

Antonio was happily listening to his Ipod when his mother tapped him on the shoulder. Removing his earbuds, she said, "Thank you for getting your chores done. Dad's on his way home and we are going for pizza. Please go find your brother and have him come in. Then you can go back to your music till dad gets here."

"Why do I have to go and get him? Can't you yell for him?"

Giving him an exasperated look, she said, "Last time I saw him he was waving his sword at the top of the hill near the lightening tree. He wouldn't hear me from here anyway."

"Oh, man. His games are stupid. When is he going to grow up?"

"It wasn't that long ago that you used to be right beside him, young man. The only thing that has happened is that now you think it is uncool to play with your little brother because you are in Junior High. That isn't his fault, nor yours. It is just the way things go." His mom then paused a moment, and added, "Don't pick on him, alright?"

Rolling his eyes, Antonio answered, "I won't."

Shooting him a sharp look, she said, "Why should this time be any different? You should be protecting him as the older brother, not making his life miserable."

"He bugs me."

She shook her head. "Of course he does. That is his main objective in life. At least he is using his imagination instead of being plugged into some electronic device."

Antonio knew better than to argue that point so he just shrugged and went off to find his brother, leaving his Ipod on the bed.

Their turn of the century farmhouse, passed down by his grandparents, was happily situated on twenty acres of heritage oaks and manzanita bushes. Newbury Park was a suburb of Los Angeles, and had long ago expanded beyond its rural roots. It was now a busy hub for commuters who preferred living closer to nature and were willing to trade more time in their cars for hiking trails and cleaner air in the Conejo Valley.

Climbing over the white wooden fence that separated the pastures, Antonio was kicking rocks aside as he walked up the hill through the dried up grass cooked by the summer sun. It was almost dusk, and the oak trees were throwing their shadows across the hills. As night encroached, a coolness was settling over the valley as the on-shore breeze came lazily over the Santa Monica Mountains from Malibu. Their horses were grazing peacefully nearby, more interested in snuffling out any remaining morsels of grass than what he was doing. He had lost interest in

riding when he went to Junior High and they no longer expected any apples or sugar cubes from him. Tomas was not the only one he had abandoned.

Halfway up the hill, he found his old wooden sword in the grass. Picking it up, he waved it around and smiled at the crude carving he had done years ago on the blade. His dad had helped him glue some glass beads that were flat on one side onto the hilt. He gave it a few broad swipes as he continued walking toward his brother. Off in the distance, a few hills over, he saw him charging up the hill with his sword held high as he advanced towards some imaginary foe. Wearing his Knights Templar overlay over his jeans, the cross easily visible, even from this distance.

At the top of the hill sat what remained of a majestic old oak tree destroyed by lightening many years ago. It was now a three-sided stump about eight feet high that resembled a turret. The hollow interior made a perfect cave-like enclosure. In their imaginations, it had become the entryway to their castle and was the place where all battles were finally won. They had many adventures on these hills, whether it was as Knights Templar or part of King Arthur's Round Table. Antonio felt a pang as he remembered how much fun they used to have. The games just seemed silly to him now.

As he cleared the first ridge, he saw that Tomas had stopped and was looking at something. From this distance, it looked like a large hawk was on the ground near Tomas, but it was trying to fly, and kept trying to lift off without much success. Picking up his pace, the teen wondered if it was wounded and needed help. Not wanting to scare the bird, he kept silent and resisted the urge to yell at his brother as he closed the distance between them. Saving an injured hawk definitