there been any word, Arthur?" asked Reyna.

“No.”

“When’s Lance coming back, Arthur?” Chris asked sadly. “And Jack.”

Arthur patted the small boy on the head. “Soon, Sir Christopher.” Then he turned to the group. “Shall we begin?”

Jenny eyed the seat, pictured Lance sitting in it, and shook her head. “That’s Lance’s seat. I’ll sit on the floor.” And she did, right beside Reyna.

Arthur eyed her, then the empty seat, and frowned.

“So,” Jenny began, “you were right, what you said about the mayor. That city hall mural is just a publicity stunt.”

The kids agreed.

Arthur nodded soberly. “His ilk has not changed in twelve centuries.” He surveyed the group. “To what do you all attribute the mayor’s challenge to me regarding school?”

“It’s a trap, Arthur,” Esteban spoke up at once. “He’s trying to get ya to admit you be breaking the law.”

“Sir Este, be right, Arthur,” Justin chimed in. “The mayor, he wants an excuse to bust your—I mean, to arrest you and do it all nice and legal like. My dad’d probably be the guy hauling you off to jail.”

The kids laughed and then fell silent again.

Reyna raised her hand. “Unfortunately, Arthur, that’s the way things work here. We kids have to be in school Monday thru Friday, whether we learn anything or not.”

“Mostly not,” chimed in Darnell, which earned him a high five from Jaime.

“What about home schooling?” Duc suggested. “One a the kids I used to kick it with never went to school. His mom, like, taught him stuff at home. He just had to pass tests or something.”

The others nodded. Home schooling was obviously not unknown to them.

Arthur turned to Jenny. “You be silent, Jenny. Since education hath been thy livelihood, what be your opinion?”

Jenny bit her bottom lip. Their talk of home schooling had given her an idea. A plan. A crazy, audacious, probably impossible-to-execute plan.

“I have an idea,” she announced, grinning at Arthur, whose eyebrows rose questioningly.



This time it was Arthur who called Helen and asked her to set up a press conference at City Hall and she was only too delighted to help. The mayor was informed and the event scheduled again for 3:00 p.m. That particular time was at

Villagrana's insistence—he wanted to hammer home the school-hours issue. Thus he could reiterate to the public that Arthur's kids—which he would surely bring—had *not* been to school that day.

Council President Sanders cautioned the mayor about losing his cool or allowing himself to be sucked into some stupid debate about “rights for children, for God's sake.” Villagrana assured him that *he*, not Arthur, would control this press conference.



At five minutes before three, a crush of reporters and camera operators crowded around the stage and podium, with the Mural Project in the background. Only this time, there were no kids working on it. Scores of onlookers stood anxiously behind the reporters awaiting the arrival of Arthur.

Suddenly, a ripple of excitement filtered through them as the king appeared, flanked by his leadership team. Arthur carried Chris in his arms, and Jenny walked at his right side. A buzz went through the crowd because no one had ever seen her before.

Arthur and his crew strode up to the platform where the mayor, flashing his most camera-ready smile, greeted them.

“Welcome, King Arthur. We meet at last.”

The crowd cheered, not for the mayor, but for Arthur. They started chanting, “Arthur, Arthur, Arthur, Arthur!” causing Villagrana to lose that pasted-on smile very quickly.

Arthur held up a gauntleted hand to the crowd, and they settled down at once. He felt resplendent in his purple tunic and scarlet cloak and golden crown. He set Chris down, and Reyna stepped up to take the boy's hand.

The mayor indicated the microphone embedded in the podium, and Arthur hesitated.

“You talk into it,” Reyna whispered in his ear.

He gave her a grateful grin and moved closer to the mic. “Ye have challenged me, Mr. Mayor, to return my knights to thy schools. Does that be correct?”

He stepped back, and the mayor leaned in. “That's correct, yes.”

“And yet,” Arthur went on, returning to the mic, “methinks thy schools have already had their chance. Thy system hath not only failed to educate these children in counting and linguistic skills, it cannot even teach such basics as right and wrong.”

The crowd roared its approval.

The mayor leaned in. “It's not the job of schools to teach right and wrong.”

“Then may I ask whose job it d be?”

“It’s the job of parents.”

“Do parents spend every moment with their children, Mr. Mayor? It seems to me that teaching and modeling right from wrong be the responsibility of *all* adults.”

The crowd roared even louder.

Villagrana stepped to the mic. “Look, we’re not here to debate. The law says these kids must be in school, period. Do you have any idea how much money you’re costing the schools by keeping your kids out?”

“What hath money to do with this issue?”

The mayor sighed smugly. “Let me educate you, *King*. In this country schools are funded with money by how many students are present each day. Every kid in every school each day is worth money to that school.”

“So, if I understand thee correctly, it be important for these knights of mine to be in school for the school to have money, whether they actually learn anything of value or not?”

Another roar of approval soared out from the crowd. Jenny and Arthur’s knights exchanged quick looks of approval.

Villagrana glared daggers at Arthur. “You are in violation of state law, sir. I could have you arrested here and now.”

The crowd booed vociferously.

“And all of my knights as well?” Arthur replied calmly, indicating those with him. “I could call upon the other thousand to join us.”

The crowd hooted with laughter, and Villagrana squirmed like a fish on a hook.

“Ye and thine have failed these children, Mr. Mayor,” Arthur said, looking straight at the man. “I be their teacher now, and there be nothing you can do to change that. And do you know why? Because I give them a choice. You and yours do not.”

Villagrana was fuming. “You are *not* a credentialed teacher!”

That was Jenny’s cue, and she stepped forward to the mic, practically shoving the mayor aside. “*I* am. I have a multi-subject credential and a single- subject credential, and I’ve resigned my position at Mark Twain High School to work exclusively with Arthur’s knights. Between he and I, they’ll learn all the lessons they need.”

A wild cheer and thunderous clapping arose from the crowd.

Arthur faced off against Villagrana and bowed respectfully. “Good day to you, sir.”

The flabbergasted mayor stood open-mouthed as Arthur took Jenny’s arm, leading her and his knights off the podium and through the phalanx of reporters.

They threw ad-libbed questions his way, but he just smiled and moved on to the crowd of onlookers. These were the people he needed on his side, and he thanked them all for coming out to support him. After he and the kids signed numerous autographs, the posse set off on their return journey to The Hub.



Most of the leadership team went their separate ways, peeling off to their homes upon agreement to meet as usual tomorrow. They would clean up some areas in Van Nuys in the morning while Jenny decided how best the school lessons should be dispensed. Obviously, she could not teach a thousand kids at once, though that would be the ultimate extension of today's public school policy, she'd mused, since nowadays the goal seemed to be cramming as many kids into one room as possible.

No. More likely, they'd work in shifts, just like home schooling was done, with she and Arthur supervising the older kids and the older ones helping to teach the younger. Half of each day, they decided as they left City Hall, would be devoted to learning, and the other half to doing. The clean-ups were going so well that these could not be halted. Two half-days in a given area should suffice for clean-up of that entire neighborhood.

Enrique, Lavern, and Luis had remained behind to work on the mural, calling the other artists on their cells to join them. Since the mayor refused to let them work during school hours, they only had a brief window of sunlight each day to work with.

As soon as Arthur entered The Hub, Chris trailing behind, he pulled out his phone to check for messages.

"No word from Lance?" Jenny asked from beside him.

Arthur shook his head. Something was wrong. He could feel it. In the first Camelot, the seed of doom had been Mordred. But there was no Mordred this time. So why did he feel that shadow of doom approaching?

"Can we play catch, sire?" Chris asked, running to snatch up the football he'd left beside Arthur's throne.

Arthur smiled down at him. Such innocence, he thought as he gently stroked the boy's long blond hair.

How much like Mark he looks.

"In a bit, Sir Christopher," he replied with a smile. "I must needs speak with the lady for a time."

Chris looked crestfallen. "Okay." And he took off.

"Are you going to tell me what happened with Mark?" Jenny asked, breaking

into his thoughts.

He sighed, pulled two chairs over next to each other, and they sat. And he told her everything. He even showed her Mark's letter.

She admitted that she'd not expected something like this, but understood how it could happen.

"Arthur, these children you've collected are damaged, some very deeply. They've been told for so long they're worthless that all they can see in themselves is failure and weakness. They can't see their strengths, or successes, even when adults like us help bring those things to their attention. They almost set themselves up for failure because the very idea of success is too foreign, and too scary. There's only so much any of us adults can do to try and repair that kind of damage. Mark's feelings for you aren't your fault."

"But I should have seen it, Jenny. Had I just spent more time with him, I'd have seen it in his eyes. Then perhaps I..."

"What? What could you have done? Told him *not* to feel that way? Arthur, kids are not adults, even though this state likes to pretend they are when they get in trouble. They don't have the experience to process feelings like we do, and they can't reason things out as well. It's not built in yet. No matter what you might've done differently, Mark would still feel rejected because you can't be the person he wants you to be."

Arthur digested her very astute opinions. "Ye be a remarkable woman, Jenny. Wise beyond thy years, methinks."

She nodded her thanks at the compliment, and they fell silent a moment. "Methinks, Jenny, I may have lost Lance, as well." It was barely a whisper.

She looked at him sharply. "What do you mean? Is he okay?"

Arthur turned to gaze at the empty chair that should have been occupied by his First Knight, the most remarkable boy he'd ever encountered. But the chair was silent. And so was his phone. Why did Lance not communicate with him?

"I don't know."

He fell silent, lost in his thoughts, going over and over in his mind how he may have hurt the boy. But there'd been so much happening, so many challenges, so many words exchanged between them.

It could be almost anything.

That shadow of doom he felt hovering over the crusade morphed into Lance's eager young face.



Jack and Lance were once again patrolling in and around Hollywood Boulevard,

but this time up and down cross streets and side streets to any place Jack thought Mark might have gone, any place he might have forgotten to check. This was now their second full day, and all they'd found out was that Mark had been seen in the area, and he'd looked like he was using again. That news had deepened Jack's depression, and Lance fought hard to keep both their spirits from flagging.

After the incident involving Mr. D., Lance felt even worse for Mark and Jack than he had before. To have to live like that, to be used and humiliated by guys like that—he couldn't even imagine it.

Their celebrity status tagged along wherever they went, and Lance dreaded each new encounter with their "fans." They reluctantly posed for pictures with gushing strangers, accepted phone numbers from insincere girls, shook hands with those who thought their crusade was "awesome," and tried to ignore the constant pointing and gawking as they navigated their way along the streets.

It was late afternoon when Lance finally insisted they stop, sit, and rest a little. He was dog-tired. They'd slept very little last night because they'd needed to keep their eyes open for Mark, and they were flaming out.

Spotting a bus stop bench up one of the side streets, the boys trudged over and plopped down heavily. They sat a moment in silence.

Jack sighed. "Any word from Arthur?"

Lance made a noise like a snort. "No."

"What's goin' on with you two?"

"Nothing."

"Don't BS me, Lance. What happened?"

Lance sulked a moment, running the exchange over in his mind for the hundredth time. "Just somethin' he said, 'fore we left."

"I was there. Don't remember anything to make you mad."

"He said," Lance began, then stopped to pull his breathing under control. "When I asked if I could go with you to look for Mark...."

Jack squinted in the harsh afternoon sun.

"He said it was fine, 'cause anyone could carry the banner."

"Yeah, so, anybody could. What's the—"

Lance turned on him, his eyes blazing. "I thought I was more important to his crusade than that, Jack! Didn't know I was just a nothing flag carrier!"

Jack leaned away from Lance's vitriol. "What you talkin' about? Don't you know... you got no clue who you *are* to him?"

Confusion washed over Lance. "What do you mean?"

Jack shook his head in amazement. "Oh man, Lance. You are one of the smartest kids I know, and the hottest boy I ever laid eyes on, but man, you're blind as a bat, dude!"

“What’re you talking about, Jack?”

“Arthur, man!” Jack exclaimed in frustration. “Don’t you know what you are to him? Haven’t you seen the way he looks at you? Dude, I used to be so damned jealous of you when I got there and saw you guys together.”

Lance stared at Jack blankly.

Jack placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “You’re his *son*, man, didn’t you know that? It’s all over his eyes and face, the pride he has in you. God, he loves you more’n all the rest of us put together!”

Lance’s mouth dropped open at the word “son,” and stayed open in shock until Jack finished. Could it be true? Could what he so hoped for...? Could Arthur *really* love him? Him, who wasn’t *worthy* of love? He shook his head.

No. Not me.

“If he loves me so much, how come he never said nothing, huh?” He tried for strength of conviction, but his voice cracked and broke.

Jack shook his head, anguish flooding his face, remorse drowning his soul. “I don’t know, man! Same stupid-ass reason I never told Mark I loved *him*, I guess.”

Lance sat back against the bench seat in astonished silence. The tightness had nearly choked off his breathing.

Could it be true?

Jack shook his head again sadly. “Man, if my dad ever looked at me once the way Arthur looks at you, I’d have had a heart attack and died right there.”

Lance turned his head to see a tear drop from Jack’s eye.

“Only reason I played football was to make him happy, and I worked my ass off, worked out like a crazy man to get buff and tough. And I liked it, too, don’t get me wrong, Lance. But I was *never* good enough. Even when I scored a touchdown, in his eyes I *always* could a done it better. And oh hell, when he found out I was gay, that was the end. I was *nothing* anymore except what he told the coach I was—a disgusting faggot lusting after my teammates. That’s *my* old man, Lance. But Arthur? He’s so frickin’ proud of you, for everything you do, man, for everything you are, but you can’t see it, and I can. Crazy, huh?”

Jack’s shame and rejection seemed to fill the air, smothering them both under a thick blanket of agony.

Was it true, Lance considered, his mind pinwheeling from what Jack had said about Arthur, or was it merely Jack’s perception of the truth? Was he actually worthy of being Arthur’s son? It was true, he reflected back, that Arthur had certainly complimented him a lot in the beginning, and encouraged him, even though he hadn’t felt he’d earned that praise.

And yet, ever since the Round Table had gotten bigger, the man’s attention

seemed to be on everyone *but* him. Arthur never asked for his help or advice anymore, never seemed to want leadership from the boy. All he'd really done of late was carry that stupid banner and coordinate some of the clean-up operations, even though his fellow knights knew the drill by heart and didn't need his input. Had he done something to let the king down? If so, he couldn't think what it was, and his stomach twisted painfully as he struggled to understand what he'd done wrong.

Maybe, just maybe, he hadn't done anything wrong. And maybe Arthur's crack about carrying the banner, well, maybe that *was* just because he was upset about Mark....

Lance eyed Jack uncertainly, his stomach tight, his heart racing with uncertainty. "Maybe I should text him, huh?"

Jack twisted his tear-streaked face around. "Ya think?"

That made Lance smile.

As he reached for his phone, Jack suddenly grabbed Lance's arm. "Hey, that reminds me! I know a guy who might have seen Mark. Let's go."

They were up and on their feet instantly, Lance's text to Arthur forgotten.

As they hurried back up to Hollywood Boulevard, the crowded sidewalks and heavy traffic made their progress much slower than Jack would've liked. In addition, the more people who saw them, the more who recognized them from the news or the Internet, and waylaid them to stop and talk.

One cute girl with facial piercings who looked no older than thirteen, actually gushed, "I wanna have your baby, Sir Lance!"

Lance's mouth dropped open, and he hurried away before she could make a grab for him.

While Lance continued to fend off the autograph hounds and gawkers, Jack explained about the guy they were going to see. He was a gay geek who ran this little electronics and phone place on the boulevard. He, Mark, and Jack had become friends over the nearly two years the boys had lived in Hollywood. His name was Marcus, and he always gave them cell phones so they could keep in touch and find each other no matter where a john might dump them in the morning. If Mark was out here, Jack reasoned, he might have crashed at Marcus's pad.

The store, called "Phones, Etc.," was on the boulevard near Schrader, and after what seemed an eternity dodging fans, they arrived at the little place. There were two display windows with various models of prepaid and contract phones, as well as other electronic junk like mini slot machines or wind-up elephants that could shoot actual water.

Marcus, a skinny, late twenties, African-American wearing a ball cap

backward and huge gauges stretching out his earlobes, beamed with delight at seeing Jack. “Jacky, my man, what’s crackin’?”

He came around the counter and threw his arms around Jack, even kissing him on the cheek. Lance looked away. Marcus eyed Lance but a moment before snapping his fingers. “I knew it! You’re—”

“Sir Lance,” Lance replied with an extended sigh. “Yeah, I’ve been told that a few times today.” God, he hated being famous.

Marcus blew a kiss Lance’s way, which caused him to blush, and then squeezed Jack’s biceps like it was his favorite hobby in the world. “Still buff as hell, Jacky, my man. What brings you back to the ’hood?”

Jack’s face instantly darkened. “It’s Mark, man, he’s gone missing, and we been searching since yesterday. You haven’t seen ’im, have you?”

“He got his phone on ’im?”

Jack nodded. “But he don’t pick up or answer texts.”

Marcus winked at Lance. “This boy is buff as hell and can throw a football better’n them NFL dudes, but he don’t know crap about technology.” He raised his eyebrows at Lance questioningly.

Lance shrugged. “Me, either, man. Just know it works.”

Marcus shook his head in despair. “Kids.” Then he turned back to Jack. “Gimme your phone.”

Jack pulled it out of his pocket and handed it over. Marcus slipped around behind the counter and sat in front of a computer screen. He fished around until he found a USB cord to connect Jack’s phone to his computer.

“Thing is, see, all these new phones got global positioning chips and locator technology built right in. I can use his number to track his phone, Jack. Show you exactly where he’s at.”

Jack cursed himself. “I never thought of that.”

Lance also felt like a fool. “Sorry, Jack, I didn’t think of it either.”

“That’s ’cause you guys’re too hot to be geeks,” Marcus said, waving them over to the counter.

They waited expectantly while Marcus triangulated on Mark’s location. A map of Hollywood appeared on the computer screen and then began zooming slowly in. And in. And in. Finally it stopped, and Jack leaned as far over the counter as he could.

“That Vine Street?” Jack asked, squinting to get a better view.

“Yeah,” Marcus confirmed. “But see this little street just up from Vine?” He pointed to the screen. “Cosmo? That’s where the signal is. Phone’s not moving either. Looks like he’s right on that street, maybe an alley?” He turned with a grin. “See, piece of cake.” He disconnected the phone and handed it back. “Left

the map on it for you.”

Jack looked like he wanted to cry happy tears. He reached out and clasped Marcus’s hand. “Thank you, Marcus, thank you ssssooo much!”

“Anything for you, buff boy. Give my love to Mark.”

“C’mon, Lance,” Jack said, bolting from the store.

Lance nodded his thanks to Marcus.

“Take good care of him, cutie,” Marcus said, winking, and an embarrassed Lance dashed after Jack.

Now they ran, and ran hard. Every bit of exhaustion was gone, and adrenaline had taken over. They dodged people and cars and wheelchairs and dogs and even cops. They were frantic with excitement that their quest was nearing its end.

Finally, just ahead, loomed the world-famous and heavily trafficked intersection of Hollywood and Vine with its theatres and trendy shops, but Cosmo was half a block before that. They stopped to catch their breath, and Jack glanced down at the map on his phone screen. The little stickpin was to their right.

They turned and pelted down Cosmo and stopped again. It was a tiny street with no traffic. Jack and Lance both consulted the map, and Lance looked around. Across the street behind a building were some dumpsters, including a huge industrial-sized one in a little alley.

He glanced back at the phone and then nudged Jack, pointing toward the alley. “There.”

The boys jogged across the empty street as Jack slipped the phone into his pocket. They halted at the mouth of the alley. It looked deserted.

“Mark?” Jack called out hesitantly. There was no response.

They walked slowly into the alley. Dumpsters lined the walls on the right side and Lance knew they could get jumped by some strung-out junkie or crazy-ass homeless person. He’d seen it happen before.

As they walked quietly, Jack whispered, “Oh please, God, don’t let Mark have lost his phone.”

Lance glanced at him. That thought hadn’t occurred to him.

Suddenly Jack stopped and pointed. Lance gasped. What looked like two feet, twisted up, were sticking out from behind the industrial dumpster. There were leather boots on those feet. Exactly like the ones Jack and Lance were wearing.

“Oh no,” Jack whispered, as a tear worked its way from one eye. Petrified, Jack couldn’t even move, except for his fists clenching and unclenching.

Lance inched his way around the dumpster, his wide eyes fixed upon those boots.

Don’t let it be.... Please!

There was trash scattered around the overflowing dumpster. Gradually more of the body came into view. A shirt became visible from beneath the garbage—a *sky blue* shirt. Lance put a hand to his mouth. His heart thumped, his legs wobbled, his breath froze in his throat. He forced himself to step closer.

The face was covered by a plastic bag that had probably fallen from the overfull dumpster. One of the long shirtsleeves was rolled up, revealing a pale white arm with marks along it. Needle marks. And there was an empty syringe lying beside the body.

Lance felt his stomach clenching. He reached down, dreading what he would find, but needing to know the truth.

He pulled the bag away.

Mark's long blond hair was dirty and disheveled, his mouth open in a silent grimace of pain, his usually lustrous blue eyes open and pale and staring lifelessly from their sockets. He was dead.

Lance cried out and stumbled back, even as Jack pushed his way forward. Lance jumped in front, tried vainly to block the view, but the stronger boy lifted him to one side. Lance's hand flew to his mouth. His stomach lurched. He thought he might vomit.

"No," Jack gurgled, shaking his head from side to side. "No. No. No." And then he screamed. "Nnnnnooooo!" and threw himself onto Mark's lifeless body, hugging him, cradling Mark's head in his lap, and burying his face against Mark's silent chest, sobbing uncontrollably, his chest heaving and hitching with unbearable sorrow.

"I love you, Mark!" he blubbered into the dirty blue shirt, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I never told you...." The tears cascaded down Jack's cheeks to stain the light blue of the shirt like acid.

Lance stood rooted in shock, tears streaming down his face, stunned that someone he knew, someone he loved, his best friend who he was supposed to have saved, was dead. Mark was dead! And he never knew. He *never knew* he was loved.

Lance dropped to his knees and took Mark's cold, lifeless hand in his, pressing it to his lurching chest, and sobbed along with Jack. They stayed that way for a long time. What did time matter anyway? The boy they both loved was gone, and he'd died without hope.

Lance went numb with pain and remorse.

I love you, Mark, he said in his mind. I should've told you before. And I should've saved you. You were worthy, Mark. I'm the one who's not....

He didn't even know how long they stayed that way, Jack cradling Mark, him clasping the dead boy's hand to his heart, except it was dark by the time he had

no more tears left in him to shed, and finally recovered enough to call 911.

When the paramedics and police arrived, he had to pry Jack off of Mark so they could take the body away. Even then, Jack desperately wanted to go with the coroner, but was told he could not.

“But you don’t understand,” he told the sympathetic, middle-aged paramedic tearfully. “I loved him. And I never told him.”

The small man with pale gray eyes patted Jack on the shoulder, and Lance took his friend’s arm.

“I’ll take care of him, now. Thanks.”

They watched the coroner’s van pull away, and then Jack threw his arms around Lance in a crushing hug.

An officer approached and asked some questions. Lance haltingly explained as best he could about Mark, about who they were, and how they’d come to find Mark’s... body. His voice choked on the word, almost couldn’t say it. Was that all Mark was now, a body?

The officer, who clearly recognized Lance, offered a sympathetic smile before stepping away.

Lance continued to support Jack, while the police moved around them gathering evidence.

Finally, after a time that had no meaning for him, the same officer approached. “Boys, you can’t stay here. I’ll—”

“I’ll handle it from here, Officer,” another voice, gruff, yet somehow gentle, said in the dark. “You take off.”

Lance didn’t look up as receding footfalls came to his ears. He and Jack remained locked in mutual grief.

“Son,” the voice said softly, “I know you’re Arthur’s boys. Lance and Jack.”

That made Lance turn his head. “Sergeant Ryan?”

Ryan stepped closer, the sickly alley light making his weathered face appear drawn and haggard. “Yeah. I heard about this on the dispatch. I’m sorry about your friend.”

Lance nodded, gently stroking Jack’s hair in a soothing gesture. Jack had stopped crying, finally, but still held on as though drowning, and Lance was his life preserver.

“I couldn’t save him, Sergeant,” Lance murmured, almost in a trance. “I couldn’t save my best friend.” His wide eyes gazed imploringly at the gray-haired detective.

“Let me drop you boys somewhere. This is no place to be on a night like this,” Ryan offered, his voice far different than Lance remembered from the pizza parlor. This voice wasn’t angry, but rather laced with compassion.

Lance nodded again, and led Jack to the detective's four-door sedan. Ryan opened the back door so Lance could guide Jack into the rear seat and slide in beside him.

Lance silently held Jack's hand along the way, absently staring at, without really seeing, broken pieces of pencil strewn randomly about the floor of the car. The boys remained silent and desolate, hands clasped tightly. Lance needed the basic human contact, flesh touching flesh, a reminder of life, rather than death.

No one spoke. Only the raspy engine noise and the uneven thumping of tires against pavement filtered into the car. Still enveloped within a haze of shock, Lance finally asked Ryan to stop at a deserted spot that he knew was close to the LA River.

"You sure?" the detective asked after stopping the car, his head out of the driver's window watching the boys exit, and glancing uneasily at the shadowy, menacing squalor surrounding them.

Lance turned his devastated eyes on the weathered face peering out at him. "Yes, sir. This will be fine. Thank you for your kindness."

"Least I could do, Lance. Give Arthur my regards." Ryan drove off into the night.

Lance led Jack down the embankment and along the dry riverbed to the storm drain entrance, but balked at going in. He felt overwhelmed with confusion. Hurt cocooned him—hurt over Mark, and over his relationship with Arthur. What could he even say to the king? Would Arthur blame him for Mark's death because he hadn't found his friend in time? Wasn't that the quest he'd been given, and then failed so miserably? He was the one in charge, Arthur's chosen one. Hadn't Arthur called him that on many an occasion? And hadn't Jack insisted that Arthur was proud of him? But how could he be proud now?

I let Mark die! I let my friend die!

No. He had to think. He needed to skate. That would clear his head. Yeah, he'd skate for Mark. He'd skate 'til he dropped. He'd skate until he could bring Mark back and make everything right again!

Guiding Jack through the grate, Lance retrieved his skateboard, which he'd left behind when they'd embarked on their quest.

"Jack, can you hear me?"

Jack looked over at Lance, his face riddled with shock and despair.

"I can't go in, Jack. I can't face him. Or you. I failed Mark, man." New tears doubled, and then trebled his vision. "I'm First Knight, it was my job to save him, and I let him die! I gotta go, Jacky. I just gotta go. I don't know where, but I gotta go!"

He spun around and dashed frantically off into the night.

“Lance, wait!” Jack called out and leapt forward to follow, but the receding scrape and roll of receding skateboard wheels against pavement told him his friend was gone.

Broken and bereft, Jack slumped down onto a concrete balustrade.

“Now they’re both gone,” he mumbled despairingly. “I lost ’em both.”

The tears returned in force, and he buried his head in his hands, sobbing quietly, with only the forlorn sound of dripping water to keep him company.

CHAPTER 11: HOW CAN I FACE HIM?

ARTHUR STOOD IN THE HUB and observed his young charges. They had eaten dinner and cleaned up their trash. Now many practiced their swordplay or sat playing board games or texting on their phones or just chatting with one another. Jenny had returned to her home, and Arthur already felt her absence.

But it was Lance on his mind, and Mark. Anxiety crept into his heart, and that dark shadow of doom that looked so much like Lance kept clawing at his soul, at his conscience, at his memories. He pulled out his cell phone and glanced at the screen—no message from Lance. Or Jack. He'd texted Lance every fifteen minutes for the past hour, with no result. What could be wrong? Where could his... the boy have gone? And what of Jack? He, also, had not responded to his texts.

Damn!

This amazing invention that made it so easy to talk to anyone in the world at a moment's notice sat in his hand, useless as a mute messenger boy from his own time. At least back then one was accustomed to not receiving an answer to a summons right away. He sighed, realizing that he was acclimating to this era faster than he could ever have imagined—he already wanted everything to happen immediately, if not sooner.

“Oh Lord, watch over me and these children ye hast given me,” he intoned softly, head bent as he paced.

He heard laughter and glanced up to see Chris playing tag with Lavern and some of the other boys, laughing and jostling and running from each other as though the rest of the world mattered not. That much at least, he mused, had not changed since his own boyhood.

So lost was he in his thoughts that when Arthur turned to pace back the way he'd come he nearly collided with a bedraggled and haggard-looking Jack, whose tunic was dirty and stained, his curly black hair disheveled, his face tear-streaked, his wide brown eyes orphaned of hope.

“Sir Jack!” Arthur exclaimed in surprise, causing the other boys within The Hub to stop what they were doing and turn to look.

Jack threw his arms about Arthur and hugged him, his whole body shaking

with despair.

Arthur's fears engulfed him. "Sir Jack, when did you return? Hast thou found Mark? Where is Lance?"

Jack could not speak, continued trembling, struggled to find his voice, but could not seem to regain control.

Arthur led him to some chairs and sat him down gently, while Chris, Lavern, and the other kids gathered round in silence. This was the second time Chris had seen Jack cry. To him, Jack was practically a man and he had never seen men cry. He knew that whatever happened had to be *really* bad.

Arthur sat cautiously beside him, gently placing one hand on Jack's shoulder and squeezing slightly. "Sir Jack? Tell me."

"Mark's dead!" Jack blurted out, his gaze locked on the floor.

Chris gasped.

"What?" Arthur felt like he'd been pierced straight through the heart.

Jack nodded through his tears, and Arthur lovingly cradled the boy's head against his shoulder.

"Canst thou tell me what happened?"

"He OD'd, man," Jack mumbled. "He died in a dirty old alley, all alone."

"OD'd?"

Now Jack whipped his head up in fury. "Drugs, dammit, he went back to the stinkin' drugs!"

The surrounding boys gasped again, and Chris began to cry.

Arthur was stunned, his stomach knotting. "Dear God in heaven!" He paused, Mark's letter replaying itself in his mind. "Because of me.... Oh, Sir Jack, did I truly give that impression, that I would hate one of mine own?"

Jack shook his head, tears overflowing onto his pants and turning the light brown dark. "No, and I told him that, but he was so ashamed for the way he felt. I told him it was okay...." He looked up at Arthur through tear-blurred eyes. "Oh God, Arthur, he never even knew how much I loved him. He was all I had!"

Arthur's eyes welled up and blurred his vision. "Nay, Jack, thou hast me."

Jack continued to cry, and Arthur pulled him in, rocking him gently in his arms.

Suddenly, Jack's words hit Arthur like a slap to the face—*He never knew how much I loved him.*

He pulled Jack's head away to look straight into the boy's eyes, doom choking his soul. "Lance, Sir Jack! Where is Lance?"

Jack shook his head in confusion, swiping snot away from his nose with his sleeve. "I don't know, Arthur. He was mad at you for saying something about carrying the banner." Arthur flinched. "And now he blames himself, said it was

his job to save Mark, and he failed you. He took off, Arthur. He just got crazy and took off!”

He pulled away from the king and stood. “Oh God, Arthur, he was crazy upset. He might do something stupid. We gotta find him before...” He choked back a sob. “I can’t lose him, too!”

Arthur’s face reeked of guilt and shame, but determination pounded through him. “Nor can I.”

He stood and addressed the onlooking boys, all of whom stood frozen with shock. “As ye have heard, my noble knights, one of our own hath fallen, and we shall pay him the honor that is his due. For now, we must needs find Sir Lance! That be of the utmost import. Take thy phones and spread out around the city. Find him, and assure him of our love and protection.” He’d almost said “my love,” but foolishly chose not to.

There were mumbled, “yes, sires,” and accompanying bows, and the boys scattered to gather their knives and phones. Within seconds, only Chris remained, still in tears and gazing silently at Jack.

Chris ran to him and threw his small arms around Jack in a tight hug of comfort. Jack gratefully hugged him back and just held him tenderly.

Arthur pulled out his phone and typed in Jenny’s number. The kids had attempted to train him on features such as speed dial, but he could never get the hang of it. Her phone rang once, twice, and on the third ring she picked up. A frantic Arthur quickly informed her about Mark, and heard her soft crying over the line.

Oh, how he hated and loved this invention all at once. He wished to be with her face to face, holding her in their mutual grief, but alas, time was of the essence. Briefly he told her about hurting Lance’s feelings and how the boy blamed himself for Mark’s death. He needed her to go to the skate park, and he would meet her. If Lance ended up anywhere tonight, it would be there. She agreed at once and hung up.

Arthur turned back to Jack and Chris. “I go to seek Sir Lance. Sir Christopher, please take care of Sir Jack for me.”

Chris nodded.

Jack looked over Chris’s shoulder, a look of desperation in his eyes. “Find him, Arthur, and tell him how much I... need him.”

Arthur nodded and hurried to saddle Llamrei.



Eucalyptus Park looked calm and peaceful in the moonlight, just the way Lance

had always loved it. But tonight was different. The outside exuded peace, but inside of him turmoil raged. Even that new mural of him and Arthur mocked him. Already sweaty and tired from his hard ride to the park, he slipped into the skate park and attacked those ramps with a vengeance. He spun and rolled and flipped, daring himself to stunts more crazy and dangerous than he'd ever attempted. What did it matter? His friend was dead. It was his fault. Did it matter if he killed his own stupid ass? Hell no!

Despite his best efforts to squelch the memories, Mark's soft, gentle features kept intruding, flitting before his mind's eye like a lawyer waving evidence of guilt before a defendant: Mark's gentle laughter; Mark giving him the thumbs up sign; Mark's huge blue eyes brimming with tears; Mark's comforting arm around his shoulders; Mark giving him the fist bump; Mark silent and sad and brooding; Mark flashing that shy little smile; Mark's angry eyes and pouty mouth when Lance had called him a fag; Mark offering him friendship and acceptance; Mark keeping his secret when he didn't have to; Mark lying open-eyed in death, pain and unworthiness permanently etched onto his milky white face....

Try as he might to hurt himself, Lance landed every jump clean, retrieved his board perfectly after every flip, after every crazy-ass trick, and within an hour of nonstop skating had pounded his mountain of anger and guilt into a smaller, more manageable size.

Drained and dripping with sweat, the knot of Mark's death sitting in his stomach like an ulcer, Lance swatted his soaked and scattered Samson-like hair off his face as he despondently lurched across the park and stopped in front of the mural.

He spotted a Sharpie on the ground beside a trash can, scooped it up, and looked long and hard at the mural.

At himself.

And hated what he saw.

The pen was almost dry, but it still worked.

He tossed it into the can when he finished, and wandered over to plop down onto one of the swings.

His swing.

And that was where Jenny found him.

Lance didn't even glance up at her as she gingerly sat in the swing beside him, acknowledging her presence with only a slight shift in body posture. His eyes remained fixed on the retaining wall mural of him and Arthur. Now scrawled above it were the words "Youth Sucks."

Jenny followed his gaze and frowned at the graffiti. "I heard about Mark," she began, uncertainly. "I'm sorry."

He said nothing. Just stared at those words.

“Everyone’s out looking for you, Lance. We were all worried.”

“That’s me, you know. Holding the banner.”

“I know. It’s a good likeness. Did you add the words above it?”

Lance shrugged, but said nothing.

“Arthur’s frantic with worry over you.”

That got his eyes off the words and onto her face. “He is?”

“You know he is. He told me how he hurt your feelings. Oh, honey, he didn’t mean it. He was just distracted, like we all get sometimes.”

Lance’s gaze returned to the mural. “I know. Jack told me. But....” He wasn’t sure he could admit it.

“But what?”

He turned to her again, tears brimming. “Oh, milady, it would’ve been better if I just *was* the banner carrier, you know?”

“I don’t understand.”

“He counted on me, milady. He gave me a quest, the most important one ever, and I failed him!”

“You mean Mark?”

He nodded, tears dribbling down his face and pooling onto the board across his lap. “How can I face him, Lady Jenny? I lost one of his that I was s’posed to save. And I lost the first friend I ever had. And I.... I never even told Mark I loved him, you know? I mean, he kept my secret, and I loved him for that, for not telling anyone, but I never said it. I never told him. And now he’s gone! He’s *gone....*”

She reached out and pulled him in, stroked his damp hair, and let him cry.

“Oh, honey, you didn’t fail Arthur, or Mark. Mark made a choice. It was a poor choice, but he made it. He could have stayed with you, but his pain was too great. You didn’t fail him. You loved him. And he knew you loved him, just by the way you were there for him when he needed you.”

“But that’s just it, milady, I wasn’t there,” Lance confessed. “I was too busy thinking how much *I* was hurting to see how much Mark was, too, and I should’ve told him....” His tear-streaked face looked up at her imploringly. “He thought he was *worthless*, Lady Jenny, not *worth* being loved, but he *was* worth it. *I’m* the one who’s not. *I* should be dead, not him!”

Jenny cupped his face in both hands, her blue eyes harsh with reprimand. “Don’t ever say that, Lance. Ever! You *are* worthy of love, and you did everything you could for Mark. It’s just that sometimes, *everything* isn’t enough.”

His eyes magnified with surprise. That thought had never occurred to him.

Wasn't there always something more that could be done?

She enfolded him in a soft, comforting hug and let him cry.

"How can I face Arthur now? How can he be proud of me after all this?"

Jenny pulled away from him so she could make eye contact. "Oh, Lance, Arthur is so proud of you I can't even tell you." His blurry eyes widened at that. "And he loves you so much, more than most fathers love their sons. Don't you know that?"

Lance let go and clutched his skateboard with white-knuckled tightness. "That's what Jack said, but milady, Arthur never said nothing like that, that he loves me."

Jenny sighed with disgust. "Men. Never comfortable with their feelings. Trust me, Lance, it's true. He loves you more than anything."

Lance jerked his head up, startled by her words, but clearly seeing the truth of them on her softly pretty face.

"Have you told him how you feel about him?"

"That's just it, milady. I don't even know how. I never said those words to nobody before, 'cause there wasn't ever nobody to say 'em to. 'Cept Mark." He paused, his voice catching in his throat like a hiccup. "And now, well I be Arthur's First Knight and all, and he's counting on me. I gotta be strong and be in charge, and I gotta get everything right."

"Nobody gets everything right, sweetie," she assured him, continuing to stroke his damp, silky hair. "I know you're his First Knight, but first and foremost you're a young boy who needs love. We all need that, Lance. And we're *all* worthy. Especially you."

Lance scanned her earnest expression, saw the honesty in those soft gentle eyes, saw how much she cared, and hugged her tightly. She warmly embraced him. She held him for a few minutes, the two comforting each other.

Then Lance pulled away and gazed longingly at the image of Arthur.

"He's on his way, Lance. For you."

Lance stood at that, clutching his board as though afraid to let it go, and then began backing away from her, his heart pulling into his throat.

The *clip clop, clip clop* of trotting horse hooves came to his ears.

"I can't face him right now, milady," he spluttered, still backing away. "I'm too embarrassed. Tell him I... tell him I'll see him later, at The Hub. I gotta think some more."

And then he was gone before she could reply, bolting across the lawn to the sidewalk, up onto his board, and clattering down the dark, silent street.



Arthur trotted up to Jenny and leapt to the ground, gazing anxiously after the retreating boy. "Was that Lance I didst see just now? Is he all right?"

Jenny sighed. "Yes, and no."

Arthur hurriedly set Excalibur down and sat in the swing beside her. The seat was still warm with Lance's body heat. "Where hath he been?" His voice ached. "Why hath he not returned home, to me?"

"He loves you terribly, you know."

Arthur considered this a moment, hoping her words were true. "Do you truly believe so?"

"Oh yes. It's in his eyes, in his gestures, in the way he tries to imitate you. You're the father he never had, but always longed for. And that's the problem, Arthur. He thinks he failed you."

Arthur shifted his gaze to the mural, a great weight settling itself upon his soul. Those early days of the clean-up campaigns, so innocent and triumphant, now seemed so long ago.

"Because of Mark? Because of what I said to him in haste?"

Jenny nodded.

"Jenny, that boy can do no wrong in mine eyes, though I know he be human." He fought down his regret and recrimination. "I have such pride in him and all he hath achieved, I cannot even express it all."

"Have you told him that?"

Arthur shook his head sadly. "Not as such, not for some time. Oh, Jenny, perhaps I am no better than the very people I fight against." His voice echoed the remorse that filled his heart. "I feared the others would be struck with envy should I devote too much time to anyone, even my Lance. The needs of the entire company art more important than the needs of the one, milady."

"Not with children," she asserted, her blue eyes ablaze with passion. "They need individual love. That's what's wrong with our school system, with our one-size-fits-all, group mentality, in this country. Their individual needs *have* to be met. That's what they've been missing, especially a kid like Lance, who never had anyone before you. He's vulnerable, and he needs to know you love him, needs to hear you say it. He needs to know he's *worthy* of being loved." She paused, leaning forward to search his face. "You do love him, don't you?"

He gazed deeply at the mural likeness of Lance. "Yes, I do love Lance as the son mine own Gwen was never able to give me. Mordred never knew me until 'twas too late, till he'd been poisoned against me. I have always regretted that I did not acknowledge him."

"Lance is not Mordred," she said firmly. "He needs you to acknowledge *him*, in front of everyone. He needs you to praise him and say you're proud of him, to

hold him and assure him that Mark was *not* his fault.”

Arthur rose from the swing and stood a short distance away, gauntleted hands awkwardly at his sides, his heart and soul swathed in regret. “When I awakened in this city, I found that my youth had been restored to me. And yet, the memories of an entire lifetime remained. Guinevere, Lancelot, Mordred, Merlin. I surmised ’twas so I should be better able to control *this* crusade, so as not to repeat the errors of the first.”

He turned back to face her. “Yet I am making them all the same, Jenny. I thought by selecting children, they should be easier to teach than were the grown men of Britain who failed me so many centuries ago. It seems I was wrong in that, as well. I am young, Jenny, yet I feel very, very old.”

She stood and placed a comforting hand on his arm. “You’re doing the best you can. That’s all you can do as a parent.”

“I begin to doubt mine ability to fulfill my destined purpose. Jenny, there be so *many* children. How can there be so many, with so many needs, and no one to fulfill them?”

“That’s the great failure of our society—too many adults who want to act like children, and too many people who expect children to act like adults.”

Arthur noted the acrimony in her voice. “Have I fallen into the same trap, Jenny? Do I expect too much of these children?”

“Yes, you do, especially Lance.”

He must have looked crestfallen, because her face softened.

“It’s not just you, Arthur, like I said, it’s the whole country. *We* want to pretend children are adults so we can put them in prison, and *you* want to pretend they’re adults so they can lead a revolution to get equal rights. But Arthur, much as we’d like them to be grown up so we don’t have to parent them and role model for them and set good examples for them, the bottom line is they’re children and need to be allowed to *be* children. Children can’t, and never will, think and feel like adults, because they aren’t adults. Not yet. Lance is an extraordinary boy, in every way, and he loves you so much he’ll do whatever you ask. But he’s carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, and it’s too much for a child to handle. The guilt of failure, especially when you believe your failure cost a friend’s life, is impossible enough for us to bear. Do you really think a fourteen-year-old can deal with something like that?”

She paused, catching her breath, dropping her gaze in embarrassment. “I’m sorry. Slipped into my teacher mode.”

Arthur nodded, not in the least offended. “You be an impassioned teacher, Jenny.”

“Look, Arthur, what you’re doing, what you’ve given these kids is

phenomenal. You've given them hope, the greatest gift anyone can give a child. But they also need love. And they need good, responsible adults to guide them."

"You be correct, as always, milady. In my zeal to create a new Camelot, I have neglected the most significant element—the human heart."

He considered his mistakes, and what those mistakes may yet cost him. For the first time since beginning this crusade, the blanket of failure wrapped itself tightly around him.

"The success of my mission depends upon my ability to lead and guide these children, as ye hast said, upon my strength. But do I have that strength?"

"You have that strength," she assured him. "I've seen it. And I'll help all I can. We can recruit other adults too, Arthur, good people to support the kids, and your cause."

He gazed again at the image of Lance and considered what he would say to the boy, how he could possibly make amends to him.

Jenny cleared her throat. "Um, can I ask you something?"

"Are you really, you know, *the* King Arthur? I know you told Helen you were and, not that it matters, because what you're doing is good, but I just keep wondering and, well... are you?"

"Ye still have doubts, milady?"

"Of course I do!" she blurted and then covered her mouth with her hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to sound like that. It's just, you know, so impossible."

Arthur gave her a sad smile. "Not if you have faith, Jenny. That seems to be an element greatly missing from this era."

"Faith?" she repeated. "You mean in God?"

He nodded. "And in one another."

She fell silent, contemplating his words.

Arthur's eyes took on a faraway look as he gazed forlornly up at the stars.

"You thinking about Mark?"

"Yes."

"Though loved ones be lost, love shall not, and death shall have no dominion.... Dylan Thomas wrote that, something close to it anyway."

Arthur looked into her eyes. "It's lovely."

He saw compassion and understanding... and love?

"It's not your fault," she said. "You can't control someone's feelings."

"But I did not see the signs. Perhaps I could have—"

She put a finger to his lips. "Don't go there, Arthur. We all make mistakes. Some are... more costly than others."

There was a heavy moment of silence between them as Arthur digested her words.

“These drugs, Jenny... they be a terrible scourge upon thy society.”

“I know. But even you can’t solve the drug problem. There’s too much money in it, too much crime. It’s too big.”

Arthur considered her words thoughtfully, his mind already turning with ideas. “Perhaps.”

Her face clouded with worry, and she shivered.

He slipped off his red cloak, wrapping it around her shoulders.

“Is that better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

They found themselves gazing deeply into one another’s eyes, his hands still resting lightly upon her shoulders. There was a pause. Quiet surrounded them. They kissed, long and deeply and gently.

Arthur pulled back, dropping his arms to his sides, feeling like a nervous teenaged boy again. “Alas, I must go, Jenny, though I could stay with thee for hours and be content. I must find Lance, and tell him what he means to me.”

“Yes, you do, before it’s too late. Now get going.”

She gave him a smile of encouragement, and he saw the love in her eyes, the very same love he felt in his heart. Lithely ascending into Llamrei’s saddle, he gazed down at her.

“Ye be an extraordinary woman, Lady Jenny.”

She grinned. “I know.”

He chuckled, and she joined in.

“Godspeed,” she said and handed him his cloak.

He took it, raised a gauntleted hand in farewell, and trotted off into the night.



On his return journey, Arthur paused to text Esteban. He asked the boy to alert as many of his knights as possible to come at once for an emergency meeting. Esteban replied that he would get on it. To Arthur’s great surprise, many had already arrived by the time he’d returned, with more streaming in from around the city. Esteban had texted Reyna, she’d sent a group text to the leadership team, and they had spread the word locally to the others.

Because of sheer numbers they could no longer assemble within The Hub for these gatherings, so everyone met in the dry riverbed near the grate leading into the storm drains. Upon Arthur’s arrival, the aqueduct was already swarming with eager young knights of the new Round Table.

Children, as Jenny had reminded him. Children who needed guidance.

From him.

As Arthur dropped down from Llamrei's back, he scanned the faces in the crowd, but there was no sign of Lance. Reyna and Esteban hurried up to him.

"What's wrong, Arthur?" Reyna asked anxiously. "What happened?"

"Have ye seen Lance?"

"No," she replied with a shake of her head, and Esteban echoed her.

Arthur frowned, that shadow of doom closing in on his heart once more. "He should be here by now..." he said, almost to himself.

"What happened, Arthur?" asked Esteban, standing before him wearing jeans and a muscle shirt. He'd obviously not had time to put on his knightly attire. "What's going on?"

At that moment Jack exited the storm drain carrying Chris and caught Arthur's eye. Arthur shook his head. He knew what Jack was asking, and he didn't have the answer. Where *was* Lance?

Knowing he had to be strong for these children who had done so much for him and whom he must lead forward into greater achievements, Arthur stepped up onto a retaining wall on one side of the riverbed so all could see and hear him. He gazed outward, scanning the expectant faces.

"My noble young knights, I have some sad news." He paused, his voice choking up momentarily. "Sir Mark... is dead."

Reyna gasped below him, and dismayed chattering arose from the assembled crowd. Arthur waited for them to settle and told them about Mark and why the boy had left. The king also confessed how he'd accidentally angered Lance with his careless words, and how Lance was so filled with grief and guilt that he was embarrassed to return.

Jack fought back more tears as Arthur related the events Mark's death.

Arthur blinked back the tears forming just behind his eyes. "Mark's death hath felt as an open wound to me, for he was a truly good and gentle boy, and his loss be ever a painful reminder that every one of us, myself most of all, must needs use caution in our words and deeds."

Esteban, seeing Jaime and Darnell roll their eyes, smirked and whispered, "Probably had AIDS anyway."

Jack blanched with rage. "The hell!" He practically dropped Chris as he charged forward to tackle Esteban, and the two boys rolled and punched and raged in the dirt of the riverbed.

The other kids cheered excitedly, quickly forming a circle around the combatants. Jack was out of control. So great was his fury, and so powerful his punches, that he managed to quickly subdue Esteban and plant thick, vise-like fingers around the other boy's throat.

Esteban pressed desperately upward with his powerful arms against the solid

wall that was Jack. But Jack raged like an animal and wouldn't be budged, those hands squeezing ever more forcefully.

"Jack, stop!" screamed Reyna, who jumped in to pull at the out-of-control boy.

Pressed hard into the concrete riverbed, Esteban flailed frantically and fought hard, but was clearly losing consciousness.

Arthur swung Excalibur above his head and smashed its legendary blade against the corner of the storm drain entrance, slicing off a chunk.

"Enough!" he bellowed.

The crash of metal against concrete, and Arthur's booming voice, penetrated Jack's fury, and he let go.

Breathing heavily, Jack stood and stepped away.

Reyna knelt by Esteban to help him sit up. Esteban choked and gasped for air, glaring at the panting Jack.

"You almost killed me!" he spat, his voice raspy and weak.

Jack panted and glared back.

"Sir Esteban," Arthur spoke from above as Reyna helped lift the shaky boy to his feet, and then supported his weight. "Thy words were unmanly and without honor. Do you understand this?"

Furious, Esteban glowered up at Arthur. "Hell, homie, I's jus' clowning!" He shot a murderous look at Jack, who glowered back.

"That be one of the problems of this era," Arthur went on soberly, "too much 'clowning' about death. Sir Mark, just as you and all these others, was a sworn knight of the Round Table, and a fallen knight deserves honor, not mockery."

Esteban clearly saw Arthur's pain, and bowed his head in shame. "Sorry, Arthur."

"Now thou shall apologize to Sir Jack."

Esteban bristled, and pulled away from Reyna. "And if I won't?"

Arthur looked down at him, just as defiant. "You be an important member of this fellowship, Sir Esteban, but you be not indispensable."

"You're telling me to get out, is that it?"

"Nay, Sir Esteban, I be giving you what you have said you want—a choice."

There was a pause, and absolute silence filled the air as everyone awaited Esteban's decision. Arthur knew he was taking a big gamble. This boy was crucial to his cause because so many looked to him as a leader. But Jenny had been right—an adult must always guide a child in what's right.

Esteban looked from Arthur to Reyna "I can't believe you said that, Este." She shook her head in disgust, her long ponytail flinging back over her shoulder. "And you say *I'm* the one who thinks she's better than everybody?" She threw

her arms across her chest.

Esteban glanced at Jack, then back up at Arthur.

“Thou would throw away all our success,” Arthur told him, not in anger, but with love, “all that we have been because thou art too prideful to admit thou committed a wrong? A man can and must admit his mistakes, if he be a true man.” He paused, bowing his head humbly, Mark’s face flitting before his mind’s eye. He tilted his head back up and fixed his remorseful eyes onto those of Esteban. “I never cease to learn that lesson.”

Esteban clearly saw the truth in Arthur’s eyes. He paused, as though recalling where he’d come from, and how much he’d accomplished since. And he backed down.

He turned to Jack. “Sorry, man.” He held out his hand, but Jack just stared at it.

“He was *my* homeboy,” Jack declared, eyes welling again.

“I know,” Esteban replied. “Mine, too.”

Jack hesitated, seeming to gauge the other’s sincerity, and finally reached out to clasp Esteban’s hand. They shook.

Letting go, Esteban turned to Reyna, whose arms were still thrown across her chest. But she nodded her approval.

Jack stepped around them and scooped Chris back into his arms. “Sorry, little man, for dropping you.”

But Chris wasn’t at all upset. Leaning in to Jack’s ear, he whispered, “You kicked his ass.”

“Thanks, Chris.” He kissed the boy on one soft cheek.

Arthur’s booming voice drew his attention back to their king and mentor. “My knights, I now believe you be ready for our most dangerous crusade yet, the one all these others have been leading up to.”

Excited chatter rippled through the crowd.

“But if we’re going on a crusade, we need Sir Lance,” Enrique yelled up from below, accompanied by nods and murmurs of agreement.

Suddenly a chant arose, “We need Sir Lance! We need Sir Lance!” and it grew in intensity and pitch.

Arthur gazed out over his knights—his children—and knew once again how right he’d been in choosing Lance. In fact, he knew something else now, knew it with a certainty that could not be disputed—without Lance, without that boy’s calming presence and steadfast leadership, his entire crusade, his new Camelot, would falter and collapse.

And I love him, he added in his heart and mind.

Raising Excalibur high over his head to signal order, Arthur gradually quelled

the chants, and they awaited his response.

Reyna looked up at him with worry. “They’re right, Arthur, we need Lance.”

Even Esteban nodded his head.

“My noble knights,” Arthur began, “I, too, require the presence of Sir Lance for this campaign. However, he is grieving the loss of Mark, and I do not know when he shall return. We shall proceed with our plans and pray our Lance returns to us in time to take part.”

There were murmurs of agreement among the kids—that seemed to satisfy them for the moment.

“So what’s goin’ down, Arthur?” Jaime asked, and Reyna elbowed him. “My bad, uh, what shall our crusade be?” Reyna glowered, but Jaime just shrugged.

“These drugs, and those who dispense them must be stopped. I propose we undertake that quest, for it be a quest for true freedom.”

The muttering rose to a fevered pitch.

Still clutching Chris to his chest, Jack looked up at Arthur. “I wanna avenge Mark, too, Arthur, but there’s too much a that garbage out there, and too many dealers for us to stop it all. And they got real firepower.”

Numerous knights within the crowd, especially those from the biggest drug-dealing neighborhoods, all vocalized their agreement with Jack.

“I be not speaking of vengeance, Sir Jack, for we all here be warriors of right, not might,” Arthur said when the kids had settled down, “and we shall once again use our might to make a wrong *right*. We now number at more than one thousand, and methinks t’would not be difficult for thee to locate a great number of these dealers and their drugs.”

Excitement enlightened Esteban’s face. He and Jaime and many of the others exchanged an animated look of comprehension. “He’s right, guys! Most a us used to slang that sh—my bad, that stuff, and we know all the crack houses and meth labs in our hoods.”

Justin stepped forward beside Esteban, and they gave each other the chin raise.

“Yer old man know you’re out here this late?”

Justin shrugged. “Like I care?”

Esteban grinned, and they clasped hands in solidarity.

Justin looked up at Arthur. “Arthur, I know the big guy, Mr. R. He’s like the main one that supplies the streets. I know where he hangs.”

“Excellent, my boy, and we shall use thy knowledge to destroy him.”

“What you want us to do, Arthur?” Esteban asked.

Arthur gazed out at all the eager, expectant faces. Like all children, they sought guidance, and he would provide it. “The knights of the Round Table shall

now fully enter the twenty-first century, with all of its marvelous technology. Our ultimate triumph in this venture shall give us the final leverage we need to go before thine elected officials, and the people of this city, and lay out our demands for the future. *Your* future.”

A rousing cheer erupted from the throng, and Arthur nodded his approval.

Yet he did not smile. His thoughts were on Lance.

Where was Lance?



Within The Hub, Arthur and his leadership team talked until well past midnight. There was much heated debate on how best to hit the crack houses and meth labs. Most were, the kids informed Arthur, just regular homes in their neighborhoods. Most people wouldn't even know what went on inside, “less you live round 'em,” Jaime put in.

Esteban was all for firebombing every one with Molotov cocktails, which he assured Arthur were easy to make.

“Nay, Sir Este,” Arthur commanded, once again wishing for and needing the calming presence of Lance. “We do not seek bloodshed, merely justice. We are warriors of right and cannot risk such fires spreading and killing the innocent.”

“What about smoke bombs?” Reyna suggested. “We could smoke 'em out and then grab 'em.”

“Grab 'em how?” piped up Darnell, who sat twiddling his cornrows. “They got guns, Lady Reyna.”

Reyna shrugged and threw up those lovely eyebrows of hers. “I don't know. Drop a net on 'em?”

Arthur lit up at that suggestion. “I believe the lady be on to something.” They discussed that option and reasoned that kids could be above an exit, or right outside, and when the “druggists” bolted, “Bam! You throw a net on 'em an' catch 'em like fish,” Duc finished, laughing excitedly.

“Then what, Arthur, we wrap 'em up and give 'em to the mayor?” Esteban asked.

“We shall have a gift for the mayor, but methinks I have a better plan for these druggists, as ye hast called them.”

Many of the boys said getting or making smoke bombs wasn't hard—they had connections, but buying nets could cost big bucks. Reyna solved that problem by offering the six thousand she'd been given by her parents to *not* vacation with them. Plus, Arthur still had money in the bank and his ATM card.

They agreed on a limited area of coverage because they wanted the operation

to go off this very day. The mayor was planning an event to unveil the mural, and they wanted to trump his card. The leaders figured they could hit at least a hundred of these places at once and be ready by nightfall.

“What about Mr. R.?” Justin asked nervously. “He’s badass—sorry, he be dangerous, Arthur. Got some Chinese dude with him. I think they be Mafia, you know?” The others nodded, though Mafia clearly meant nothing to Arthur. “I think he wasted Dwayne, ’cause I hain’t seen ’em since that day we run ’im out of the ’hood.”

Arthur leaned forward. “You know where to find these men?”

“Yeah,” Justin answered. “It’s a big warehouse downtown. That’s where a bunch of the sh—the drugs are made.”

“I say we firebomb that place, Arthur,” insisted Esteban, his face hard and serious. “Otherwise he’ll just stay in business. If we take down his operation, maybe he won’t get it back up.”

Arthur agreed, so long as the firebombs Esteban talked about were thrown through the upper windows to allow anyone within the building time to escape via the ground floor.

Esteban and Jaime agreed that was okay by them.

They settled on teams and who would lead each one. That meant a hundred different teams, so they went through all the names of knights they thought most capable of handling a leadership role. Each team would be comprised of six members for a total of six hundred kids mobilized at once, the teams scattered throughout the main parts of the city.

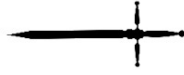
Because Arthur wanted all of his knights to rendezvous at City Hall to meet with the mayor, this initial operation would only focus on the downtown metro area and surrounding communities.

All teams would remain in contact with Arthur via cell phone. Esteban would be temporary First Knight for this operation unless Lance returned in time. It troubled Arthur to even consider someone else in the role, but Lance had given him little choice. Besides, he reasoned, this type of crusade was more suited to Esteban, who knew better the people they’d be up against.

Each team member would have his or her specific responsibility when the operation commenced, and at least one must be assigned the task of filming the druggists and their drugs as evidence to give the authorities.

When all had been planned and settled, everyone returned to their respective neighborhoods to begin assembling their teams first thing in the morning and preparing them to be ready by mid-afternoon. Arthur and Reyna would take a few of the kids who lived in the tunnels in her parent’s Escalade to purchase the netting and rope and other supplies they would need.

Operation Drug Lab was scheduled for dusk, and the knights felt giddy with anticipation.



Jack had said nothing during the meeting because his thoughts were elsewhere—on Mark, of course, but also on Lance. His mind replayed images of Lance over these past months, of the times they'd spent together, both happy and sad, of the connection they'd made, of how good it felt just to hold him in his arms. How perfect that seemed. His chest swelled with emotion as he pictured the most amazing boy he'd ever known in his life, and Jack knew he couldn't lose him. No way. In some ways, he realized with breathless abandon, losing him could be even *worse* than losing Mark....

He knew he should volunteer to lead a team. Hell, he could easily have been the football team captain before everyone found out he was gay. After his outing, however, the only title he'd been given was team pariah. He shoved that memory away and replaced it with Lance. The boy's beautiful face, that oh-so-engaging smile that made Jack fantasize about what it would feel like to kiss him, that easy laughter when they'd be working out, all sent shivers of joy and fear coursing through him.

He knew he *should* volunteer, but Arthur hadn't asked, and so he remained silent, cradling Chris, the small boy asleep in his lap. If Lance wasn't back by morning, with or without Arthur's permission, Jack would go out and find him.



Jenny had prepared herself to begin lessons that same morning, but Arthur had called early and asked her to wait until tomorrow. The knights had a special mission to complete today. That worried her because he didn't say what it was. She knew the clean-ups were being restructured to accommodate schooling, so that wasn't likely the reason. No, something was wrong. All her instincts told her so. And Lance was still missing, Arthur had said. Yes, he'd been texting the boy, but had gotten no response.

"Did you text that you love him?" she asked.

There had been silence on the other end. "No."

"Then do it, and call me the second you hear from him," she insisted sternly.

Arthur promised to do so and hung up. As she sat with her morning coffee, gazing out her living room window, the bad feeling increased, crept all the way up her back, and lodged itself deep within her heart. If she didn't hear anything more, she would go to Arthur's place directly and find out what was going on for

herself.



When Arthur hung up with Jenny, Chris had needed help getting ready, and Arthur's plan to text Lance slipped momentarily from his mind. Then Reyna arrived to pick up Arthur, and Lance had still not returned nor been heard from. Both Arthur and Jack were convinced that something had happened to him. Reyna said she'd texted him also, but he'd not responded.

Arthur knew he had to focus on Operation Drug Lab, but Lance remained uppermost in his mind.

I cannot lose thee, my Lance....

Jack made sure Chris was fed and ready to accompany Arthur and Reyna and then threw on a clean red tunic and grabbed his phone. He strode up to them.

"Arthur," Jack announced, "I'm going out looking for him."

Arthur nodded, his mind on Lance.

Reyna leaned in to give Jack a kiss on the lips. "Give that to Lance for me." Jack blushed, and she laughed gently.

"I'll let you give it to him," Jack told her with a small smile.

Reyna turned serious now, unusual for her. "You tell my beautiful brother that I love him and need him here with me. You tell him."

"I will."

Arthur looked grave, graver than Jack had ever seen him. "Tell him I... also need him, Sir Jack. Hast thou any idea where to look?"

"No, but I got a friend in Hollywood who could help—" He stopped suddenly, his face lighting up with a revelation. "Never mind that. I know *exactly* where he is."

"I shall go with thee," Arthur said immediately.

"Then who'll go with me to buy the stuff?" Reyna asked cautiously. "I'm not a legal adult yet, remember?"

"She's right, Arthur," Jack put in. He didn't really want Arthur to go. He needed time with Lance first. "The needs of the whole company, remember?"

Arthur looked weary, and afraid. Jack had never seen him this way.

"Very well. But call the moment you find him, Sir Jack, and bring him here to me at once."

"I won't fail you again, Arthur," Jack insisted, and he meant it too. He gave Chris a high five and took off running through the tunnels.

"Ready, Arthur?" Reyna asked.

Arthur was fiddling with his phone.

“Message from Lance?”

“Nay, I was going to text him, but it doth not seem to be working.”

She took it and tried to turn it on, but nothing happened.

“He forgot to charge it again,” piped up Chris, watching them from his chair. “I’ll do it.” He jumped off the chair, took Arthur’s phone, and plugged it into the generator.

A generous benefactor had given Arthur a sizable generator for when he needed power along his various journeys. Mostly he kept it here in The Hub and used it to power electric lights and electronics like cellular phones. Its constant hum added almost musical accompaniment to the usual dripping of water.

“When’s Lance coming back, Arthur?” Chris asked in that sweetly innocent voice while plugging in the phone. “Will Jack find him?”

The king offered the best smile he could conjure under the circumstances. “Yes, Chris, soon.”

Reyna held out her phone casually. “You can use mine today and tonight for the operation too, if you need it. I’ll be with Este, so you can reach me on his phone.” She handed him her leather-encased phone. “Oh, and don’t look at the pictures.”

Arthur tossed her a puzzled look as the three of them headed out to her car.



Jack boarded the first Metro bus headed for Hollywood, slumped down in his seat with one arm draped across his face, and feigned sleep. He absolutely wasn’t in the mood to be gawked at or autograph-hounded as one of Arthur’s world-famous knights. He was too hyped up with anticipation, hoping and praying he was right and Lance would be there. *Still* be there, anyway, for he knew in his heart where his friend had spent the night.

And why not?

It was where he wished to be all the time, too.

As expected, he found Lance off Cosmo Street, sitting behind the dumpster, leaning up against the dirty brick wall in exactly the spot where they’d found Mark’s body. Had it just been yesterday, Jack reflected, his heart lurching violently?

Lance looked tired and a bit disheveled, like a lost puppy, but otherwise unharmed. Jack felt an almost overpowering urge to scoop the younger boy into his arms and never let him go. But he held back.

Lance looked up, long hair draping his broadening shoulders, eyes pensive, but unstained by tears.

“You okay?” Jack asked, almost a whisper, fighting to control his voice. Lance nodded.

“May I?” Jack indicated the spot beside him.

Lance nodded again, and Jack sat beside him so their bodies touched. He needed that human contact, and figured Lance did, too. “I knew you’d be here. It’s where I would’ve gone.”

No answer.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Mark,” Lance answered hollowly. “And you.”

“Me?”

Lance turned his head, those sad green eyes settling on Jack. “When did you know you were in love with him?”

Jack’s heart leapt into his throat, and his breath momentarily stopped. The question blindsided him, and he took a moment before answering, to steady his uncertain voice. “You probably won’t believe this, but I... I think I knew it the first time I looked into those swimming pool eyes of his that seemed to go on forever.”

“Really?” Lance asked, a slight smile enlivening his sad features.

Jack nodded, his breath coming more easily now, the memories somehow not so painful as he would have thought. He cleared his throat, his eyes fixed on the far wall of the alley where someone had scrawled “love hurts.”

Yeah, it sure as hell does.

“I was already, you know, *working*, for a couple a months when Mark showed up on the boulevard one night. He was so small, so skinny, so blond, and so lost that I just knew I had to help him. So I walked up and introduced myself and asked how old he was.” Jack paused, the memories flooding him with simultaneous waves of delirious joy and unabashed anguish.

Lance leaned in, clearly wanting to hear more.

Jack pulled himself together, glancing shyly over at Lance. “Sorry, it’s just, you know, hard.”

Lance reached out and took his hand. Surprised, Jack felt the warmth of Lance’s smooth young fingers intertwined within his own, and squeezed back gratefully.

“He was so scared and so shy, and I was a pretty big kid, even at fifteen.” Jack had to catch his breath a second, and Lance gave his hand another little squeeze. “I guess I kind a scared him, you know, Lance?”

Lance nodded.

“Anyway, I told him it was okay, that I’d protect him. That’s when he looked up, and that’s when I fell right into those amazing blue eyes. He smiled that shy

little smile of his, said his name was Mark. I guess he told his story. I hardly remember. Everything blurred except those deep blue eyes that seemed to carry me straight to heaven. I felt like I'd never felt for any other boy, even the first boy I ever kissed. I knew at that moment I loved him." He paused. "And I still do, even though he's gone." He choked back a wrenching sob.

Lance squeezed the hand more tightly.

Silence filled the air with its invisible weight and just held them both in place a moment.

When Jack said nothing more, Lance released his hand and slumped back against the wall. "Thanks, Jacky, for telling me."

There was an unexpected moment of unalterable peace between them.

"Everyone misses you, Lance, and Arthur's out of his mind with worry."

Lance looked up. "He is?"

"Hell, yeah," Jack confirmed, knowing he had to convince his friend, somehow, of his own worth. "We got a big operation goin' down tonight, and Arthur can't hardly concentrate 'cause he misses you so much."

"Is he mad at me? Does he blame me?"

"Hell, no!" Jack insisted as forcefully as he could. "He loves you, man, I told you that, and he wants you back more'n anything."

"Did he like, actually say that, you know, that he loves me?" His shimmering eyes expanded with hope.

"No," Jack admitted, seeing that hope vanish like the setting sun. "But he does." He paused. "Reyna said she loves you too."

"Reyna?"

Jack blushed. "She kissed me and told me to pass it on to you."

Lance chuckled. "Sounds like Reyna." Then he blanched and eyed Jack fearfully, as though he'd just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "What did you tell her?"

Jack did his best to look mortified. "What kind of cheap hoe do you think I am?"

At that, Lance actually laughed. Reyna *had* only been joking. Or had she?

"Don't answer that!" Jack added quickly, with a slight smile.

And then Lance lost it. He couldn't help himself. He busted up, and the two of them laughed for several moments, gradually shedding bits and pieces of loss and pain from around their wounded hearts like ice crystals from a windblown tree branch.

When their guilty laughter slowly eased to a stop, they sat a moment in silence. Jack put a strong, comforting arm around Lance's shoulder, causing him to shiver.

“Come back, Lance. Arthur needs you. We all need you. *I* need you.” Lance looked down a moment in shame, and then into Jack’s urgent eyes.

“You don’t blame me either?”

Jack’s mouth dropped open. “For what?”

“For not thinking of that phone thing!”

“I didn’t think of it either, man,” Jack reminded him, almost choking on his own culpability. “Don’t you think I feel like crap, too? My God, Lance, a few months ago we were both screwed-up kids who nobody ever expected would do anything good, and now we’re supposed to save the world?”

“Maybe not the world, but what about our friends?”

“If anyone should’ve saved Mark, it was me. He never even would’ve been out here if I’d just—”

“Don’t,” Lance admonished, grabbing Jack’s trembling hand again. “Don’t go there! Please.”

Jack caught his breath, feeling a lump in his throat, and squeezed Lance’s hand desperately. “You know, Lance, what I *finally* figured out?”

Lance eyed him expectantly.

“It’s the things we *don’t* say to each other that make the biggest difference.” He lowered his head in shame.



Lance considered Jack’s words, comprehension almost slapping him in the face. That *was* true! Of course it was. He suddenly recalled all the things *he* hadn’t said, all the failures eating away at *his* heart, and nearly gagged with self-hatred.

“Jack, what happened, man?” he asked imploringly, his body feeling cold and numb, his eyes wide with need. “It seemed so good for a while, like we was gonna finally make something good outta ourselves, ya know? How did we screw it all up?”

Jack tugged back the tears. “Because we’re kids, Lance. And kids screw up.”

Lance hesitated, Jack’s words settling heavily around his heart. “Yeah, I guess so.” He paused. “But we lost Mark, man. He was so good, and the first *real* friend I ever had.”

Jack blinked back his tears. “Aren’t I the second?”

Lance nodded.

“*I’m* still here, Lance. And I need you, man, more than ever. We’re the only ones who *really* loved Mark, you know?”

Lance understood. They’d lost Mark, for which he’d never completely forgive himself, but they still had each other. And Jack *was* right—the things *not* said

were so much more important! He had to face Arthur, had to tell him, had to *not* let those words go unspoken for another second.

“You’re right, Jacky. I been acting like a stupid-ass little kid. C’mon, let’s go back. I need to tell d—Arthur something real important, somethin’ I can’t *not* say.”

Jack smiled and stood, dragging Lance to his feet. “Let’s go.”

Lance grabbed his skateboard.

“You should text Arthur that we’re coming home so he can stop worrying about you,” Jack suggested as he dusted some dirt and debris off Lance’s bright green shirt.

“Okay,” Lance agreed and rapidly thumbed in a message as they began walking toward the mouth of the alley. Jack saw him pause, as though considering what to say, and then Lance finished and returned the phone to his pocket. Feeling better than he had in days, he threw his arm around Jack’s neck and futilely tried to choke the bigger boy, maybe even take him down.

They were playfully wrestling, like two regular boys who didn’t have to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders, and were thus distracted when two Asian men abruptly appeared at the entrance to the alley and clamped cloth-filled hands over their mouths. So sudden was the attack, and the chloroform in those cloths so potent, that both Lance and Jack were unconscious before either knew what had hit them.

A Hummer stretch limo rolled to a stop in front of the alley, and both boys, limp and unconscious, were dragged to the backseat and thrown in. One man even grabbed the skateboard. The entire kidnapping lasted mere seconds, and there were no witnesses. The limo drove off into morning traffic.

CHAPTER 12: THAT BOY IS SPECIAL

THE HUB WAS BUSTLING WITH activity as nets were folded into large backpacks, and kids tinkered with the various smoke bombs to get the feel of them and how they worked. Arthur and Reyna had filled up the Escalade several times that morning, always returning to the storm drains and depositing their load of supplies just inside the main grate and then setting off to buy more.

Esteban and the older boys had made it their quest to secure or make those smoke bombs that would be used to flush out the “rats,” as Reyna called them. More and more of these devices were procured and added to the overall supplies.

When knights began trickling in throughout the early afternoon, teams were assigned and supplies apportioned. Every team had at least one cell phone for communication and video recording. Most had more than one. One of the Asian boys who was a tech wizard of sorts, gathered the one hundred team leaders together and put all of their numbers into a group message on Reyna’s phone, so Arthur could alert every team simultaneously when to begin.

Arthur’s phone had not fully charged all morning while he and Reyna were shopping, so the tech wizard, whose name was Thuy, but who’d been dubbed “Sir Techie” by Reyna, surmised that the battery must’ve gotten wet, not an unusual occurrence in a damp storm drain.

“No biggie,” Sir Techie told Arthur with a shrug. “I’ll find ya a new battery tomorrow, after the big raid.”

Arthur nodded, but deep down, his heart ached with fear. Would Lance feel even more rejected if he sent a message and it lay unopened on Arthur’s phone?

He paced The Hub, filled with unease. The raid was set for dusk. His entire army would arrive shortly to collect their supplies and move out into the city to prepare their traps. All seemed to be moving according to plan. His knights, young though they may have been, were nothing if not resourceful and eager.

However, it was now 2:00 p.m., and neither Lance nor Jack had returned. Chris tossed Jack’s football up and down and watched Arthur pace. Finally, Reyna sauntered up, already dressed for battle in her leather pants, boots, long-sleeved brown tunic, jerkin, and chain mail shirt. She handed Arthur her phone.

“Here’s my phone, Arthur,” she announced, tossing a wink Chris’s way. The small boy gave her the silent head nod. She opened the phone and showed Arthur the group Sir Techie had created in the messaging section. “Any text you send will go to every team captain at the same time.”

Arthur nodded, his mind far away. “Any text from Lance?”

Reyna shook her head, her features etched with worry. “What could have happened to them?”

Arthur felt his stomach tighten. “I do not know.”

“Did you ever text him from my phone to let him know you were using it?” Reyna asked. “If he thinks it’s me he might not answer, though I’ll kill him if he ignores me.” She flashed a half-hearted smile, hoping to lighten the mood.

Arthur’s eyes widened with comprehension. “What a fool am I! In our mad dash for supplies, Reyna, I forget.”

Awkwardly, he thumbed in a message to Lance, letting the boy know that he was using Reyna’s phone and to *please* contact him. Then he gazed deeply at the screen a moment, as though expecting Lance to text right back. The screen remained blank. Only his reflection gazed back at him. The reflection of a distressed and guilt-ridden man. Sadly, he slipped the phone into his pocket.

Reyna cleared her throat. “Um, isn’t it time for you to call the mayor? You asked me to remind you.”

“Thank you, Reyna, for your help and your loyalty. You have become one of my most trusted and dependable knights, and you have become a better young woman, as well. I feel great pride in thee, my child.” He placed a hand lovingly on her shoulder.

Reyna uncharacteristically blushed with embarrassment. “Um, thanks, Arthur,” she mumbled. Then she placed both hands on his shoulders. “We’re gonna find Lance, Arthur, believe me. If he’s not back by the time we move out, I’ll go looking myself, soon as were done.” She paused and lowered her hands to her sides. “I never thought I could take orders from anyone, especially a young kid like him. I always had all the answers.”

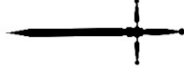
She hesitated, and Arthur knew why. He’d been told how Lance helped her make peace with Salma, had helped her connect with Esteban on a deeper level than she’d ever connected with any boy, had helped her *not* become her parents.

“That boy is special, Arthur, more special than anybody I’ve ever known, and I love him. We’ll get him back, I promise.”

Arthur nodded with gratitude, overflowing with a deep sense of love. How great a gift he’d been given in these amazing children, he thought for the umpteenth time. “Thank you, Reyna, for loving my Lance as I do, and for your fealty.”

She nodded and then took on a look of mock seriousness. “Ahem. The mayor?”

Arthur bowed. “Yes, ma’am,” he said, causing Reyna to grin. He pulled out her phone and punched in the mayor’s number.



Across from City Hall, the eleven-story sheet still covered the Mural Project. A system had been set up utilizing a long pull cord attached to the top of the sheet and connecting to both upper corners. At the appointed hour, the mayor would pull the ripcord, the sheet would flutter down, and the mural would reveal its face to the world.

Bleachers had been erected on the grounds of City Hall to accommodate crowds and dignitaries for the grand unveiling scheduled for tomorrow night. Among the setup paraphernalia along the Temple Street side were several wooden ramps that had been used to roll the heavy bleacher sections into place and now awaited removal. The ramps were relatively steep and sloped, attracting any skaters who happened to live in the downtown area. A security guard had been stationed in front to make sure no kids got hurt before the ramps could be dismantled.

Even Villagrana had not yet seen the finished mural, but then he didn’t care to. The mural was just an expensive, tedious attempt on his part to show, publicly at least, solidarity with Arthur’s crusade. Sadly, all his efforts to discredit the man had backfired, including the school issue. The mayor intended to pursue that angle vigorously by riding that obnoxious woman teacher on every home school standard the state insisted upon. If nothing else, he hoped to burn her out and leave Arthur stranded.

Sitting in his office, Villagrana was hosting President Sanders and Chief of Police Murphy. The topic for discussion was the mural unveiling, crowd control, and how to spin the event to their advantage.

The mayor’s secretary beeped on the intercom. Annoyed, Villagrana flipped the talk switched abruptly.

“Diane, what part of ‘no calls’ didn’t you understand?” His tone was snippier than usual.

Diane’s slightly nasal voice filtered in through the intercom. “Sorry, Mr. Mayor, but it’s King Arthur on the line.”

That got the attention of all three men, and Villagrana exchanged a look with Sanders.

“See what he wants,” the council president said with a shrug.

Villagrana picked up his phone and went instantly into his PR voice. “King Arthur, what a pleasant surprise,” he schmoozed. “To what do I owe this honor?”

Murphy shook his head in disgust, but Villagrana ignored it.

“I don’t understand,” he said into the phone, his face clouding with puzzlement. “The mural unveiling is tomorrow, so what’s happening tonight?” He listened a moment, frowned, and then looked disgusted. “I’ll see what I can do. It’s rather short notice.” He listened again and sighed heavily. “Very well. I’ll contact the council. Good-bye.”

He hung up and sneered at the phone in contempt.

“What was that all about?” Sanders asked, twiddling his tie as he spoke.

“He said for all of us, including the whole city council, to gather here tonight at dusk.”

“For what?” Sanders asked. “It’s enough of a bitch to get ’em all here tomorrow night.”

The mayor glared fiercely. “I don’t know. The damnable man wouldn’t say. He just said for us to be here and we would witness ‘the true power of Arthur’s Round Table’.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Chief Murphy exclaimed.

“As though I know?” Villagrana snapped in return. “You better have your men on high alert.”

Murphy shrugged. “You got it.”

Villagrana stood and gazed out the window, his eyes falling on the massive sheet just across the street. “I don’t like this. Whatever he does, I’m sure it’ll make me look bad.”

Sanders smirked. “You do that well enough on your own, Mr. Mayor.”

The mayor turned and flashed an icy scowl. “Feel free to leave any time.”

Sanders rose and slipped his tie beneath his dark gray jacket and buttoned the top button. “My pleasure.”

He exited the office without another word.

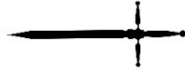
Villagrana glowered at Murphy. “You got any smart-ass comments to make?”

The chief just shrugged again. “This whole thing gets crazier by the minute. I gotta go get my men set up. See ya tonight.”

The mayor grunted in reply, his mind already turned toward tonight’s uncertainty. What could this king be up to now? What did he mean by *power*? He heard his door open and close as the chief left, but his gaze remained riveted to the enormous, billowing sheet across the way. He was losing control of his city.

R. had promised to take care of it, but did the man know about this latest development? Villagrana turned and unlocked a drawer of his desk, slipping out

a prepaid, cheap and disposable cell phone. It only had one number in its phone book, a number without a name attached. He dialed that number.



Lance dreamed.

The X Games were in full swing, and he was in the lead. One more event to clinch—the Big Air Final—and the gold would be his to claim. Arthur stood below, and Jack and Chris and Mark. Mark? Yes, his first friend stood grinning with the others, big blue eyes brimming with excitement, offering him that shy little smile and a big thumbs-up sign.

And Reyna was there too. Reyna? Yep, there she was, cheering him on, louder than the rest. Arthur's face reflected nothing but love and pride, and he raised Excalibur in salute. Jack grinned and flexed, causing him to laugh. Chris waved a small flag with "Team Lance" emblazoned across it. The small boy cheered and pumped his fist, calling out, "Lance! Lance! Lance!" Amazingly, many in the crowd echoed the chant.

He waved down at them from ninety-plus feet in the air as he stood poised at the top of the steepest ramp in the games. Not only did he need to descend clean and fast, he had to jump a sixty-five foot gap, land it, then scale the twenty-seven foot quarter pipe, gain substantial air, grab his board, and land clean. Piece of cake.

He waited.

He breathed.

And then he dropped.

Whoooooosssshh!

Down he flew, faster than his earlier run, faster and faster and faster, and then he was up, up, up and out over the abyss. He gently and smoothly turned 180 degrees, sailed high and true and landed on the other side with a light clunk of wheels, and then soared up again, up and up and cleared the ramp, did a forward-to-fakie grab 720 off the twenty-seven footer, spun three times in midair, and then landed on all four wheels as smoothly as if he'd ollied over a speed bump.

The crowd went wild, and Lance pumped both arms into the air in unabashed triumph. He stood atop the smaller ramp, board in hand and gazed down at his fans. They cheered and fist pumped with abandon. But his gaze sought out only one face—that of Arthur. The man who'd given him a new life, who meant more to him than anyone in the world, was shedding tears of joy as he gazed upward, waving Excalibur excitedly.

Lance's score was announced, a 96.3, and the crowd let out another deafening

roar. Lance beamed with pride.

He'd done it!

He'd won the gold.

He barely felt the elevator ride to the ground, but immediately saw Arthur approaching, a huge grin on his face. Warmth enveloped Lance as he welcomed the crushing hug to come, but instead shook with astonishment to feel a hand slap his face. Hard. And then again.

And then he woke up.

His face burned. From humiliation? No, it hurt! He really *had* been slapped. Groggily, his vision began to clear.

"That's enough," he heard a cold, vaguely familiar voice intone as though from far away. "We don't want to damage that pretty face, now do we?"

His vision cleared. A young Asian guy with close-cropped hair, wearing black pants and a black turtleneck shirt stood before him, hand poised as though to strike again. Lance flinched back, but the hand lowered, and the young man stepped away out of his field of vision, somewhere behind him.

And then Lance felt the pressure on his arms and hands, and a new wave of panic assailed him. He was tied to a chair! A stiff, wooden, straight-backed chair. What the...? Wait a minute.... He and Jack had been wrestling... then there was something over his mouth and nose, and a weird, sickly kind of smell....

He looked around frantically, struggling against the bonds that held him. He was in some kind of office, and Jack was similarly tied to a chair in front of him, regaining consciousness. The bigger boy's eyes opened wide when he saw Lance tied up, and he, too, struggled to escape, but even his well-muscled arms were no match for the restraints.

"It took you two long enough to wake up" came that cold, steely voice to Lance's right.

He whipped his head around, groaning in fear as he saw Mr. R. seated at a large, expensive-looking desk, with a small Asian guy beside him.

"What the hell is this?" he shouted, his breath raspy from the chloroform.

R. shook his head in mock offense. "Such language from a knight of the Round Table. We can't have that, can we?"

He nodded to the young Asian standing behind Jack, dressed exactly the same as the one who'd slapped Lance. The Asian stepped around Jack and without warning hauled off to plant a pile-driving fist hard into the boy's gut. Jack grunted in pain, and doubled over in the chair, gagging and spluttering.

Lance blanched with fury. "Leave him alone!"

"You don't learn very fast, do you, Pretty Boy?"

The young Asian slugged Jack hard to the jaw, snapping his head back and

causing it to strike the back of his chair with a loud *thunk*.

Jack groaned in agony, but he didn't cry out. He merely glared at his assailant with defiant fury.

"No!" screamed Lance. "Don't hurt him! I'm sorry, okay."

R. exchanged a look with the small Asian. "I knew he'd get it eventually." He smiled, reminding Lance of a rattlesnake coiling to strike.

Lance gazed at Jack, who looked dazed and muddled, blood trickling from a cut on his lip, purple bruise already blooming on his cheek, and his heart ached for his friend. He knew R.—Jack didn't—and he *knew* they were in real danger.

"What do you want, R.?" Lance asked warily.

"That's *Mr. R.* to you, Pretty Boy." If a voice could replicate ice, this one was it.

Lance eyed the young Asian in front of Jack, and added, "Sorry, Mr. R."

"That's much better, Pretty Boy," R. continued, his voice cold and smooth. "You've been getting far too uppity since joining that crazy man. A child should respect his elders, don't you agree, Mr. L.?"

The Mr. L. guy nodded silently, his cold, dead brown eyes fixed on Lance, making him squirm like a bug pinned to a table.

"Arthur's not crazy," Lance said, but kept his tone neutral, conversational.

He didn't want Jack getting hurt because of him.

"No? What else would you call a man who thinks children should have the rights of adults, hmm?"

Lance remained silent. He didn't know what to say, and feared arousing the man's anger even more.

R. eyed him with amusement. "Do I frighten you, Pretty Boy?"

"No," Lance lied, lowering his eyes and glancing over at Jack, who looked furious. He flicked his gaze at the older boy—a warning: don't do anything stupid!

"No?" R. repeated in mock shock. "Then you're dumber than I thought, because you should be. You know comic books?"

The question caught Lance off guard. "Yeah."

"Do you know Lex Luthor?"

Lance nodded.

"Not the pantywaist from those movies," R. went on, obviously enjoying himself, "No, the portrayal in the comics. He *ruled* his city with an iron fist, just as I rule Los Angeles. Only I'm much more deadly. Let's just say I make Lex Luthor look like Mother Teresa."

Lance nodded, pretending to understand the comparison, even though he hadn't the slightest idea who Mother Teresa was.

R. stood and stepped toward the two boys, standing in between them. He gazed a moment in contempt at Jack and then turned to Lance.

“This is *my* city, Pretty Boy,” R. said with emphasis. “Do you really think I’m going to allow some nutjob with a sword to take it from me? Especially with an army of children?”

He laughed, and Lance’s blood ran cold. It was the most frightening sound he’d ever heard.

“Your Arthur is a bigger fool than all the other bleeding hearts who think they can give this country back to the people. This country belongs to the rich and powerful, to men like me who will do anything to get what we want. You really think *right* can overcome *might*? Only a child would think that. *Might*, when one has no scruples about its use, will always crush *right*, my pretty little friend, because *right* is weak, and it’s weak *because* it has scruples. You getting the picture here?”

Lance nodded. The man was crazy; that was the picture he was getting, crazy and deadly. But could he also be correct about might and right? That question drifted briefly through his troubled brain. Arthur and his knights would never resort to hurting people to achieve their goals, but this man, and others like him, wouldn’t even hesitate. Did that mean Arthur’s crusade was doomed to fail? He didn’t even want to go there.

Ra. looked from Lance to Jack and shook his head in disgust. Then he spat in Jack’s upturned face, the spittle dribbling from the boy’s left eye down his bruised cheek.

Jack reared his head back in fury. “The hell?”

R. nodded to the young Asian, who delivered another crushing blow to Jack’s midsection. He doubled over again as the air spewed from his lungs, and he coughed and gagged, fighting to regain his breath.

“Please!” Lance begged, tears leaping unbidden to his eyes. “Leave him alone! Please. Hit me instead. I’m the one you always wanted anyway.”

“Once upon I time, I believed you could be of use to me, Pretty Boy. Not now. Not since you’ve acquired your *boyfriend* over here.”

The blood drained from Lance’s face, and he nearly cursed the man out. *Control, Lance*, he whispered to himself, *control*. “He’s not my boyfriend. He’s my *best* friend.”

R. smiled wickedly. “My sources tell me you’ve been quite chummy with this disgusting faggot, and that makes you no better.”

“He’s not a faggot,” Lance said evenly, struggling to maintain control. “A faggot is a stick of wood. He’s a boy, and he’s my friend.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Pretty Boy. A stick of wood is worth more than

all the faggots in the world. If I had my way, I'd line 'em all up and shoot them! So don't push your luck, if you want your boyfriend to live."

The chilling, matter-of-fact tone of voice terrified Lance. This man meant what he said, and had a reputation for no mercy toward anyone.

R. adjusted the lapels on his fancy suit and ran one hand through his slicked back hair, composing himself. "Now then, Pretty Boy, here's the deal. I'm going to crush your King Arthur and his infantile movement, and you're going to help me."

Lance shook his head vehemently. "Never."

R. leaned in and planted his face right in front of Lance's, causing him to squirm. "You really believe that man cares about you?"

"Arthur loves me."

Does he?

"Like all adults, he loves what you children can do for him. You're nothing more than a tool, a means to an end for him."

"That's not true! He loves me. Check my phone. I bet you'll find a grip of messages he sent."

I hope!

R. nodded. "Mr. L.?"

Mr. L. plucked Lance's cell phone off the desk, tossing it to R.

"This your phone?" He held it out to Lance.

Lance nodded, praying Arthur hadn't given up on him, praying that Jack and Lady Jenny were right.

You should've responded to his other texts, fool!

R. opened the text messages and eyed them without expression.

There were ten messages from Arthur, all begging Lance to call him. The last one read: "My dear Lance, I truly think of thee as my son, and I love you more than anything. Return to me, please. I need you."

R. subtly tapped the "Select All" key and then slipped his thumb over the word "Delete." He shook his head, affecting a look of mock sadness. He held the phone out.

Lance's heart sank. Nothing. No messages. Had he been forgotten after all? If so, R. might as well kill him now, because there was nothing left to live for. He lowered his head in sorrow. He *wasn't* worthy, after all.

R. affected a look of pity. "What did I tell you, eh? Now that you see who your *real* father is, will you help me?"

Lance glared at him. "You're not my father, and I'll never help you!"

"As you wish."

The young Asian hauled off and slugged Jack hard again to the face, this time

to the other cheek. Jack's head snapped over and he sagged a moment, looking like he might lose consciousness. But he still didn't cry out.

"No!" Lance screamed, fighting and twisting against the rope binding him. More tears welled in his eyes as Jack's head lolled to one side. His friend looked semiconscious.

"Well?" R. said, turning to drive his soulless gaze into Lance's eyes.

Lance dropped his head in shame. "What do you want me to do?"

"No, Lance!" Jack rasped, spitting out blood in the process. "Don't help him!"

Lance locked eyes with those of his best friend. "They'll kill you if I don't."

And I can't lose you, too!

"I don't care!" Jack insisted, eyes burning with determination. "The needs of the whole company, remember?"

R. eyed the exchange curiously.

"I can't let them keep hurting you."

"A wise decision, Pretty Boy," R. said with a smirk.

"My name is Sir Lance," the boy responded in a clear, but nonchallenging voice.

R. laughed. "Oh yes, of course. He wants to be *Sir Lance* now, Mr. L. What do you think of that?"

Mr. L. just shrugged.

R. turned back to Lance. "Very well, then, *Sir Lance*." The voice oozed sarcasm. "I happen to know that something big is going down tonight. What is it?"

That was news to Lance. He shook his head, mystified. "I don't know."

R. nodded to the young Asian, who raised his fist toward Jack yet again. Jack didn't even flinch; just mad-dogged the guy.

"I'm not lying!" Lance called out, and the movement of the fist stopped. "I haven't been there in a couple of days. I don't know what's going on."

R. gazed long and hard at him. "I don't believe you."

He nodded again, and the young Asian prepared to strike Jack.

"He's telling the truth!" Jack shouted before the fist could fall, eyes glaring with contempt at R.

R. waved the Asian away. "So, the faggot speaks. Tell me, *faggot*, why should I believe a disgusting pervert like you?"

Jack spit out more blood and returned his furious gaze to the man standing before him. "Because it's true. Lance wasn't there when Arthur made those plans, but I was."

"Jack!" Lance shouted out in horror, knowing what his friend was trying to do. "Don't worry about me."

R. leaned closer to Jack. "So, queer boy, tell me what he's planning."

"Hell, no! You may as well kill me."

"No, Jack!" screamed Lance, fighting and struggling against his bonds. "He *will* kill you! Please!"

Jack shook his head defiantly.

R. smirked. "Very well."

Now he nodded to the other young Asian. With lightning speed, the man hauled off and pounded a sledgehammer fist into Lance's gut before he even knew it was coming. He doubled over as pain ripped through him, the air pumped instantly from his lungs. Gasping for breath, he mentally thanked Jack for the incessant crunches the older boy had made him do, for he was sure they'd saved him from permanent damage.

"No!" Jack shrieked in anguish as Lance spluttered and fought to sit up straight. "Don't hurt him, please don't hurt him!"

"I love to hear faggots beg, don't you, Mr. L.?"

Mr. L. didn't answer, because it obviously wasn't expected.

R. turned back to Jack. "Well?"

Lance met Jack's eyes, and knew his friend would do anything to protect him, even betray the crusade.

"Arthur's got a big operation going down against a bunch of crack houses and meth labs around town."

R. lost his grin. "Which ones?"

"I don't know."

R. frowned.

"Really, I don't! I was out looking for Lance when they settled on targets, and I'm not part of any team. I swear it. That's all I know." He glanced over at Lance, who stared back uncertainly.

R. paced a moment. "Okay, so we warn our people. What was Arthur planning to do after this operation?"

"I don't know exactly, but he was gonna be at City Hall to call out the mayor on something. That's everything I know." Jack lowered his head in shame.

R. exchanged a silent look with L., and then rubbed his fingers across his chin, as though contemplating something. "I have heard a rumor that so long as Arthur holds Excalibur, he cannot be killed."

Lance involuntarily flicked his gaze up to R. and then just as quickly lowered it to the floor. He noted Jack doing the same.

R. smiled. "I see you have, too."

Lance fought to meet the man's gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

R. laughed hollowly. "I may have use of you both later, for negotiation purposes, if the plan I'm forming in my brilliant mind doesn't quite come off. For now, your lives remain yours."

He nodded to the two young Asians, who quickly set about untying the boys from their chairs.

"Put them in the holding tank for now."

Lance and Jack, hands still bound behind their backs, were pushed toward the door. Before they made it very far down the hall, Lance overheard the two men talking.

"You have a plan?"

That was the L. guy.

"Have your boys ready, Mr. L. The best you have. I'm going to call in Santiago."

The office door closed, and Lance heard no more.



The holding tank turned out to be a small bathroom with a stainless steel sink and toilet, but no windows and no furniture. Their hands were untied just outside the door, and then Lance and Jack were tossed into the room like bags of garbage, the door slamming shut behind them. A lock clicked, and receding footsteps came to Lance's ears.

Lance landed on top of Jack, who lay pinned beneath him groaning in pain.

"You trying to seduce me, Lance? I think it's working." He tried for a laugh, but winced instead.

Lance clambered off and carefully wrapped his arms under Jack's, dragging the much heavier boy toward the wall.

"Thank God for those workout sessions," he grunted as he heaved his battered friend upright and leaned him against the wall.

"Yep. Lance the Animal." Jack tried for another laugh, but ended up grimacing with pain.

"Don't move," Lance instructed as he grabbed some toilet paper. Wetting the paper in the tiny metal sink, he tenderly wiped the blood from Jack's bruised and battered face. He felt like crying and screaming in rage for what had been done to his friend.

Jack winced as Lance touched one cheek with the blood-soaked tissue.

"Oh, Jack, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault!"

Jack gaped in surprise. "You seem to want everything to be your fault. Not healthy, my friend."

“It is my fault, Jack,” Lance went on morosely. “If I hadn’t been acting like a baby and running away, we’d be home with Arthur and not here.” Damn, he was screwing everything up! “Now R. knows about Arthur’s plans.”

Jack mouthed, “Not all of them.”

Lance’s eyes flew open with surprise, and he looked around as though expecting cameras or bugs to be evident.

Jack waved him in close, and when Lance put his ear to Jack’s lips, Jack whispered something that made him smile. It was *something*, after all.

Pulling away, Lance returned to wiping off Jack’s face, terrified that they really *had* betrayed Arthur, even if it had been unintentional.

“We gave it away, didn’t we?” he whispered. “Arthur’s weakness.”

“I think so. I’m sorry.”

Lance gazed at his friend. “We both blew that one. We gotta find some way to warn him.”

Jack nodded, and they lapsed into a brooding silence, Lance contemplating their future, and that of the entire Round Table.



It was late afternoon, and The Hub was a hive of activity. The main teams had been sent out to set their traps and await Arthur’s signal. Six hundred knights had trooped into and out of the dry riverbed, gathering up their equipment and joining their assigned teammates. The other four hundred had been instructed to rendezvous at City Hall by seven o’clock.

Everyone was excited and anxious, knowing that this undertaking would be fraught with danger.

Arthur had directed them to get into position and wait. “At my command, initiate operations. Use caution at all times, my noble knights. Tonight ye be marching into history, but I cannot lose any more of you.”

A few had inquired about Lance, but in the bustle of preparations, the question died a quiet death. It was, however, never far from Arthur’s mind, or his heart. Reyna and Chris stayed by his side as the teams formed and marched away to meet their destiny.

Esteban and Reyna’s team was the last to depart. The remaining archers and swordsmen would travel with Arthur.

“Everything be ready, Arthur,” Esteban said after sending the last of the teams on their way, tossing Reyna a confident grin. She grinned right back.

Arthur nodded, eyeing Esteban appraisingly. When he’d first joined the crusade, the boy had been bald. Now his hair had grown out, accentuating his

handsome good looks. But more importantly, *he* seemed to have grown over the past few months, not physically, but in maturity. Despite the callous joke Esteban had made at Mark's expense, Arthur still saw enormous potential in this boy who not so many months ago had felt little hope for a future of value.

"I thank you, Sir Esteban, for thy knowledge and leadership on this campaign. You have grown much these past months, and I am deeply honored by your loyalty."

Esteban stood a moment, speechless.

Arthur saw humility in those brown eyes.

"Oh, well, uh, thanks, Arthur. It weren't so much. I know these streets real good and—"

Arthur held up a hand to stop him. "And you did not have to join us against some who were in the past thine allies. And you have been masterful in organizing these teams. Again, I thank you."

Esteban nodded, his eyes flicking up to those of Reyna.

She rolled her own eyes and laughed. "His ego's big enough, Arthur," she said with a grin, "don't make it worse." Then she frowned. "Any word on Lance?"

Arthur shook his head.

"Don't worry, Arthur, he'll be back and in charge," Esteban assured him. "That kid kicks a—I mean butt, and he's smart, and he's got mad talking skills and..." He trailed off, struggling for the right words. "He's just the right one for the job, Arthur, you know?"

"I know, indeed."

Reyna gaped at Esteban and then shook her head in amazement.

Despite his fears for Lance and Jack, Arthur smiled. Esteban's words helped assuage some of his guilt over replacing Lance, even temporarily. He studied Esteban and Reyna, so opposite and yet so perfectly suited for one another. They had come a long way in a short period of time.

"Godspeed, my knights. Tonight we take a major step toward the future of your city."

They nodded and went off to gather their team.

The Hub still buzzed with the remaining armor-clad boys, who clutched their weapons and adjusted each other's chain mail or breastplates.

Arthur spotted Chris struggling into his chain-mail shirt. His mind flashed back several months to Lance, struggling with his helm. He slipped Reyna's phone from his pocket and checked the messages for the hundredth time. Nothing. Sighing, he stepped over to Chris and squatted before the boy.

"Thou shalt be at my side this night, Sir Christopher," he said, adjusting the chain mail and slipping a helm one size too large over the boy's small blond

head. "I shall protect thee."

Chris smiled, but his big blue eyes begat sadness all the same. "I know that, Arthur. I just wish...."

Arthur nodded, knowing exactly what the boy wished. "I wish they be here with us too, my boy." He gripped the child by the shoulders and squeezed gently.

Chris's eyes suddenly went wide, and Arthur stood to whirl around, hoping against hope that Lance would be there.

But it was Jenny. She stood before him wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, blonde hair falling loosely about her shoulders, her lovely eyes and mouth etched with concern.

"I'm sorry, Arthur, I just had to see you." She eyed the hustle and bustle around her, and then her gaze settled on Chris, armored-up for battle. "You're going after the drug dealers, aren't you?"

Arthur's eyes opened wide with astonishment. He knew he shouldn't be, but her astuteness always amazed him. "Yes, we are."

Clearly terrified, she scooped Chris into her arms and held him facing Arthur. "Arthur, it's too big for them to handle. It's a war out there. A *real* war."

"These children are no strangers to war, Jenny. Or death. Both have been their upbringing. If necessary, it be better to die for something than to live for nothing."

Jenny's mouth dropped open in shock. And then she looked into Chris's eyes, the eyes of a damaged, cast-off child who'd been reborn.

Arthur knew there was no fear in Chris's eyes, no sense of danger. And yet those eyes had always spoken of someone much older, someone who'd seen more of life than he should have.

Jenny gave Chris a kiss on one cheek and set him down. He instantly moved to stand beside Arthur. Chris's blond hair had grown out from several months without a cut, and he seemed almost a miniature version of the king.

"Arthur, I'm afraid for you, for them. I care...." But she trailed off, her face rife with roiling emotions.

"You did reassure me that I do, indeed, possess the strength to lead these children. Tonight shalt be the true test. We do what be necessary if they are to have a future of value. Trust me, milady."

"Where's Lance? Isn't he going with you?"

Arthur's face drooped, and sadness nearly overwhelmed him. "Alas, he hath not returned. Nor hath Jack. I have texted him, but he hath not replied."

"Oh no," Jenny muttered, her brows furrowing with worry. "Arthur, something must have happened to him. He loves you, and he was coming back here. I know it. Oh God, Arthur, we can't let anything happen to that boy. We

can't!" She sounded frantic.

Arthur nodded. "I have been unable to tell him..." He trailed off because he saw that she understood what he meant. "Jenny, do you believe history repeats itself?"

The question clearly caught her off guard. "What?"

"T'ween Mordred and myself were a series of misunderstandings. The end result was tragedy. Now with Lance there's..." He let the thought trail off, unable to articulate it for fear it might come true.

"Arthur, I'm going with you," she announced in that tone of hers which said, *this is final*.

Arthur shook his head. "Nay. It be too dangerous for a lady."

"Reyna's not a lady?" she replied sharply. "Look, Arthur, I can take care of myself, and I want to be there with you. I want to find Lance. And I *won't* take no for an answer."

She stood her ground, hands to her hips, soft features set with determination.

Arthur studied her with a steadfast gaze. Every time he saw her, she showed him something more, something extraordinary.

Alas, a woman of this age be confusing and terribly exciting, he concluded.

"Very well, Jenny. The time of destiny be at hand. Come." With Chris walking between them, Arthur called out to the others, "Come, my knights, we march."

All the boys assembled and dutifully followed their king and queen toward whatever destiny Fate had in store for them.



Since neither Lance nor Jack had their phones, and with no windows in their holding cell, neither boy had any idea how much time had passed since they'd been thrown in there. But they knew for certain that time was running out for Arthur, maybe for the entire Round Table, unless they figured out what to do.

They lay up against the wall side by side, thoughtful and brooding, lamenting choices made and not made. Words said and not said. But none of it mattered anymore, because neither boy really believed he'd come out of this alive.

"He's gonna kill us," Lance finally said aloud, though he'd been thinking it for hours. Thinking about that. About Arthur. About Mark. About Jack. "Soon as he takes down Arthur," he finished, his voice hopeless and accepting.

"Well, I know for sure *I'm* toast," Jack affirmed stoically. "You heard what he said about faggots."

Lance looked over sharply, anger welling at the humiliating way Jack had been treated. "Don't use that word! You're Jack, and you're good. Screw him!"

Jack smiled sadly. “Don’t worry about it, Lance. I’m used to being called names.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be!”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. He *will* kill me, Lance, I know that. You might have a shot, though.”

Lance snorted in disgust. “For what? To work for that scumbag? I’d rather die first!” He paused and met Jack’s eyes.

Jack smiled back appreciatively.

Sudden awkwardness overwhelmed Lance, and he couldn’t meet his friend’s gaze, couldn’t look at Jack’s handsome, battered face, or into those sad and fatalistic brown eyes. He fought the lump in his throat.

“What’s the matter?” Jack asked uncertainly, fisting his tunic to quell his shaking hands.

Lance looked up shyly, hesitantly, his heart suddenly uneven. “Well, we both probably won’t make it and, well, I been thinking a lot about, well, I been kind a wondering if... well, about what you said before, about the things we *don’t* say to each other?” He fell silent, eyes downcast.

“Hey, badass boy, this is your best friend over here. Spit it out.”

Lance looked him right in the eye. “Can I kiss you, Jack?”

Jack blanched, his face displaying guilt and hope and shock, all at the same time. “What?”

Lance’s chest constricted, and his cheeks burned. “I’m sorry, it’s stupid, I know. It’s just that, well, Reyna kissed me one time, and I know I liked it, but, well, I’d just really like to kiss you, too. I know I sound crazy!”

Jack’s face took on an expression of understanding, and he reached out to gently grasp Lance’s tremulous hand. “No, you don’t, but you’re *not* gonna die here, Lance. I’m gonna make sure of that.”

“I just have a bad feeling, you know, and I been wondering what it....” He trailed off again, lowering his head in disgrace.

“What it would feel like to kiss another boy?”

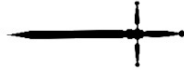
Lance lifted his heartrending eyes. “No, Jacky. I been wondering what it would feel like to kiss... *you*.”

Jack’s eyes went wide with staggering comprehension, and the blood drained from his face.

Lance saw that look of betrayal in Jack’s eyes. Betrayal of Mark.

“Never mind, it’s stupid. Just forget I said anything. God, I’m such a pathetic loser!”

He pulled his hand back and looked away. He wished he could just disappear into the floor.



Jack paused, his hands shaking as he recalled Mark's words to him in that letter: "*You two would be good for each other....*" Mark had given him permission. Had Mark somehow sensed the effect Lance would have on him? Could he even have seen Jack's love for him, but believed Lance more worthy of it?

Since the moment Jack had accepted that he wasn't bi, that he would never be attracted to the girls who hovered around him like bees to pollen, he knew he didn't want to be a player and treat boys like so many guys on the football team treated those girls. He was lonely, and his parents' indifference toward him only reinforced his pervasive sense of unworthiness. But even then, at fourteen, he knew he wanted someone to love who would love him back, someone amazing and special and one of a kind.

Someone like... Lance.

Jack turned his body and reached out to cup trembling hands around his friend's soft, smooth face. "You are so not a loser, Lance. Oh my God, no." He hesitated then. His breath seemed to waver uncertainly on his lips. "But you know I... there's still Mark."

"I know. I just wanted to, you know, see what it felt like. With *you*."

Jack leaned in before Lance could say another word and pressed his lips gently to those of the younger boy.

Lance closed his eyes, and kissed him back.

Jack felt such an overwhelming rush of excitement alight his every nerve ending that he thought he might pass out, and then he pulled back, eyeing Lance with uncertainty.

"Well?"

Lance looked confused. "I don't know. I'm not sure how it made me feel." He dropped his gaze.

Jack's rush of excitement troubled, and thrilled him. That simple kiss was more powerful than any he'd ever experienced, even his first.

"You want my advice?"

Lance nodded eagerly.

"Wait till you fall for someone, and then it'll be the Fourth of July."

"Thanks, Jacky."

"I promise you, Lance, whatever happens to me, I *will* save you."

Lance grinned. "Not if I save you first."

That broke the awkward tension, and Jack laughed. "Deal."

They settled back against the wall, and Lance eyed on the toilet across the room. "You know, Jack, I been thinking. They *might* take us with them when

they go to do, you know, whatever. You heard R.—he might need us for negotiations or something.”

“So? What can we do?”

“We need to arm ourselves.”

“With what? They took our dirks, our phones, everything.”

“Yeah, but I just got an idea.” Lance nodded toward the toilet.

Jack studied the toilet, and then turned back to Lance with a quizzical look on his face.

Lance grinned.



The teams had all reported in from their checkpoints. None had noted unusual activity at any of the houses, and every team was poised to begin the assault. Arthur’s was the last to depart. Heading up his team was Justin, who appeared confident and powerful in his helm, mail shirt, and breastplate. He carried his sword and shield with dignity and pride.

The remainder of Arthur’s team carried smoke bombs in their backpacks, along with some of the nets Arthur had procured that morning. Lavern led a small contingent of expert archers to act as perimeter cover in case of attack.

Within the dry riverbed, Arthur sat atop Llamrei, with Chris in front and Jenny behind, gazing out upon his knights. They shuffled restlessly, anxious to be underway.

“My noble knights,” Arthur called out to them, “this night we march forth into history. Ours is the most dangerous quest of all, for we seek to destroy the man who controls so much of these drugs. Be on your guard at all times, my knights. I have faith in you all. We go forth under the banner of *right*, so let us take a moment to ask God for protection this night.”

He bowed his head in silence, as did every child with him. Then he raised his head, held Excalibur high above him, and called out, “It begins!”

A cheer went up from the group, and they clambered lithely up the riverbank and piled into the enormous SUV Justin had brought. He’d actually asked his mother for permission to borrow it this time. At first she’d said no, but when he explained it was for Arthur, she relented.

However, Justin knew she never would have agreed had she known their true destination, for Arthur’s target this night was the supply warehouse of Mr. R. and Mr. L.



Mr. R. and Mr. L. had made good use of their time while Lance and Jack cooled their heels in the tiny bathroom. Mr. R. had contacted all his main “drops” in the city so they would be prepared for an attack.

Arthur’s foolish followers will get a rude awakening when they attempt to take my houses.

“Is Santiago in place?” Mr. L. inquired.

Mr. R. nodded. All the pieces were in play to finish this uprising once and for all.

“Why not just call this Arthur on the kid’s phone, tell him you have the kid, and lure him in. Easy take down. No chance of a mistake.”

Mr. R. sniggered. “Mr. L., you’re an outstanding businessman, but very poor at public relations. This man has become a media darling, an entertainment for the people. He’s like the ultimate reality show. And like any good reality show—of which there are none, by the way—we must give the viewers a slam- bang finale. When this man dies, it must be in full view of everyone, especially those stupid kids of his. The entire so-called crusade will end tonight.”

Mr. R. knew he was a hothead at times, but his flair for the theatrical was often quite useful.

“Have your men load the fagboys into the limo. I want them to have a front-row seat.”

Mr. L grinned and left the office.

Mr. R. pulled Lance’s phone from his desk drawer and slipped it into his jacket pocket before rising from his desk and following after his partner.

CHAPTER 13: IT BE YOUR CHOICE

ARTHUR'S TEAM LEADERS HAD ALL been chosen to strike at drug labs within their own neighborhoods. That way, each leader knew the lay of the land, the easy escape routes, and the best ways to attack each house. Of course, the kids all knew this was a token gesture. They would only be destroying one lab in each neighborhood—one out of dozens—but it would send a clear message to all who wished to deal drugs—the Round Table will seek you out and destroy you.

Esteban led his team back to Boyle Heights to the most notorious crack house in his neighborhood. It was one-story and old, like most houses in the 'hood, but especially ugly with its hideous pink paint job. It sat conveniently on a corner for easy access to buyers and sellers who could come and go without attracting undue attention. There was a three-foot-high metal fence surrounding the front, and Esteban knew there were two back buildings behind the main house where the drugs were produced and stored.

Eyeing the place in the fading sunlight as a knight of the Round Table, rather than as a gang member who used to slang for these people, Esteban realized that it looked like an ordinary house. Unless you knew what went on in there, you'd never guess.

Reyna crouched by his side, bow and arrow cocked and ready. They had hidden themselves and their team in the backyard of an empty house just across the street, observing their target for any signs of movement while awaiting Arthur's signal.

Esteban glanced over at Reyna and shook his head as though once again forcing himself to believe all this was real. A fine-ass rich girl into *him*? Never saw that one coming. And this whole knights and Camelot business? Who would've thought a bad kid like him could ever do anything that seemed so good?

He eyed the crack house, so innocent looking, yet so deadly and so much a part of his youth. How many kids like Mark had OD'd or gotten hopelessly hooked on dope because of him, because he'd gotten them started? A lot, he figured. And for what? So he could have fancy-ass shoes and other swag?

Before Arthur, before all their neighborhood clean-ups had revitalized the city,

including his own barrio, Esteban would've said swag and girls and money were all that life was about. He thought he'd had power. But this, what they were doing tonight, *this* was power—the power to change things for real.

He found his gaze returning to Reyna. She looked so taut, so amped, so ready for action.

Man, what a turn-on.

She caught him staring, but he didn't care. She puckered and kissed air in his direction, drawing a smile to his face. He felt his phone vibrate and slipped it from his pocket. The text was from Arthur. Only one word: *Begin*.



Lance and Jack were led at gunpoint out of the bathroom, into an elevator, and then down to an underground garage. The two young Asians calmly pointed very high-tech-looking handguns at both boys and looked prepared to use them. Neither Lance nor Jack saw any possible opportunity to overpower these men. Sure, to Lance, Jack looked a lot stronger than those guys, but a bullet trumps muscles any day. So the boys offered no resistance as they were led to a black Hummer stretch limo parked sideways across the garage floor.

Shoved hard into the luxuriously appointed car, the boys were flanked in one of the rear seats by the armed Asians. In the facing bench seat were R. and L., the former grinning like a young child gazing at a pile of presents on his birthday.

“Where are we going?” Lance asked as the limo began moving.

Mr. R. laughed. “You were there when it all began, Pretty Boy, so it only seems fitting for you to be there when it ends.”

His words and cold, chilling tone sent shivers down Lance's back. He exchanged a glance with Jack and knew his friend was thinking the same thing: if their plan didn't work, this could be the end of everything.



Esteban's team was in place. Upon receiving the go-ahead from Arthur, and with dusk casting the ugly pink house into a half-light, half-shadow realm, everyone had slunk to his or her assigned location. They now surrounded the house, putting special emphasis on the two back buildings that contained the drugs. The archers were in place. Some had attached smoke bombs to their arrows, had them cocked, and merely awaited Esteban's command.

Suddenly, without warning, a bullet sailed from the house and struck the edge of Esteban's shield.

He dropped back down behind the front gate and cursed. "They made us," he whispered to Reyna. He put his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly.

All hell broke loose. His archers fired their smoke bombs, but gunfire erupted from the house, sending Esteban's team scrambling for cover. The gunshots had thrown off the archers' aim, and most of the arrows went wild, striking walls rather than windows, and filling the yard with blinding, billowing smoke.

Esteban looked at Reyna. "It's like they knew we was coming."

They watched through the rising smoke as the front door crept open, and the barrel of a shotgun pointed out, straight at them.

"Oh, hell no!" Reyna exclaimed and stood to her full height, letting loose her arrow. It sailed through the cracked-open door, and with a grunt of surprise the gun barrel disappeared. But the door remained open. Reyna whipped her head around to Luis, his arrow cocked and loaded with a smoke bomb. "Now!"

Luis leapt up and let his arrow fly. His aim was perfect, and it went straight through the open door into the house. There came a muffled explosion, and suddenly the house filled with dirty white smoke. Reyna ducked back down as windows burst open and more bullets flew at them along with the smoke. Crouching, Reyna took aim again and fired through the smoke and through the front window. A loud "Ugh!" was heard, and the bullets ceased.

"Now!" Esteban called out, and they surged through the gate toward the house, shields raised, swords ready to fight hand to hand. Esteban yanked open the door, and smoke poured out.

He coughed and spluttered, but hung back from the entrance. He motioned the net carriers into place as he heaved yet another smoke bomb through the door. It exploded with a loud pop like a firecracker, and more smoke poured forth.

"We gotta move fast," he whispered to Reyna, "'fore someone calls the fire department."

She nodded and then leapt back as a man burst from the house, blinded by smoke, bleeding from a wound to the shoulder, but still wielding the shotgun. Esteban smashed down on the man's wrist with the flat of his blade. The man cried out in pain and dropped the gun to the walkway, staggering to his knees.

A woman stumbled toward them through the smoke, her arm wrapped in a bloody cloth, coughing and hacking, brandishing a handgun. The point of Esteban's sword stopped her in mid-step, and she gazed with stunned recognition at him through smoke-burned eyes before tossing her gun to the walkway.

Esteban glanced over his shoulder to a short, skinny boy named Ronaldo, who stood back a few paces, sword in one hand and cell phone in the other. "You getting all this, Ronaldo?"

The boy nodded, dipping the phone to get close-ups of the man and woman as

they remained on their knees, coughing and spluttering.

“Anybody else in there?” Esteban asked.

The man shook his head. “Just two out back.”

The woman glared at him. “Traitor!”

Esteban flinched, but didn’t respond to her taunt. He was done with her and everyone like her. They were his old life. He waved over the net carriers. They tossed the large fishing net over the man and woman, forced them at sword point to roll over, and then secured them within the net like a couple of bluefin tuna.

Esteban and Reyna headed around back with the others, leaving these two in the custody of Luis.

The situation in back was a more dicey. The two back houses—more like large sheds, really—had no windows through which to shoot the smoke bombs. A boy named Willie told Esteban that somebody was holed up in the bigger shed, firing out through a small slit in the walls every time they got close.

Huddling together beside the garage for cover, Esteban, alongside his team, considered their options. Time was running out.

These hits had been designed to be quick and dirty—slam, bam, in and out before the neighborhood even knew what had happened. Somebody had tipped these people off, Esteban knew. Did that mean the other teams were in trouble too? He couldn’t worry about them, he realized. They had to take these guys out, and they had to do it now.

“We don’t have time for this!” he whispered in frustration.

“What’re we gonna do?” Reyna asked, her bow cocked and ready.

Esteban looked over some of his old homies, now his fellow knights. He’d grown up with most of them, and most had been in the gang with him. He could trust them, he knew. Would they die for him? Yeah, they would.

“Guys,” he whispered to his team, “we gotta storm that shed. Swords and arrows ready. Frankie, you draw their fire to the side, Willie you toss a smoke bomb right in front of their little ass window. I’m gonna break down that door!”

Reyna’s mouth dropped open. “Este, they got guns.”

He eyed her soberly. “You think we ain’t been shot at before? Welcome to my life, Reyna. If this ’hood ever gonna be free, we gots to do this. Now get ready—soon as we bust in the door, fire right into that place.” He tossed her a grin. “Maybe you’ll hit one of ’em in the balls.”

Reyna smiled.

Esteban gave the signal. Frankie dashed madly across the back driveway, zigzagging and tossing a smoke bomb right toward the shed. Bullets strafed the driveway, kicking up chips of concrete near Frankie’s feet and forcing him to dive for cover behind the side of the house. The bomb exploded, filling the

driveway and backyard with billowing smoke.

“Now!” Esteban hissed, and they were up. Willie dodged the whizzing sounds of bullet fire to lob another smoke grenade right at the tiny crack where the shooting had come from. Like an enraged bull, Esteban charged the closed door at a run and slammed hard into it, just the way he used to hit the opposing players in tackle football games as a kid. The door cracked and groaned, but didn’t fall in.

He bounded quickly to the side as bullets pierced the wood of the damaged door. Panting, his shoulder sore and throbbing, Esteban eyed the doorknob. The wood around it had splintered but held.

He cursed, raised his broadsword high above his head, and with every muscle in his thick arms and shoulders brought the blade down against the knob with a loud *thunk*. The sword sliced clean through the handle, and the knob clattered to the concrete.

Reyna lifted a well-toned leg and kicked the battered door inward, simultaneously firing her arrow. A shriek of pain roared from inside, and Reyna knew she’d made contact. She reloaded, saw movement in the darkness of the shed, and fired again. A scream and a thud could be heard, and Reyna grinned smugly at Esteban, who stood rubbing his sore shoulder.

“Show off,” he muttered and cautiously entered the small building. Two men lay moaning and twisting on the floor. Esteban felt a thrill of accomplishment knowing these guys would now be out of business because of him, hopefully forever.

Ronaldo entered with the phone, sweeping the video eye over bags of white powder on several tables and settling on the two wounded men groaning and writhing on the floor. Reyna flipped on the lights. One man had been shot through the upper thigh, the other in the right shoulder. She flicked a look toward Esteban and shrugged. “I missed.”

He grinned and quickly took action. “Wrap these guys up and collect all this stuff. We gotta bounce.”

His team quickly netted up these last two and dragged them around to the front along with a net full of drug-manufacturing paraphernalia. Some of the drugs were left behind as evidence and the rest confiscated as a gift to the mayor.

As Esteban and the others reached the front of the house to deposit their load, Frankie pulled out a premade note emblazoned with Arthur’s “A” symbol. Every team had been given the same note. Each note was exactly the same, and each was to be left with the netted drug dealers.

The note read as follows:

To the good people of this neighborhood—The Round Table and King Arthur hereby deliver unto you some from among your number who have brought death and addiction and misery to this area. You may pass them onto the police and rid yourselves of their heinous influence, or untie them and allow them to continue. The choice be thine.

At last, Esteban's team finished its mop-up and prepared to depart. The captives struggled and cursed from within their fishnets, but none could escape.

"We're done, here, knights of the Table," Esteban announced with pride. "Let's get—" he turned as he was speaking and stopped dead. Many of the neighbors—his neighbors—stood in the street just outside the metal fence gazing in at them. Among them was his mother.

He and the others cautiously approached and stood on the other side of the fence, uncertain of the crowd's intent.

"Hello, *mijo*," said his mother quietly. "You not bringing trouble here, are you?"

"No mama. You all know these people we got tied up back here and you know what they done to this *barrío*." He looked out at the young and the old, the big and the small. His people all. "Our crusade is to rid our barrios of scum like this who done nothing good for the neighborhood and only brung bad. I know it, and you know it. But Arthur, see, he be about giving everybody choices. That's why we be leavin' 'em here with you. It be your choice, mama. You can let my sister grow up like I done, or you can call the cops and have 'em take this trash away. We gotta go meet Arthur."

When he saw they weren't making any threatening moves, Esteban opened the gate and allowed his team to exit the front yard and gather on the sidewalk. He and his mother gazed silently at one another. The sound of police sirens could be heard approaching.

"We already called 'em," said the elderly *abuelita* who had threatened Ryan with the rolling pin at Round Table, "soon as we seen who you had tied up over there."

Esteban's mother smiled sadly. "I'm sorry, *mijo*, for everything. It'll be different now, for your sister. I promise."

He nodded. Before he could turn away, she grabbed him in a crushing hug and held on. Mortified, Esteban squirmed out of her embrace. "C'mon, mama," he hissed, "you be embarrassing me!"

She let him go. "Sorry."

Reyna stepped forward to stand beside Esteban, clearly indicating by her stance and by her look at the older woman that she was asserting her own claim

on him.

His mother eyed Reyna appraisingly. “I met you before.”

“Yes,” Reyna replied, “during the clean-up.”

The older woman smiled. “So you’re his latest *jaina*?”

“No, I’m his *last jaina*.”

Esteban turned a bit red and had to cover his awkwardness. “Okay, team, cops’re coming, we’re outta here.” He turned back to his mother. “Give Rosa a kiss for me, ’kay?”

He didn’t even wait for an answer, just sprinted off down the street, his team following closely behind. Reyna patted Esteban’s mother on the arm and handed her the phone Ronaldo had used to video the whole operation.

“Give this to the cops.” Then she followed the others into the darkness.



Throughout the city, in neighborhood after neighborhood, similar operations unfolded at the same moment. Because of Mr. R’s warning, his people were prepared for an attack. However, like all adults, they greatly underestimated the power of young people when those young people wanted something badly enough. A number of the drug-house owners were wounded, like those in Boyle Heights, but none were killed. That had been Arthur’s directive. Bullets had grazed some of his knights, but none were badly hurt.

In placing former gang members as leaders of each team Arthur had ensured that his knights knew how to deal with gunfire, just as Esteban and his old homies had done. Jaime, Darnell, Duc, Tai, and all the others had achieved great success, considering the odds against them. Some of the houses, upon receiving the heads-up from Mr. R., had cleared out, leaving nothing for the knights to attack or confiscate.

But considering it was but a small salvo in a much greater war, Arthur’s operation was a resounding success. And contrary to what Mr. R. had told Lance and Jack, every neighborhood hit that night made the exact same choice—call in the cops to remove the drug dealers, and all felt empowered for having made that choice.



When Arthur had given the word to begin, he and his own team were lurking within the shadows of a large industrial building directly facing Mr. R’s warehouse. A Hummer stretch limo had pulled out of an underground garage ten minutes before, but since then all had been still. Arthur and Jenny exchanged a

look when the limo departed, as though the same sense of dread had come over them both simultaneously.

Despite that eerie feeling, Arthur dispatched a young knight named Norman to take care of the parking garage gate, which had descended once the limo departed. He sent a text to a splinter group to do the same on the opposite side of the warehouse. The large padlocks Arthur had purchased that very morning were perfectly suited to the task.

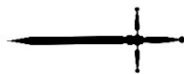
With both garages secured against escape, Arthur eyed the quiescent building soberly. To think that such death and destruction of human life originated here on a daily basis. He scanned the few windows on the top floor, waved his hand at Lavern, and pointed to one window in particular. The small, wiry boy took aim and fired a smoke bomb. The window shattered, and smoke billowed out into the setting-sun-drenched sky.

Arthur sent a text to his splinter team, and skilled archers on the opposite side began their assault.

Arthur pointed out the next window to Lavern. The boy fired. Another bomb. More smoke. And so it went until a smoke bomb had been fired through every upper-floor window. Smoke billowed from the wounded building like blood from an animal that had been stabbed.

Arthur nodded in approval at Lavern's expert shooting. The small boy grinned back with gratitude.

"Now we wait," Arthur whispered, and all eyes returned to the smoking warehouse.



Mayor Villagrana stood at his window watching the brilliant red and orange of the setting sun, the twinkling of city lights springing to life below him, and wondered what Arthur was up to, and would R. take care of it like he'd promised. All these kids running around the streets doing who knew what—it was a public-relations fiasco waiting to happen.

"Well?" came a harsh voice from behind him.

Villagrana turned to observe Council President Sanders with the usual scowl plastered to his craggy old face. Seated with Sanders was the rest of the city council—none too happy to be here by the looks on *their* faces. Chief Murphy had also brought in Sergeants Ryan and Gibson.

Oh joy, the mayor sighed inwardly, *the whole circus is in town*.

Despite these thoughts, all he said was, "Nothing going on that I can see." Sanders "hummped" and exchanged a look with Vice President Sandra Gale.

The phone rang suddenly, startling Villagrana with its harsh, tinny clang. The mayor snatched it up in annoyance. “Yes?” He listened but a moment and then held out the phone to Chief Murphy. “It’s for you.”

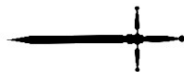
Murphy rose from his chair and took the phone from the obviously disgruntled mayor. “Yeah?” He listened, then covered the receiver with his hand and turned back to the group. “911 calls coming in from all over the city.” Then he resumed listening to the report.

Villagrana and Sanders exchanged a look. Despite their enmity, the mayor knew that whatever was going on probably wouldn’t be good for either of them.



Arthur watched as people attempted to exit from the underground garage. The padlock trapped them like the rats they were. Arthur looked at Jenny, who nervously gripped his hand. He squeezed it gently and then nodded to Lavern. The boy retrieved from his satchel another arrow, this one fitted with bound cloth. Enrique soaked the cloth in gasoline and lit it. Lavern notched the arrow, took aim at the first window he’d taken out, and fired. The arrow made a perfect arc up and into the office. Within moments, fire leapt from the window as the interior went up in flames.

Arthur observed a moment as the fire took hold. Lavern shot several more flaming arrows in through the upper windows, and as the inferno engulfed the entire top half of the building, Arthur signaled to Jenny. The prepaid phone she’d been given was already in her sweaty hand, and she thumbed in 911.



In the mayor’s office, Villagrana, the council members, Ryan, and Gibson had all taken spots at every available window to observe the scene below. Smoke rose from all over the city. Sirens shrieked as the flashing red of fire trucks and the flashing blue and red of police vehicles ripped the twilight open like a wormhole might a galaxy of stars.

“What the hell is happening?” Villagrana practically shouted. “It looks like a war zone down there!”

Ryan and Gibson exchanged a frustrated look. They clearly wanted to be out there with whatever was going on.

Chief Murphy finally hung up the phone. He’d made several calls to his men at Parker Center and now had a pretty good idea what was going on. And he liked it. Damn if he didn’t approve, despite the vigilante nature of the whole thing. He cleared his throat, and everyone turned to look. “You want the story? I

got it.”

He leaned up against the mayor’s expensive desk, ignoring the flash of anger in Villagrana’s eyes.

“Well, Chief,” Sanders asked anxiously, “Is the city burning down?”

Murphy shook his head. “Not fires. Just smoke. Well, there’s one fire at a warehouse, but somebody called it in and trucks are on the way.”

“Then what’s going on out there, Chief?” Villagrana practically screamed.

The Chief cleared his throat again. “It seems our King Arthur and his kids have smoke bombed a bunch of crack houses and meth labs throughout the city.”

“What?” Sandra Gale exclaimed, her eyes wide with astonishment.

The chief nodded. “Yep, bagged the cooks and left ’em in fishnets for us to pick up and book. Actually, these kids are turning the netted cooks over to the locals and letting *them* decide to call us or not. That’s the 911 calls—citizens who want us to finish what Arthur and his kids started. They even videoed everything and left the evidence for us to use.”

“Anybody get hurt?” Ryan asked.

“Too early to tell. I think some cooks got shot with arrows, but that’s still unconfirmed.”

“Hell!” Villagrana cursed, glaring at the Chief as if the whole evening was his fault. “Do you know how bad we’ll look in the media, Chief, when a bunch of kids can do better police work than the LAPD? We’ll be the laughing stock of the country.”

“Is that all you care about, Mr. Mayor?” Sandra Gale asked incredulously. “I, for one, think this King Arthur has done us a tremendous favor. Chief, how would he know where to find these drug houses when your men didn’t?”

“If I may answer that, Chief,” Ryan piped up, and the Chief shrugged. “The kids know everything that goes down in their neighborhoods, Ms. Gale. That’s why we try to befriend them. Unfortunately we stab them in the back way too often, so they don’t trust us. They *do* trust Arthur.”

“You’re out of line, Sergeant!” Murphy barked, his temper rising.

“Yeah, Ry,” Gibson added. “When do we stab ’em in the back?”

“Every time we arrest ’em and tell ’em if *they* help us, *we’ll* help them. We help ’em all right, straight to prison.”

Gibson opened his mouth to protest, but ended up saying nothing.

The mayor looked fit to be tied. “So, Mr. Police Chief, what do we do, huh?”

“I got my men responding to the calls, including that warehouse downtown. Seems that was a major drop and manufacture point too. Didn’t you say Arthur wanted us here in your office?”

The mayor nodded.

“Then I guess we wait for him,” Sanders added before returning to the window.

Smoke billowed above the city lights, and flashing sirens cast everything in strobing shades of blue and red.



At the first sound of approaching sirens, Arthur nodded to Justin.

“Thank you, Sir Justin,” he said, placing one hand on the tall boy’s shoulder. “You have done a great deed this night for the people of thy city. Your father would be proud of thee.”

Justin basked in the compliment, but lowered his gaze at the mention of his father. “I don’t think so. Probably just think I’m some kind a pyro or somethin’.”

Arthur waited, never taking his eyes from the boy’s face until Justin raised his head again sheepishly. “I take great pride in thee, Sir Justin, and I thank thee for thy loyalty.” He offered a small smile, patted the boy on the back, and turned to the others. “Now, my brave and noble young knights, we have a rendezvous with the mayor.”

He exchanged a look with Jenny and then glanced down at Chris, who gazed at the burning building in wonder. The top floors were completely engulfed in flames, and the people below beat furiously against the locked garage gate.

Arthur slipped quickly up into Llamrei’s saddle, knowing the approaching sirens would arrive in time to save those who were trapped. Hopefully, they would find the note Justin attached to the padlock and arrest them all.

But that decision would be theirs to make.

He reached down for Chris’s upraised hand and easily hefted the small boy up into the saddle, adjusting Chris’s helm and noting the long blond hair flowing from beneath it.

Was I once so small and young, he mused as Jenny deftly climbed up behind him?

He turned and cast her as reassuring a look as he could muster before flicking the reins and starting down the street, his team of knights following. Since they weren’t far from City Hall, they were all on foot, Justin’s mom’s SUV left behind for the time being.



Lance and Jack remained untied, but held at gunpoint by the two Asians flanking them. Lance knew if either of them made a move, any move, it would be their last. So they sat stiffly against one another, Lance glancing about the unabashed

opulence of the limo and awaiting an opportunity to put their plan into action.

R. observed them with amusement. The look in his eyes frightened Lance, because he knew this man had no conscience. Whatever he was planning had to be stopped.

Lance glanced down at the floor, hoping to appear humble, while his mind raced for a solution. He almost gagged, but held it back. Tucked under R.'s seat, right behind his feet, was Lance's skateboard. He figured it must've been tossed under there when he and Jack had been kidnapped, and then forgotten.

Could that be useful?

His thoughts were interrupted by movement from R. He flicked his eyes up and onto the man's face.

R. laughed. "So jumpy, Pretty Boy." He made a big show of reaching into his pocket.

Lance held his breath, certain a gun would be produced.

But R. merely pulled out a cell phone.

Lance's cell phone.

His eyes went wide with surprise. "Hey, that's my phone—"

A hard, bony elbow to the ribs cut him off, and he coughed and spluttered to catch his breath.

R. looked at him smugly. "I do believe children should be seen, but not heard. Isn't that the adage?" He chuckled as Lance struggled to regain his composure, and Jack glared furiously. "It applies to pretty boys, as well."

Lance could tell Jack wanted to jump the man then and there. He met Jack's eye and nodded, as if to say, "I'm okay."

R. thumbed in the number. He'd memorized it before deleting Arthur's messages. "I think it's high time I had a little chat with your so-called King Arthur, don't you?"

Neither boy responded as R. pressed "Send."

CHAPTER 14: BE IT OVER?

ARTHUR AND HIS TEAM HAD made good progress. They'd proceeded straight up Temple from the warehouse and had acquired quite an entourage along the way. Some of Arthur's other knights, who had completed their raids, folded into the parade, as had been planned. But what hadn't been planned were the people—local residents, many of them children and their parents—who spotted the march from their windows and had spilled out onto the sidewalk to follow. Seeing Arthur and his knights in the flesh was a thrill, and seeing them on the march meant something was going on, probably something good, and they obviously wanted a front-row seat.

Jenny looked amazed as the number of followers kept increasing. Within a few blocks, the procession had outgrown the width of the sidewalk, and people were spilling out into the street, causing drivers to slow down and gawk at the impromptu parade.

Arthur had just passed the intersection with Los Angeles Street when the phone in his pocket began vibrating.

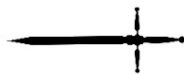
He frowned. Since all of his teams knew to meet at City Hall upon completion of their raids, and there was no need for communication, he felt a sudden chill run up his back. He slipped out the phone and glanced at the name—Lance. But rather than elation, fear seized him, and he hesitantly placed the phone to his ear.

“Yes, this is Arthur.”

A stony, heartless voice came out of the phone, and the words pierced his heart like a knife. “I have your pretty boy, and you want him back.”

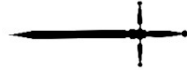
Arthur sucked in a loud, shocked breath, drawing Jenny's attention. “Arthur, what's wrong?”

He didn't answer, his heart thumping frantically, that shadow of doom closing in on him from all sides. He said into the phone, “Who are you?”



Lance observed R. settle more comfortably into his seat, crossing his legs and smirking like a predator about to strike. Mr. L., as always, remained unreadable.

“Who I am isn’t terribly important,” R. began smugly. “Let’s just say I’m the true ruler of this city. It’s belonged to me for years, and I intend to keep it. Your pathetic attempt to return it to the people ends tonight.”



Arthur continued guiding Llamrei up the street as he listened, but allowed the mare to move at her own pace. “Is Lance all right? Do you have Sir Jack, as well?”

At Lance’s name, both Chris and Jenny leaned in closer.



R. let out a snort of disgust. “If you mean the faggot, yes, he’s here too.”

Lance bristled at the word, but Jack took it in stride. He looked alert to any possibility to put their plan into action and clearly had no intention of being rattled.

“You could really do so much better in your selection of knights, King Arthur,” R. went on tauntingly. “I mean, really, faggots? And wanna-be faggots? I’m certain you’ll be disappointed to learn that your pretty boy son is probably a fagboy too. Doesn’t that just disgust you?”

Lance burned with equal parts humiliation and hatred. Jack lightly elbowed him, a signal to keep his focus. Lance forced himself to stay calm.



Arthur felt a sickness well up in his stomach and surround his thumping heart. He knew, deep down, that this man wouldn’t hesitate to kill Lance and Jack. His tone, his words—this was a man without conscience or remorse. Arthur forced himself to remain calm.

“On the contrary, I could not be more proud of Sir Lance, and Sir Jack. They be outstanding young men.”

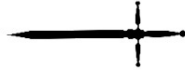


R. guffawed. “Yeah, right, *men*. That’s a good one. It’s those attitudes that’ve doomed your whole crusade from the start, *King*. Only the strong survive in this world, and *might* will *always* crush right!” He smirked again at the boys, obviously enjoying himself.

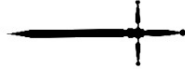


Arthur sat stiffly upon Llamrei, both Chris and Jenny leaning in anxiously. “How do I know my boys be still alive?”

Jenny gasped, and Chris’s eyes welled with tears.



“Do you have video chat on your phone?” R. asked with an exaggerated sigh, as though saying, “why do they never believe me?”



Arthur handed the phone to Chris. “Sir Chris, does this phone have something he called video chat?”

Chris took the phone and through blurred eyes pressed a couple of buttons on the touch screen to open the video chat feature. Before handing the phone back, he looked imploringly at Arthur. “Are Lance and Jack gonna be okay?”

Arthur nodded. Then he held up the phone and spoke into it. “I have it.”



R. turned the screen away so as to not reveal himself. Instead, he turned the phone to face Lance and Jack.

Lance couldn’t help himself. “Arthur, he’s gonna kill you! It’s—” An elbow to the ribs shut him down before he could finish.

“It’s a trap, Arthur—” Jack spit out before he, too, got an elbow to the gut.

R. glared and disengaged the video feature before returning the phone to his ear. “You, see, Arthur, your knights are alive and, like all children, incredibly stupid!”



A wave of panic assailed Arthur at seeing the boys struck so harshly, and he fought to control the fear in his voice. His breath felt tight in his lungs, and his heart pounded with dread. He should have been prepared for a man like this—there had been a great many of his ilk back in Britain.

But he *hadn’t* been prepared. Another error on his part.

Please, Lord, do not let Lance and Jack pay for my mistake...

He exhaled a deep breath then spoke into the phone, “Do not harm them. I shall do whatever you ask.”



R. glowed with delight. “Of course you will. And what I want is very simple. You’re to keep your appointment with the mayor. Proceed precisely as you planned, but know that I will be watching and listening the entire time. Should you try to double cross me, your fagboys are dead. I’ll call again with further instructions. It’s been a pleasure.”

He pressed “End” and beamed at the two coughing, gagging boys. “The end is near, for you and for him.” He sounded almost giddy.



Arthur saw the call had ended and lapsed into a brooding silence. Jenny gripped him tightly around the waist, and Chris squeezed the hand holding Llamrei’s reins.

“I couldn’t see your phone. Are they all right?” Jenny asked, almost breathless with fear.

“For the time being. But can I save them?” He shook his head in despair. “All my accomplishments, in Britain and here, all will be for naught if I cannot save them.”

“You will. You’ll think of something.”

Arthur spurred Llamrei into a fast trot, causing those on foot to break into a jog to keep pace.



All windows in the mayor’s office were occupied as Villagrana, the council members, and the police gazed out at the city below. The smoke had dissipated for the most part, but the sounds of sirens and the flashing of red and blue lights still crisscrossed the city.

Looking down, instead of out, Villagrana pointed. “What the hell is that?”

From all streets leading to City Hall, small lights bobbed and weaved and raised and lowered and flashed and winked. But all were on the move—toward them.

“Cell phones,” Gibson responded. “Kids light ’em up at concerts like that.”

“Those are all kids?” Sandra Gale exclaimed.

“Looks like it,” Gibson replied with a sigh.

“And look who’s leading the largest group,” Sanders announced, pointing up Temple Street.

All eyes focused on the man atop the white horse. There was a child seated in front of him and a woman holding on behind. More blinking, winking, waving lights filled the street behind him. Cars had slowed to a crawl, trailing the

pedestrians, headlight beams like huge eyes opening up the encroaching darkness.

“Looks like the king approaches, Mr. Mayor,” Murphy declared with a look toward Villagrana.

“Hell, Chief!” the mayor responded angrily, running his hands nervously through his moussed hair. “Get your men and your ass down there.”

“My men are already down there, Mr. Mayor, but I don’t think it’s me he wants to see.”

“The Chief’s right,” Sanders said, turning to face Villagrana, who was visibly sweating with nervousness. “He wants us. And he’s probably got a thousand kids with him. I guess this *is* like a concert, Mr. Mayor, except you’re the star performer. You blow it, and they’ll storm the stage.”

“And then all hell breaks loose,” Murphy finished solemnly.

Ryan pulled his eyes away from the politicians and focused again on Arthur and his multitude of adoring, jubilant, and powerful children. He’d never have believed such a thing was possible, not here in his city, and yet it was happening, right before his eyes. He smiled to himself.

“Let’s go,” Villagrana announced with resignation, and the assemblage left the office.



As Arthur neared City Hall, he noted a large dumpster off to one side of the building. His mind was fixed solely upon on Lance. He wanted nothing more than to gallop off and rescue his boy, but he did not know where to go or even who had him. So he focused on his original plan. He instructed Justin to pass the word back amongst the knights—all backpacks filled with drugs were to be brought forward and tossed into the dumpster.

As bags began shifting from back-to-front, almost like an assembly line, the boys nearest the dumpster grabbed each one and tossed it in. As this was going on, Esteban and Reyna, along with Jaime, Darnell, Tai, and Duc made their way through the throng to stand by Llamrei’s side.

The king surveyed them. “You all achieved success?”

“Yes, sire.” Esteban spoke for the group. “The people, well, they be on our side.”

The others nodded.

“Thank ye, my noble knights. You make me proud.”

They grinned at that, and Reyna leaned in to kiss Esteban on the cheek. When he turned in surprise, she planted one on his lips, throwing her arms wildly

around his neck and pulling him against her.

Jaime laughed. "Break it up, homie, or you'll have the same problem as me."

Reyna disengaged herself and punched Jaime in the shoulder. "Like hell!"

But she laughed anyway, and Esteban smirked at Jaime.

Arthur watched their joyous youth, their spontaneous and exciting energy, their pride in tonight's accomplishments, with wonder and trepidation. All would be perfect, except for Jack and Lance.

The kids continued the hand-over-hand passing of the backpacks, and were thus engaged when the mayor and his people exited the front of City Hall and stood at the top of the steps. The TV news crews were already in place, led by Helen Schaeffer, whom Arthur had called that morning.

The mayor stopped short when he caught sight of her, especially with the camera aimed squarely up at him. Helen lifted a hand and wiggled her fingers at Villagrana. He scowled before returning his attention to Arthur.

Arthur dismounted, helping Chris and Jenny down. He handed the reins to Chris and gazed up at the obviously angry mayor. "Good evening, Mr. Mayor," Arthur said with a bow of respect.

Sanders and Gale exchanged a worried look as they surveyed the size of the crowd.

"Sergeant Ryan," Arthur called up, and Ryan disengaged himself from the group to step forward. "I wish to thank thee for assisting Sir Lance and Sir Jack when Mark died."

"They're good kids, Arthur," Ryan called down. "Never thought I'd hear myself say that, but they are. You been good for 'em."

Gibson stepped forward in surprise as Justin stepped to Arthur's side and said something to the king. Arthur nodded and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. Gibson stared at his son in frozen amazement.

"You and your kids are blocking public streets, you know," the mayor called down feebly, clearly not knowing what to say or do.

"I do not see anyone complaining, Mr. Mayor," Arthur replied calmly. "If they do, my knights shall be happy to step aside."

A cheer rang out from the kids and the assembled spectators. More winking, flashing cell phones lights glittered all around City Hall, accompanied by honking car horns.

"We've gotten reports on what you and your kids have been up to tonight," Villagrana went on. "We got a bunch of wounded citizens in the hospital with arrows sticking out of them. Would you care to comment on that?"

Arthur sighed, gripping Reyna's cell phone tightly in his left hand, willing it to vibrate. "Mr. Mayor, someone alerted the drug dealers that my knights be on

their way, and they attacked us first. Those you speak of were living under your care as guardian of this city and poisoning the children you claim to be concerned about. Ask the people gathered here with me if they care that some of these *citizens* have been hurt.”

The crowd erupted with an ear-shattering roar, “We don’t care! We want Arthur!” The cell phones waved and flickered like angry starlight, and car horns blasted into the night like howling dogs.

Though slightly embarrassed by the people’s show of support, Arthur stood his ground and gazed up at the mayor with pride. And why shouldn’t he? His kids had done tonight what all the adults up there had failed to even attempt.

Villagrana exchanged a look with the police chief, who shrugged. Fury swept across the mayor’s face. “You cannot go around taking the law into your own hands!”

Arthur shook his head at the venality of this man and his ilk. “I thought in this country the laws came from the people. Are we not the people?”

The knights and spectators again went wild with cheers and applause and flashing phone lights and honking horns.

“But alas, Mr. Mayor,” Arthur went on, playing to Helen’s camera as well, “I did forget that in thine eyes and that of your fellow authoritarians, children be not part of the people, but mere property to be bought, sold, traded, and neglected. They have no rights. They cannot even vote for men such as yourself. Tonight my noble young knights have proven the error of your ways and your thinking. My knights have accomplished what you and yours could not or would not do, and the whole of this city has benefited.”

He pointed to the dumpster, now overflowing with drug-filled backpacks. “Behold, Mr. Mayor, but a mere fraction of the drugs you have allowed to infest your city, drugs which destroy the lives of children first and foremost, and which took from me one of my most beloved knights.”

He paused a moment as the image of Mark’s soft features pulled his heart with tight emotion, and Lance’s eager young face danced before his mind’s eye. “But Sir Mark’s death shall not be forgotten. My knights have begun a crusade this day that is not near to being finished. Do *you* intend to finish the job, Mr. Mayor and Mr. Police Chief? The people be awaiting your response.”

The crowd and the kids let loose another resounding roar of approval, and cell phone lights flashed on and off in excited waving.



Parked a few blocks up Temple near the intersection of Spring Street, the limo

idled. On a flat-screen TV, which had descended from the roof at the touch of a button, the occupants watched the entire scene below them play out live. Lance had flinched when Arthur mentioned Mark, and was visibly surprised to hear Ryan's assessment of them. He knew Jack was, too. Always, however, he sought any possible opening to initiate his plan.

R. chuckled as the camera zoomed in on Villagrana's face. The mayor looked like he'd swallowed a whole onion, so disgusted was his expression.

"Villagrana always has been a fool," he said to no one in particular. "A useful idiot, but nothing more." Then he looked at Mr. L. "Are your men in position?"

L. nodded.

R. grinned. "Let the diversion begin."

L. raised a phone to his mouth and spoke only one word, "Now."

Lance whipped his gaze back to the TV monitor, dread clenching his stomach into knots.



Villagrana and Murphy exchanged looks with Sanders and Gale and the other council members, and they began speaking quietly to one another, debating what should be done.

Ryan and Gibson took the moment to eye each other.

"You saw Justin?" Gibson whispered to his partner, his voice filled with pain.

Ryan nodded. "You gonna go get him, or do I have to?"

"I'll go."

But before he could move, a group of fifteen individuals, dressed in ninja black, faces covered except for their eyes, appeared from behind City Hall and oozed smoothly and rapidly down the steps toward Arthur. They brandished katanas, their movements lithe, nimble and sure-footed.

"Knights, to thy swords!" called out Arthur as he drew Excalibur with his right hand.

Esteban pushed Reyna back and unsheathed his sword. Reyna grabbed Chris, and they backed Llamrei away from the melee. Jaime, Justin, Darnell, and the others surrounding Arthur pulled out their swords, and the fight commenced.

Jenny backed away into the kids surrounding the fighting arena. A huge circle had quickly spread outward from the center, with the combatants attacking each other within.

Helen's cameraman swung around to catch the action, as did all the others.

Arthur's knights used their weapons effectively against the attackers, who jumped and spun and wielded their katanas with deadly precision. But Arthur's

knights were just as skilled and managed to block every attack with their shields, and their body armor protected them from glancing blows by the enemy.

The sheer weightiness of Arthur's swords often knocked the smaller attackers to the ground, especially when wielded by Esteban with his prodigious strength. The powerful boy pounded into the fray, swinging and hacking and parrying and dancing, putting technique ahead of brute force, just as Lance had taught him.

Tai, the massive Samoan with the steamroller build, plowed like a bull into the skirmish, swinging and hacking with his six-foot broadsword, disarming one of the attackers with a hard swing that shattered the man's forearm. Then he whirled and barreled into two more, head-butting one so hard he dropped to the pavement like a sack of potatoes, and then plowing his shoulder into the other, sending the smaller man crashing hard to the ground where Duc easily kicked the sword from his grasp and held the man down with the point of his own weapon.

Arthur's knights fought viciously, dancing and swinging, dodging killing blows, all their training coming to the fore, clearly enjoying the opportunity to show off their skills, pumped up with the strength of their youth and vigor.

Arthur wielded Excalibur as though it were a kitchen knife, always swinging and slashing and hacking with his right hand for fear of dropping Reyna's cell phone, which he clutched tightly in his left.

Esteban and Darnell wounded their attackers with measured, well-placed thrusts to the shoulders, and the men crumpled to the pavement, their swords clattering out of reach.

"My God!" exclaimed the mayor, looking over at Murphy. "Do something."

"Like what?" Murphy retorted. "Have my men shoot into a crowd of kids?"

Gibson gaped in stupefied amazement as his son swung and hacked and parried and danced and easily took down not one, but *two* of the attackers.

Luis and Enrique suffered serious slashes across their sword arms that drew blood, causing them to stumble back against Reyna and Lavern, both of whom already had their bows loaded and cocked.

Reyna smiled at the attacker moving in to finish off Luis, sword poised for the kill. "Sorry, sucker," she said and let the arrow fly. It struck the man in his upper bicep, causing him to shriek in pain and drop his sword.

Likewise, Lavern let fly his arrow, which caught the other man in the thigh, sending him sprawling to the concrete, the sword tumbling from his grasp.



In all of this confusion, no one noticed a young Asian man creep through the

crowd to stand behind Jenny, who fearfully watched the fighting, breath caught in her throat. She suddenly felt something cold and metallic press into her back.

“Don’t turn around,” she heard a soft voice whisper.

Her heart beat wildly, her eyes fixed on Arthur and Excalibur, as though willing the man to look over. But he gamboled and parried against the largest of the attackers and did not even glance in her direction.

“Now we’re going to casually turn and walk through the crowd ’til we’re clear of them,” the voice went on in her ear, casual and deadly. “You make a false move or try to get any of these kids to help, I’ll shoot you and then randomly shoot kids. You got it, lady?”

She nodded, and slowly turned around. The boys surrounding her were engrossed in the fighting, their swords out and ready should they be needed, and had not even noticed her deadly predicament. With the metal still pressed into her back, Jenny wended her way carefully through the throng, death right on her heels.



Within the limo, Lance watched the fighting unfold on the flat screen with confidence and fear. There were too few attackers, he knew. There was no way they could beat all of Arthur’s knights. So why bother? A diversion, R. had said, but diverting attention from what? Despite his fear, he felt pride in his fellow knights. Most of them had been trained by him, which gave him a fleeting sense of accomplishment, something so rare it caught up in his throat like a wad of gum.

R. observed the mayhem with amusement, occasionally glancing up through the open moonroof and drawing Lance’s attention. He, too, looked up through the open rectangular hole.

A building loomed to the right of the limo, and he thought it was an old court building or something. But why would R. keep...? And then movement caught his eye, a flash of light against metal, up on the roof, right there on the corner.

“What you lookin’ at, Pretty Boy?” R. barked.

Lance whipped his head around, but quickly recovered. “Nuthin’. The stars.”

R. shook his head in disgust. “You’re a pathetic excuse for a boy, you know that?”

If he thought Lance would rise to the bait, he was mistaken. Lance’s mind spun. Roof. Metal. What did it...? And then he knew.

A sniper!

That had to be it, and that’s what the diversion was about, so he could shoot

Arthur!

Desperation swept over him. He wanted to blurt it out to Jack, who sat fuming over R.'s insult, but knew he couldn't. Their time was up. They had to get out of this car, and they had to do it now! He locked eyes with Jack, exchanged a slight nod, and then began.

R.'s phone vibrated, and he put it to his ear. "I said I didn't... what?" His eyes bugged out in fury, causing the boys to press closer together. Each had casually slipped a hand beneath his own tunic, and so far no one had noticed.

"Sit tight, and we'll get you later." He slammed the phone down.

L. turned from the fighting. "What?"

R. glowered with such hatred at Lance that he thought the man might rip him apart with his bare hands. "That was Gutierrez. He barely got away from the cops, after our warehouse was firebombed!"

L.'s face twisted with anger. "What?"

But R.'s fierce, killing glare fixed on Jack. "Forgot to mention that, did you, fagboy?"

Jack pretended to consider the question. "Oh yeah," he said with a shrug. "I did forget that." Then he grinned.

R. turned red with rage. "Kill him!"

That was their cue. They yanked their hands from beneath their shirts. Each wielded half of the metal rod used to lift the toilet stopper—the metal rod from the toilet of their holding cell, the one Jack had snapped in two with his powerful hands.

With the quickness of youth, the boys twisted around and rammed their sections of steel right into the throats of the Asians flanking them, causing both men to flail wildly about, grab for their throats, and drop their guns.

R. dove across the space toward Lance, but Lance was faster. He dropped to the carpeted floor of the limo, reached under the seat, and grabbed his skateboard.

Jack flung himself across the small space and attacked L. like he was a tackling dummy in football practice. He drove his shoulder into L.'s chest, shoving the man back hard against the car seat and sending the wind whooshing from his lungs.

Quick as a rabbit, Lance was up with his board and swinging. It struck R. hard in the jaw, and the audible crack of bone warmed Lance's heart. R. went sprawling, and Lance called out, "Let's go, Jack!"

Before the other boy could even respond, Lance was up and through the moon roof. Jack leapt up after, his muscled frame finding it more difficult to squeeze through. L. reached out a hand to grab Jack's ankle, but when Jack kicked out,

there was an “ugh” sound and his ankle was free.

Lance hauled him the rest of the way up and they and stood atop the limo. Lance pointed up at the court building.

There was movement, visible even in the dark.

“I think it’s a sniper. C’mon!”

The boys leapt onto the hood, down to the sidewalk, and took off down Temple Street.



Mr. L. was the first to recover and started to jump from the car with his gun. Mr. R. flung a hand out to stop him. “Let ’em go. It’s too late anyway. Help me up.” His voice sounded slurred and uneven.

Fagboy broke my jaw, he silently fumed. He’ll pay for that!

Mr. L helped him back onto the seat. He pulled out Lance’s phone and dialed Arthur.



The battle had wound down. Only Arthur still fought, clashing with the biggest of the attackers. His knights, the mayor and his group, the LAPD officers scattered around the perimeter, as well as the rubbernecking local residents, stood by helplessly, breathless with anticipation.

Arthur’s attacker fought hard and with deadly efficiency, his katana swinging deftly up, down, and across with dizzying speed, parrying many of Arthur’s thrusts. He could jump high above Arthur’s swings and crouch low to avoid the same. After a time, Arthur figured out his pattern, and when the man leapt, Arthur swung high instead of low, and Excalibur slashed across the attacker’s thigh, slicing it open.

The man crumpled to the ground with a piercing scream, blood spurting from the jagged wound, his sword spilling to the concrete for Lavern to retrieve.

Arthur stood back, panting from the exertion, eyed the writhing, wounded man and the blood streaking Excalibur, and then thrust the sword skyward in triumph. The kids roared their approval. The fight was over. They had won.

Then the phone in Arthur’s hand vibrated.



Lance and Jack sprinted feverishly down Temple and had just passed Spring Street. Lance’s lungs burned and his heart pumped wildly, adrenaline propelling him forward with desperation.

Up ahead in the distance, he saw the lights of City Hall and the crowd of knights and spectators all spread out in a massive circle that spilled outward like a spiral galaxy. All heads faced inward, toward the center, toward something Lance could not yet make out.

Hundreds of winking and flashing cell phone lights made the whole area look like a glittery star field, as though the boys were headed into the center of the Milky Way, itself.

Traffic on Temple, usually extreme, had trickled to almost nothing, maybe because everyone knew all the action was up ahead at City Hall.

Lance's panting heaved and pulled at his lungs, but Jack seemed hardly winded at all. He nudged the younger boy as they pounded along the pavement. "You got the board, man, go! I'll catch up."

Lance tossed him a worried nod then deftly leapt atop his board and began to fly.



Arthur lowered Excalibur and raised the phone to his ear. The surrounding starfield of people saw the movement and, bewildered, fell silent. Arthur forced calm into his voice. "I am here."



Within the limo, a disheveled Mr. L. sat smoothing out his wrinkled jacket, while Mr. R. sat across from him, his jaw swollen and enflamed, his fury raging. He held up Lance's phone and growled, "You wanna see your punk-ass kids alive again?"



Arthur exhaled in relief.

My boys yet live! Thank you, Lord.

"What do ye wish me to do?"

Everyone watched uncertainly, and waited, including the mayor and his people. Absolute silence filled the night.



Mr. R. knew he had but moments before those kids raised the alarm. His jaw throbbed, and his words came out slurred.

"It's very simple, *your majesty*," he said mockingly. "Simply lay down your

sword and step away from it.”

He and Mr. L. exchanged a look while he awaited Arthur’s answer. “Remember, I am watching everything.”

Arthur frowned. It was an odd request. And the man’s voice sounded different somehow. He heard pain in that voice. He’d been around more than enough battle injuries to know the sound of a battle wound when he heard it. Had Lance or Jack somehow hurt this man? If so, were they even, in fact, still alive?

He gazed a moment at the mayor and police chief. The chief had a radio to his mouth, presumably calling in reinforcements. Then Arthur turned to the sea of faces awaiting his next move. Reyna flashed him a “what’s going on” look, but he didn’t respond.

Lay down Excalibur. A simple request. It would make him vulnerable to attack, he knew. But if there was a chance to save Lance....

“Very well,” he said into the phone.

He bent to lay Excalibur onto the pavement.



Lance kicked and barreled down Temple Street, lungs burning, not daring to look up, but *feeling* the sniper high above taking his aim.

Lance understood the stakes. This moment would define his life. This would be his greatest event ever, greater and more important than anything at the X Games.

His real gold medal, the *only* gold medal that mattered, would not be for him alone, but for all of his fellow knights, for all of his family—he had to save Arthur at any cost!

The needs of the fellowship demanded it.

Hair trailing behind like the mane of a galloping colt, Lance caught sight of a ramp beside the incomplete bleachers, a ramp that rose up to the height of those bleachers, a ramp that would propel him up and over the crowd to Arthur.

Legs burning, sweat pouring into his eyes, Lance pumped and kicked harder than ever in his young life.



Atop the old Hall of Justice, Alberto Santiago had Arthur clearly framed within his scope. Santiago had been one of the Army Rangers’ best snipers during the Gulf War, but had been summarily dismissed from military service for later taking out a particularly nasty warlord in Somalia without proper authorization.

Hell, he’d seen the chance to take out the bastard, and he’d grabbed it.

Probably saved thousands.

But his superiors hadn't seen it that way, and he'd been given a dishonorable discharge. All he knew about this Arthur guy was what he'd seen on the news. Seemed okay to him, but Mr. R. paid the bills, and if Mr. R. wanted him smoked, well, that was his job.

His cue, Mr. R. had told him, was when Arthur laid his sword onto the ground. Then, when the man stood up, he would take his shot. Armor-piercing bullets, too, since the king would likely be sporting some kind of armor.

He observed through his scope as Arthur bent down with his sword and began laying it out on the ground. His trigger finger twitched. Almost there.



Sending a silent prayer skyward for worthiness, a sweaty, adrenaline-powered Lance bolted up the rickety wooden ramp toward the heavens.



Arthur laid Excalibur out onto the ground, wary of someone coming at him from within the crowd. Body taut for action, he released the hilt, stood erect, and stepped back from his only protection.



Lance hit the top of the ramp and shot out like a bullet over the bleachers. Below him, the kids looked up in amazement and excited recognition. Fingers pointed, hands clapped joyously. He heard his name called out.

But his gaze remained fixed on Arthur a short distance below. He yelled as loudly as he could, "Arthur, look out!"

Arthur turned at the sound of Lance's voice, his face breaking into a joyous smile of relief at the sight of Lance floating toward him like an angel.



Santiago had Arthur's chest square in his sights. He pulled the trigger.

Lance soared directly toward Arthur, his heart in his throat. The bullet struck him square in the back. He twisted grotesquely in midair, his face erupting in pain, his board sailing off without him.

Not yet sure what had happened, Arthur held out his arms, and Lance smashed right into him, knocking them both to the ground as another shot rang out, the bullet striking the concrete mere inches from Arthur's head.

Panic gripped the crowd, and they dove for the ground.

The knights swelled into a close grouping around Arthur to protect him as he gently rolled Lance off of him. Reyna snatched up Excalibur and tossed it to Arthur, who grabbed the sword in one hand and pushed himself upright with the other.

Murphy called out orders into his radio and pointed to his men on the perimeter. He gesticulated wildly toward the Hall of Justice, and the cops took off running.

One of Arthur's archers named Khom, a Cambodian boy from Long Beach, shoved his way through the circle. "Arthur!"

The king had started back toward Lance, but now stopped at this new interruption. "What is it, Sir Khom? Be quick!"

The panting boy gasped, "Some guy, he took Lady Jenny!"

Arthur whirled to where he'd last seen Jenny. She was gone.

"Where are they?"

"He shoved her into a big-ass limo, up the street." Sir Khom pointed up toward Temple and Spring. An enormous Hummer limo could be seen driving away out of sight. "There!" the boy shouted. "There it is."

Arthur made a lunge for Llamrei, waiting restlessly beside Chris, whose frightened gaze was fixed on the fallen, unmoving Lance. Arthur bent down to examine the boy he loved. A thin stream of blood trickled from Lance's mouth, and a large pool had already begun spreading out from beneath him. His eyes flitted about, the vibrant green etched with searing pain. They focused on Arthur.

"Save her, Arthur," he whispered. "Hurry."

Arthur gazed at his beloved boy and marveled that, even now, he would think of others first. "I shall return to thee, my Lance."

He rose and ran to Llamrei, deftly leaping onto her back, snatching the reins from a shell-shocked Chris and galloping hard through the crowd, which opened a pathway. Murphy barked orders into his radio, and several of the approaching police cars took off up Temple in pursuit of the limo.



The stunned spectators began rising to their feet, milling and confused, uncertain about what had just happened.

Chris dropped to his knees beside Lance and Reyna, who knelt by the wounded boy's other side. Chris grasped Lance's hand, gazed in shock at the blood pooling from beneath him, and began to cry.

Reyna gently cradled Lance's head in her lap, lightly brushing his damp hair

from around his face. He tried for a smile. “You mad ’cause I’m younger, prettier, can shoot, *and* skate better than you?”

Reyna swiped at the tears dripping down her face. “You crazy fool, had to play the hero, didn’t you?”

“Did I win the gold?”

She took his hand in hers and fought for control. “Course you did. And you know why?” He shook his head weakly. “Cause I love you, that’s why. You couldn’t’ve done it without me.”

Lance smiled.

At that moment, Jack pushed through the circle, panting and heaving, and gasped when he saw Lance. And the blood. His breath nearly stopped, his heart in his throat.

“Oh no,” he said to no one in particular, his knees almost buckling beneath him. “No, it can’t be! Oh please, God, don’t let this happen!”

Reyna waved him over. “C’mon, Jack, he needs you.”

Jack stumbled forward and dropped to his knees beside Lance.

“We did it, huh, Jacky? We saved Arthur.”

Jack clenched and unclenched his fists, struggling to control his anguish. “Damn you, Lance, it wasn’t supposed to be this way. I was supposed to save *you!*”

Lance grinned. “Not if I saved you first.”

Jack stroked Lance’s soft, sweaty brown hair with trembling fingers. “Oh God, Lance, you can’t go, you can’t leave me.” Tears sprang to his eyes. “I need you too much!”

“It’s okay, Jacky,” Lance said quietly, “I can—” He coughed up a little blood, and Reyna gently wiped his mouth with her sleeve. “—I can tell Mark how much you loved him.”

Jack choked back a sob and turned his anguished gaze toward Reyna. They reached out to grasp each other’s hand, sharing the aching pain of their mutual love for this boy.

At that moment, Ryan and Gibson shoved their way through the crowd and into the circle, Ryan shouting, “Get back, everybody, stay back, give the boy some air!” He knelt beside Jack and gazed soberly at the wounded Lance.

Approaching sirens began to get louder. Ryan stripped off his rumpled jacket, gently moved Chris aside, and laid the jacket over Lance to keep him warm. “Don’t worry, son, help is on the way.”

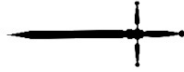
Lance smiled up at the aged cop, his beautiful, angelic smile. “Thank you, Sergeant Ryan.”

Ryan nodded, but looked nauseous, as though watching Lance suffer was the

worst thing he'd seen in his life.

Jack sat beside Lance, and Reyna allowed the devastated boy to take Lance's head and cradle it. Chris took Lance's hand again and sobbed into Jack's shoulder. Reyna took Lance's other hand.

"Hang on, cutie," she said with a wink, her voice tight with fear.



Gibson stood gazing down at the wounded boy, the blood pooling around him, turned away in disgust and anger, and came face to face with his son. Justin was crying, something Gibson hadn't seen him do since he was little. Father and son gazed at one another a long moment, and then Justin unexpectedly grabbed his father in a tight hug.

Caught off guard, Gibson let his boy do the hugging. He understood that Justin wasn't crying only for Lance, but for everything that had happened in his life, for all the missed opportunities he and Gibson had had to connect, the way he had connected with Arthur. So finally Gibson did what he should have been doing all long—he hugged his son and whispered into the boy's ear, "I love you, son. I always have."

Ugly slashes of red and an ear-piercing siren signaled the arrival of the paramedics, who leapt from their vehicle almost before it stopped and ran to the wounded Lance.



Inside the limo, Jenny struggled against the Asian man's iron grip. For such a small guy, he was incredibly strong, and she couldn't break free. The two younger Asians sat stoically in the back of the limo, holding sections of cloth ripped from their shirts against bleeding neck wounds.

The third Asian, the one who'd kidnapped Jenny, sat calmly beside them, handgun at the ready, awaiting further orders.

A middle-aged Latino man sat across from Jenny holding a chunk of ice against his swollen, crooked jaw.

She glared at him with hate. "What do you want with me?"

He glowered, his eyes rolling with fury. "Bait, lady. Stupid kid got in the way. Your Arthur still lives!"

A thrill of joy and fear thrummed through Jenny's nerves. Arthur lived! But which kid got in the way? What did that mean? She didn't want to ask. She could see how unstable this man was becoming.

"Any sign of pursuit?" he asked the Asians in back.

“Just cops,” gurgled one. “No sign of *him*.”

“Get rid of the cops.”

The young Asian who’d grabbed Jenny put down the back window. Two police cars had barreled up Temple after them, and a third joined the chase from Spring Street. He slid his semiautomatic handgun out the window and began firing.

The pursuing police cars swerved as bullets flew at them from the fleeing The limo swung an ear-screeching turn onto N. Broadway Street, heading east. The police cars skidded around the corner to follow. Startled drivers swerved their cars to the side of the road to avoid a collision.

Suddenly, the driver rapped on the window separating him from the passengers. Latino guy pressed a button, and the window lowered.

“What is it?” he asked irritably.

“Straight ahead, sir!” the nervous driver called back over his shoulder.

Both the Latino guy and the Asian holding her leaned forward for a better view.

Arthur, his hair flying in the wind, galloped Llamrei straight down Broadway, crossing the overpass above the 101 Freeway, darting in and out of the swerving cars, on a nonstop collision course with the limo.

“Run his ass down!” Latino guy called out to the driver.

But then his grin dropped, for Arthur had raised a bow and arrow and aimed it straight at the limo. He let the arrow fly.

There was a *thunk* as the arrow struck the limo’s left front tire, and the car spun wildly out of control.

Arthur lowered the bow, snatched up Llamrei’s reins, and jumped the horse high into the air. The spinning, swerving limo passed directly beneath him and smashed into the concrete embankment of the overpass.

Arthur landed his horse safely and spun around.

The limo smashed through the overpass embankment, sending large chunks of broken concrete onto the freeway below.

The long black Hummer swung partway out above the freeway, its front end still on the roadway, but its rear teetering dangerously over the abyss. The sound of police sirens signaled the approach of the pursuing police cars.

Arthur spurred his horse toward the tottering limo.

As the car smashed into the guardrail, Jenny saw her chance and shoved the startled Asian away from her. The teetering car and spinning tires threw everyone off-balance. She fought madly for the door, instinctively kicking out with one foot and hearing a satisfying “umph” as she made contact with the man’s face. The door swung open, causing the car to teeter even more. The

driver frantically gunned the engine, fighting to keep the vehicle on the overpass.

Jenny leaped from the car.

She tumbled hard onto the asphalt and looked up at the sound of pelting hooves. Before she could react, Arthur was upon her, his arm outstretched for hers. She stumbled upright and flung out her hand desperately. He grasped it in his and swung her sharply off the ground and into the saddle behind him, almost wrenching her arm from the socket. She nearly cried out from the searing pain, but bit it back with a groan.

Arthur galloped onward just as the limo driver righted the vehicle and gunned the engine in pursuit. Jenny glanced back to see one police car stopped at the overpass, but the other two still pursuing the damaged limo.

“Hurry, Arthur,” Jenny called out, glancing back over her shoulder. “They’re gaining!”



Arthur was an able horseman, but no horse could outrun a car, even one as wounded as the limo. A bullet whizzed past his head. He spun Llamrei sharply to the right, and they galloped down the less-trafficked Arcadia Street.

He didn’t have time for this! He had to get back to Lance!

The limo, obviously caught off guard by Arthur’s sudden move, screeched to a halt and then backed up and turned down Arcadia in pursuit. Those precious few seconds were all Arthur needed.

Arthur rode Llamrei to a sudden stop, turning the horse around to face the soon-to-be oncoming limo.

“Take the reins,” he told Jenny.

Without question, she complied.

Arthur grabbed his bow and cocked an arrow just as the limo’s headlights sped down the street, bathing them in harsh, blinding light. He dug in his heels, and Llamrei leapt forward into a determined gallop.

Bullets flew at him from the windows of the limo.

With both hands occupied by the bow and arrow, Arthur could not grip Excalibur. The first few shots missed, but the fourth struck him in the shoulder, causing him to flinch.

“My God, you’ve been hit!” Jenny screamed in horror.

“Just keep her steady!” Arthur shouted, pulling back on the bow string and letting the arrow fly.

It shattered the already-cracked windshield and pierced the driver in the left shoulder, pinning him to the seat and sending the limo careening out of control.

Arthur dropped his bow and snatched back the reins, turning his horse sharply away from the spinning limo.

The twisting car whipped past them and smashed into an electrical pole, knocking it down and puncturing the Hummer's gas tank. Gasoline began spilling from the rupture, and lighted buildings in the vicinity winked once, and then went black.

Without hesitation, Arthur turned his horse and galloped past the wreckage.

He was desperate to return to Lance.

My son...

As the electrical wires sparked into the gasoline, it set off the remainder of the gas in the tank, and the limo exploded in a huge fireball visible throughout the city.

Arthur didn't even notice.



Around City Hall, chaos ruled the night. Police and paramedic lights flashed haphazardly amidst the seething throng of children and local citizens who packed the surrounding streets. Arthur's kids shuffled and milled about aimlessly, uncertainly, almost shell-shocked.

The mayor and council members, along with Chief Murphy and some of his officers, stood near the bottom of the steps vainly attempting to direct the multitude back away from the wounded Lance, but their efforts fell short with so many people. It seemed as though the entire city was out tonight, jostling and crowding in for a better view.

Helen and the other TV reporters urged their camera people to capture every riveting moment. Helen had gotten close enough to see the bleeding Lance, still being cradled by Jack and Reyna, and she had to forcibly blink back tears.

Two paramedics squatted beside Lance, checking his vital signs. One was very young, while the other looked to be middle-aged.

The crowd surrounding the scene suddenly parted, and Arthur appeared.

Everything seemed to stop, as though time itself stood still. Every gaze fixed on Arthur as he dropped down from Llamrei, and Jenny alighted beside him. She saw Lance, and gasped.

Arthur stepped toward his boy. One paramedic had a hand on the boy's heart, while the other listened to his breathing through a stethoscope. The older paramedic, the one with his hand on Lance's heart, attempted to make eye contact with Arthur. The king sensed something familiar in the man's eyes, but was too distraught to give it any attention. Instead, his gaze fixed on the rapidly

growing pool of blood spreading out from beneath his son. His throat went dry, and his chest pulled tightly around his wildly beating heart.

The paramedic vehicle flashed its ugly red light over the scene, giving it a ghoulish quality. Helen's cameraman tilted the camera toward Arthur as he slowly approached, a distraught Jenny trailing a few steps behind.

Standing around the wounded boy, gazing down at him in various stages of shock were Esteban, Darnell, Lavern, Luis, Enrique, Tai, Duc, Justin, and his dad. Gibson had one arm around his son's broad shoulders, as though afraid to let go.

As Arthur knelt beside Lance, he met Ryan's gaze. Ryan shook his head sadly, patted Arthur gently on the shoulder, and stood to get out of the way.

The younger paramedic removed the stethoscope and turned to Arthur. His face revealed the same report. Standing, both paramedics stepped back so allow Arthur time to say good-bye.

Reyna leaned down and kissed Lance lightly on the cheek, her tears washing some of the drying blood from around his lips. Then she stood and desperately grabbed Esteban by the hand, squeezing so hard he grimaced. A tear worked its way down his normally stoic face.

Jack gazed at Arthur, tears streaming down his bruised cheeks, his face riddled with remorse. "I promised I would save him. I failed, Arthur!"

Arthur placed a comforting hand on Jack's trembling shoulder and gazed sorrowfully at him. But there was no accusation in his gaze. Only love.

Jack bent down to Lance, resting his face up against the younger boy's, delicate beard stubble pressed against smooth, unblemished skin.

Lance opened his eyes and gazed uncertainly up at Jack.

Jack met those questioning eyes with his own. "I... I love you, Lance," he quietly confessed, eyes awash with anguish. "I couldn't *not* tell you."

Lance inched his hand toward Jack's. The older boy gently took hold of it, lightly entwining their fingers. "Love you, too, buff man."

He offered the radiant, angelic, and engaging smile that for one, brief, shining moment had thawed the entire world.

Jack pressed Lance's hand to his heart, and then reluctantly released it, allowing Arthur to take Lance's head in his lap.

Chris tearfully kissed Lance on the cheek. "I love you, Lance!"

"Back at you, little brother..."

Jack swept the weeping Chris into his arms and stood back.

Lance finally turned his gaze upon the man who had transformed his life, as Arthur lovingly cradled his head. Immeasurable sadness filled Arthur's eyes as Lance looked up at him.

“Lady Jenny... all right?”

Arthur nodded.

“Did you see my jump?” Lance croaked, grinning against the pain. “Worth a gold, huh?”

Tears dribbled forth as Arthur began to stroke Lance’s hair lovingly. “You be worth thy weight in gold, my Lance.”

“Methinks I did fail you,” whispered Lance. “Almost got you killed.”

“Nay, my Lance, t’was I who did fail you, for I neglected the needs of thy heart.”

Lance began to cry, softly and despairingly. “I’m sorry, Arthur.... I was selfish... wanted you all for myself... made a lousy First Knight....”

“Thou hast given thy life for thy king, Sir Lance. There can be no greater sacrifice. Thou art truly my greatest knight.”

“The needs of the whole....”

Arthur nodded sadly. “And yet, at this moment now, I would give up everything and everyone to save thee, my Lance. I am the selfish one.”

Lance’s entire being swelled with love and gratitude. Those were words he’d been waiting his entire life to hear. He struggled to move his hand, and Arthur took it gently in his own.

“Wanted to be like you...,” Lance whispered, the pain making it harder to speak.

“And you are,” Arthur affirmed. “Did you not get my message on your phone?”

Lance gave a slight shake of the head. “You didn’t get mine?”

“No.” He sighed. “This world has found so many ways to communicate that it has forgotten the most important one—face to face. And so, my dear Lance, I say now before all that you are my son, and I have more pride in you than I could ever express. And I say now what I should have said long ago—I love you, my Lance, with all my heart, more than I have ever loved anyone on this earth.”

Tears flowed freely down Arthur’s cheeks and spilled down his tunic.

Lance smiled. *Finally*, he was loved. He *was* worthy, after all.

His body shuddered. “Hold me, please. I’m cold....”

Arthur gently pulled him up higher and wrapped his cloak around Lance’s chest. “I shall hold thee forever, my son, in my heart and in my soul.”

Lance gave a gentle little smile to the man who had become his father.

Jenny knelt beside him now, her own eyes awash with tears, gazing sadly down at him.

“Tired,” Lance mumbled. “Gonna sleep now.” As those radiant green eyes

slowly closed, these words were faintly audible, "Love you... Dad...."

Lance's head lolled deeper into Arthur's blood-soaked cloak, and then he lay still in his father's arms.

There was a moment of stunned silence. No one moved.

No one even breathed.

"Though loved ones be lost..." Jenny murmured through her tears.

"...love shall not..." Arthur whispered, his eyes fixed on the unmoving child in his lap.

"...and death shall have no dominion." Jenny leaned in and kissed Lance on the forehead.

Arthur gazed in sorrow at the boy in his arms. "Dear God, Jenny, what have I done?"

Jenny placed a comforting hand on his arm. "You gave him a life, and now he's given it back...."

Arthur bowed his head, burying it against Lance's chest, sobbing quietly and wrenchingly.

There were a few moments of uncertain quiet as the entire city watched the man grieve.

Even Helen was crying.

Jack fought to soothe the devastated Chris, who drenched his tunic with anguished sobs.

Despite his best efforts, even Ryan had to swipe away some tears.

Gibson comforted the shell-shocked Justin.

Esteban had one arm wrapped around a sobbing Reyna, wiping away his tears with the other hand. He looked devastated, like a little lost boy who didn't know what to do next. He placed one hand gently upon the shoulder of his king.

"Arthur..." he began, his voice shaky with grief. "Be it over? The crusade? The Table? All of us?"

There was no response from Arthur, who continued to cry quietly into Lance's unmoving chest.

Esteban released Reyna and stepped around so Arthur could see him. "Arthur?"

Finally, Arthur lifted his head. Their blurred eyes met in silence. Esteban's cheeks were streaked with the remnants of his sorrow, but his expression was expectant, and uncertain.

Arthur turned away and gently lay Lance down on the pavement, kissing the boy he loved on the forehead for what he thought was the final time. Then he stood, feeling sorrow and defeat. Oddly, he found his gaze momentarily drawn to the middle-aged paramedic who had tended to Lance. There was something in

the man's eyes, something... recognizable. The man lowered his gaze to Lance's unmoving form, as though directing Arthur to do the same, like he was sending a message. Confused, Arthur followed his gaze, but only saw the unmoving form of his beloved son lying in a pool of blood.

"Arthur?"

Esteban's shaky voice forced him to look up at the boy who'd come so far in such a short time. He met Esteban's beseeching eyes, and then scanned the faces of his knights, these children who had come from so little to so much.

Chris continued to cry in Jack's arms, but most of the others had stopped weeping. Even Jack and Reyna had stopped, their tear-streaked faces asking the same question as Esteban—was it over?

In all of their eyes Arthur read uncertainty, sadness, fear, expectancy, and love. *Real* love, for him, for Lance, for each other. There was reflected on every young face a genuine need—the need to know, the need to follow, and the need to be reassured. Just as Jenny had said. They needed adults to guide and mentor them, and Arthur *was* that adult.

Forcing his sorrow down into forever place within his heart, his self-doubt of the previous moment vanished now before the needs of his company. His face took on a look of resolve and bitter determination.

"No, Sir Este," he announced, his voice loud enough for all to hear. "It doth not be over. It hath barely begun."

He spotted the paramedic vehicle and clambered atop its hood, the flashing red light illuminating his determined, tear-drenched features.

He unsheathed Excalibur and raised the sword high above his head, the blood from his earlier battle now gleaming bright crimson under the spinning light.

"Hear me, lads and ladies! This night hath delivered unto us both great triumph... and unbearable tragedy. And yet, if the loss of... of Sir Lance—" He paused to choke back a sob. "—is to have meaning, then we *must* go forward. We must continue our crusade until we achieve all our goals and make Lance's dream a reality. And I..." He turned his gaze three hundred and sixty degrees to take in the sea of anxious young faces. "...I truly love all of thee, and I shall care for thee as long as I breathe."

A rousing cheer erupted from the multitude of knights.

Arthur turned toward the mayor, the city council members, and the police chief still huddled together at the bottom of the steps.

Silence reigned. Every person present had their eyes and ears focused on the man atop the ambulance. Throughout the city, everybody watching television waited silently, expectantly, for what would happen next. The entire city, it seemed, had come to a standstill this night, watching triumph and tragedy unfold

before their very eyes.

“You see around me... children,” Arthur began, his voice carrying easily over the silence. “*Your* children. *You* created them, and then *you* rejected them. You served your own interests first and theirs second. You allowed them to learn from immoral examples, and then cast them aside when they did follow those examples. You have deemed them of no value and yet, methinks, they have proven their value time and again. Behold the latest proof, Mr. Mayor!”

He pointed to the large dumpster filled to overflowing with the drugs his knights had confiscated.

“These illegal drugs be only a small portion of that which infests thy city. They cost me my gentle, loving Sir Mark, and they have destroyed the lives of parents and children in equal measure. You and these others in power did nothing to stop this scourge. It took children, those you have considered the least valuable, to do your job. Children who have no rights in your society, not even the basic human right to vote you out of office for your failure to protect them. You call them adults when they cause trouble, but not when they demonstrate greatness. This is hypocrisy of the highest order. My knights have earned the right to vote you out, Mr. Mayor, and they will henceforth fight for that right!”

The kids cheered and waved their swords with passionate excitement.

“But our triumph this night hath been costly, oh so very costly, for I have lost my....” He almost broke and paused to regain control. “My beloved son. And yet my dearest Lance did not think his sacrifice a vain or empty one, for he dreamed of a world where children might retain the right to *be* children, to be protected and nurtured, and he has given his life so that other children may have a better one.”

He pointed Excalibur, and several boys near the dumpster tossed lighted Molotov cocktails into the mass of backpacks, igniting the drugs. As the fire grew in intensity, the kids cheered and thrust their swords into the air.

The mayor snatched a bullhorn from Murphy’s hand and raised it to his mouth. But before he could speak, Sanders grabbed it from him.

“This is one time, Mr. Mayor,” he said as he tossed the bullhorn over Murphy’s head and into the burning dumpster, “you’re gonna keep your mouth shut.”

Villagrana’s mouth dropped open like a codfish as the bullhorn went up in flames, and the entire crowd, kids and spectators alike, raised another deafening cheer.

“Mr. Mayor, City Officials, we expect you to follow *our* example,” Arthur went on, his voice strong and majestic. “We expect you to take responsibility for *your* actions. We expect you to do *your* job and do it right. In fact, ladies and

gentlemen, we demand it! Be that not so, my noble knights?”

Such a powerful explosion of assent erupted from the throng of children, with their swords waving, their feet stamping, their phones flashing, that the mayor and the council members stepped back in fear.

Ryan nodded in agreement. He looked over at Gibson, clinging tightly to Justin. The two men shrugged at one another and then raised their own fists in unison with the people of their city.

When the cheering died away, Arthur continued, speaking to the mayor, but also speaking into the cameras, to the hearts and minds of everyone who was watching.

“These children are the new warriors of right, marching forth to set the example for young and old. Whether you all watching like it or not, the way of right is here, the *might* of right is here. You can either join it or be left behind. But the new Camelot is *right* here, *right* now!”

He raised Excalibur and swung it over his head. Another roar of assent rose from the masses, the numbing pain of the fallen Lance swept momentarily away in the heat of their youthful passion and pride.

Enrique and Luis, reeling from all that had happened, worked their way out of the crowd and dashed across Temple to the billowing sheet, and their mural beneath.

They gripped the pull cord and turned back to face the throng.

Arthur swept his gaze around and settled on Chris, still cradled within Jack’s strong embrace. He sheathed Excalibur, leaped down off the vehicle, and went to stand beside Jack and Chris.

“This is Sir Jack,” Arthur announced to the camera, wrapping his arm lovingly around Jack’s brawny shoulders, “a boy cruelly discarded by his sires as having no value, yet he has proven to be a young man of extraordinary value, *and* valor. We need *more* like him, not less.”

He patted Jack on the back and pointed to Chris. “And this little one was likewise tossed into the streets to live as an animal. Have you all who be watching become so busy with your own lives that you cannot care about such as these? Simply because they be not of thine own flesh and blood?”

He scooped Chris into his arms, and strolled confidently toward Llamrei. He set Chris down and climbed up onto the horse. Then he extended a hand. All watched expectantly as Chris was swept up into the saddle in front of him.

“This is Chris, and until he met Lance and I and Jack and Mark and all these others, he had no one to champion his cause. For him, and all like him, we take up our swords and our bows, we take up our faith in what is right, and we fight. We march. And ultimately, we shall make this world better for our having passed

through it.”

He turned and extended a hand toward Jenny. She stepped forward to take it. He pulled her easily up into the saddle behind him.

There was complete silence.

Arthur unsheathed Excalibur and placed it in Chris’s hands. Chris’s eyes lit up as his small hands, aided by Arthur’s, encircled the fabled hilt.

Arthur called out for all to hear, “Behold... the future!”

He raised Chris’s hands and Excalibur high enough for all to see.

At this moment, across the street, Enrique and Luis yanked the cord, and the sheet billowed to the ground, revealing the enormous mural.

Gasps of surprise rose from the crowd as everyone became aware of the mural, and a stunned silence followed as they gazed raptly at the image.

Arthur turned to look, his splintered heart shattering anew at the sight before him.

The mural brilliantly depicted Arthur’s face in the background, but this time, seated atop Llamrei, Excalibur held majestically aloft toward the heavens, was his beloved Lance.

The likeness was perfection. Lance’s luxurious long hair framed his face, held back by his signature gold circlet, giving him a regal appearance. He wore his bright green tunic, with Arthur’s resplendent red cloak draping his shoulders and spilling across the white back of Llamrei. His perfect features flashed that winning smile, now filled with pride, and those piercing green eyes gazed compassionately out over the city he had fought so hard to save.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered by Reyna, who shouted at the top of her lungs, “Long live Lance!”

The thousands of children and adults took up the chant, “Long live Lance! Long live Lance! Long live Lance!”

Jack yelled it louder than the rest. A lone tear clung to his bruised cheek, as though unwilling to let go.

“You’re my hero, Lance,” he whispered softly, placing both hands gently against his heart, “and always will be.”

Then Esteban’s deep voice ascended into the night, “Long live Arthur!” and the throng roared out the same in a deafening cacophony.

And then Arthur’s kids exploded, “Long live the Table Round!”

In unison, every sword and every bow was raised on high toward the enormous image of Lance, and a thunderous cheer rose to the heavens.

The future... was already here.

Once upon a time in the City of Angels, the children did lead, and the people

had hope.

The Lance Chronicles Continue in

*RUNNING
THROUGH*

*A
DARK
PLACE*

THE LANCE CHRONICLES 2

AN EXCERPT FROM
RUNNING THROUGH A DARK PLACE

ARTHUR SAT WITHIN THE CRAMPED interior of the emergency vehicle, gazing at, but not really seeing, the vacant expressions of the stunned crowd as he passed through them. Moments ago, he had energized them. Now, once again confronted with the reality of what had transpired, they looked lost and fearful.

Exactly how I feel. Who can possibly replace Lance?

The heaviness of his heart pressed him down into the seat and nearly stopped his breath.

He vaguely noted when the paramedic made a left turn onto Spring Street. So lost was Arthur in thought that he barely registered the U-turn made by the driver, and didn't even notice that the vehicle had stopped in front of the Spring Street entrance to City Hall. Confused, he turned to the driver.

The driver merely whispered, "Hurry, King Arthur, before it's too late," and then popped open the door and dropped down to the street.

Mystified, Arthur flung open his door and alighted to the pavement. He hurried around to the back of the emergency vehicle just as the older man flung open the double doors.

"Quickly," he told Jack, his voice flush with urgency, "help me with the stretcher."

Arthur hesitated a moment, and Jack gazed at the king with an uncertain look. Arthur eyed the paramedic as the man reached in for the back of Lance's stretcher, a vague wisp of memory surfacing.

Something in the voice, in the tonal quality of that voice.

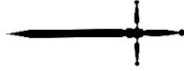
Something...

Rather than search for the recollection, Arthur nodded to Jack and then helped the paramedic drag the stretcher through the open double doors so it rested half in and half out of the vehicle. Jack jumped down to help, his bewildered young face reflected in the yellow of the flashers, the breeze wafting his dark, curly hair in every direction.

The paramedic indicated City Hall and the three of them carried the stretcher down a long walkway. With all the action on the Temple Street side, the interior lobby appeared to be empty when they entered.

Arthur exchanged another perplexed look with Jack as the paramedic glanced around the lobby. To the left was a door marked 'Board of Public Works', and to the right 'City Council Chamber'. The paramedic nodded to the latter.

"In there," he urged, already beginning to walk in that direction. When they had stopped before the ornately carved double doors, Arthur reached out and pulled the handle on the right. The door opened out, and the dimly lit emergency lights illuminated the chamber within. They scuttled through the door with the stretcher, and it closed behind them.



Jack gasped at the grandeur before him. It felt like he was inside of a church. There were enormous high ceilings, benches that looked like pews lining both sides of a long, a tiled walkway with each side flanked by huge marble columns and rounded arches. At the end of the long aisle was the raised dais and seating area where he figured the council members sat for meetings. It looked like huge judge's bench on steroids, with huge black leather chairs behind it for each council member to sit.

He had little time to gawk, however, because the paramedic was ushering them forward. He indicated that they should lay the stretcher down on the floor right in front of the seat of power, as though offering Lance up to these feckless politicians who had failed this city and its children.

As Jack released his hold on the stretcher, he rose to his full six-feet and glared at the opulence around him. Lance was dead. Lance, the most amazing boy in the world, who'd done more for this city than these clowns ever had. His blood began to boil.

"Sir." The feeble light from the night lamps caused the bloodstains on Arthur's tunic to look dark and blotchy. "I still know little of your legal system and procedures, yet this action we have taken seems highly unusual."

Now that they were alone, the middle-aged man with the salt and pepper hair turned on Arthur in anger. "Dammit, Arthur, do you not recognize me yet?"

Jack was taken aback by the man's tone, and so, clearly, was Arthur.

But the king said nothing. He studied the shorter man, squinting in the dimness to see into the man's eyes. His eyes suddenly bulged with astonished recognition.

"Merlin!"

Jack gawked at the small, skinny man with the almost nondescript face, and frail physique *This was Merlin? The Merlin?*

The little man looked blustered, "Of course it's me, Arthur!"

Arthur stepped back in shock. He looked stunned, yet somehow not completely surprised.

Jack watched the reunion with deep uncertainty.

Arthur gazed long and hard at the man, his face finally softening. “You look... different. Younger than when last we were together.”

“As do you. The mysteries of Avalon are unknown, even to me.”

Arthur attempted to embrace the smaller man, but Merlin brushed him off.

“There’s no time for this, Arthur,” the man snapped, his voice sharp and clipped, his accent similar to Arthur’s own. But the tone of his voice was different, Jack noted. It was the tone of a man who’d seen it all, and for whom nothing new could be a surprise.

Except he *did* seem surprised.

“Have you been watching me this entire crusade, Merlin?” Arthur asked sadly. “Did you set it all into motion?”

The man looked about to bust the buttons on his white paramedic shirt. “Of course I did, Arthur. And it all should have gone according to my vision. But no, you had to repeat the same errors of the past!”

Arthur bowed his head, like a scolded schoolboy might to his father after getting suspended. “I know. I failed, Merlin. I have lost my First Knight, my son.”

Merlin gesticulated toward the ever-more nervous Jack. “Arthur, this boy discovered what you knew centuries ago, what you should have avoided at all costs. And yet you did not heed your own past experience!”

Arthur glanced quizzically from Merlin to Jack, who just shrugged with confusion.

Merlin released an exasperated sigh, looking at Jack with those piercing gray eyes and seeming to see right through him. “Tell Arthur what you realized, young sir, what you verbalized to Lance in that rather appalling alley where Sir Mark was found.”

Jack pulled a startled face, recalling vividly the conversation he’d had with Lance, right before they were kidnapped and everything went to hell. And then he remembered this guy – he was the paramedic who’d come to take Mark away!

Jack cleared his throat. “I, uh, I told Lance that the things we don’t say to each other were the most important.”

“Exactly!” Merlin exclaimed. “And you knew this, Arthur. You knew. After all the words you left unspoken to Guinevere and Lancelot and Mordred, still you blew it!”

Arthur frowned. “Blew it?”

“Modern street vernacular, Arthur, for ‘you failed’.”

Jack opened his mouth to come to Arthur’s defense, but the older man kept on with his diatribe. “All you needed to tell the boy, Arthur, was that you loved him, that you took great pride in his accomplishments, and all of this would have been avoided.”

He pointed at the unmoving body on the stretcher beside them.

Arthur bowed his head in shame. “You are correct, Merlin.

And it hath cost me everything, has it not? Tell me true.”

The older man showed no sympathy whatsoever, which surprised Jack. “If by that you mean was Lance the only one to carry your crusade through to the end, and succeed where no one else could? Yes, Arthur, that is what I mean.”

Arthur bowed his head again and Jack reached up to place a comforting hand on the man’s shoulder. Arthur turned and cast a grateful look his way.

Jack turned to Merlin and extended a hand. “I’m Sir Jack.”

“I know who you are,” Merlin snapped. “And no, it cannot be you to lead, either.” He must’ve seen Jack’s hurt expression, because he softened a bit. “It was my vision, Sir Jack, which propelled this crusade forward in the beginning. But in that vision, Lance grew to manhood and remained in command. Alas, even you, as good a man as you are, do not have the requisite qualities to see this crusade through to its finish. You know what I’m saying about Lance, do you not, young Jack?”

Jack nodded. He knew, indeed. “Lance was the only one who could talk to everyone, who could be a badass one minute and caring the next. He found something good in everybody. That’s why it had to be him, right, Merlin?”

The middle-aged wizard nodded. “The boy possessed leadership abilities coupled with immense compassion and empathy. A once-in-a-generation individual. That’s why he was chosen. And that’s why he was never slated to die like this, Arthur.”

Arthur raised his head and met the older man’s gaze. “Then how, Merlin?” He indicated the body at his feet. “How did this happen?”

Merlin blew out a breath, almost like he was spitting. “Call it Fate, the Devil, a cosmic monkey wrench. Call it whatever you choose, Arthur, but the forces of chaos always seek to undo the forces of order and goodness. Had you simply told the boy what he meant to you—”

“I know, Merlin!” Arthur spat, his deep voice echoing off the cavernous ceiling. “Do you not realize what I must live with, the mistakes I must now strive to undo? I loved that boy with all my heart. Torment me no further with my failure!”

“The crusade is doomed, Arthur, unless you act immediately.”

“There is for naught that I can do, Merlin! You said so yourself. Without Lance, the crusade is doomed. And he is dead.” He paused, his tearful eyes lowering to take in the covered boy at his feet. “My son...is dead.”

“No, Arthur. He isn’t.”

Arthur’s head whipped up like a gunshot, and Jack gasped in astonishment.

“What?” Arthur choked, his voice a stunned whisper, his face a mosaic of shock.

Merlin’s gaze passed over Jack’s beseeching eyes, before diving straight into Arthur’s. “The boy yet lives.”

THE LANCE CHRONICLES

Book I:

CHILDREN OF THE KNIGHT

Book II:

RUNNING THROUGH A DARK PLACE

Book III:

THERE IS NO FEAR

Book IV:

AND THE CHILDREN SHALL LEAD

Book V:

ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA



Michael J. Bowler is an award-winning author of nine novels—*A Boy and His Dragon*, *A Matter of Time*, *Children of the Knight*, *Running Through A Dark Place*, *There Is No Fear*, *And The Children Shall Lead*, *Once Upon A Time In America*, *Spinner*, and *Warrior Kids: A Tale of New Camelot*.

His screenplay, “THE GOD MACHINE,” won First Place in the 2017 Scriptapalooza competition.

He grew up in San Rafael, California, and majored in English and Theatre at Santa Clara University. He went on to earn a master’s in film production from Loyola Marymount University, a teaching credential in English from LMU, and another master’s in Special Education from Cal State University Dominguez Hills.

He worked producer, writer, and/or director on several ultra-low-budget horror films, including “Hell Spa,” “Fatal Images,” “Club Dead,” and “Things II.”

He taught high school in Hawthorne, California—both in general education and to students with learning disabilities—in subjects ranging from English and Strength Training to Algebra, Biology, and Yearbook.

He has been a volunteer Big Brother to eight different boys with the Catholic Big Brothers Big Sisters program, and a decades-long volunteer within the juvenile justice system in Los Angeles.

He has been honored as Probation Volunteer of the Year, YMCA Volunteer of the Year, California Big Brother of the Year, and 2000 National Big Brother of the Year. The “National” honor allowed him and three of his Little Brothers to visit the White House and meet the president in the Oval Office.

He has completed three new novels aimed at the teen market, and one for middle grade.

His goal as an author is for teens and middle schoolers to experience empowerment and hope; to see themselves in his diverse characters; to read about kids who face real-life challenges; and to see how kids like them can remain decent people in an indecent world. The most prevalent theme in his writing is this: as a society, and as individuals, we’re better off when we do what’s right, not what’s easy.

Website: www.michaeljbowler.com

FB: [michaeljbowlerauthor](https://www.facebook.com/michaeljbowlerauthor)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MichaelJBowler>

tumblr: <http://michaeljbowler.tumblr.com/>

Pinterest: <http://www.pinterest.com/michaelbowler/pins/>

Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/Michael-J.-Bowler/e/B0075ML4M4>

YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2NXCPry4DDgJZOVDUxVtMw>

Google+: <https://plus.google.com/u/0/+MichaelJBowler>

Instagram: [michaeljbowler](https://www.instagram.com/michaeljbowler)

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: All Is As It Should Be](#)

[Chapter 2: Children Of God](#)

[Chapter 3: That Is Who You Are](#)

[Chapter 4: Might For Right](#)

[Chapter 5: We're Brothers Now, Aren't We?](#)

[Chapter 6: How Else Can They Learn?](#)

[Chapter 7: Speak The Oath Squire](#)

[Chapter 8: The Fruits Of Thy Handiwork](#)

[Chapter 9: Now Suddenly I Am Somebody](#)

[Chapter 10: Is That What We've Become?](#)

[Chapter 11: How Can I Face Him?](#)

[Chapter 12: That Boy Is Special](#)

[Chapter 13: It Be Your Choice](#)

[Chapter 14: Be It Over?](#)

[An Excerpt From Running Through A Dark Place](#)

[The Lance Chronicles](#)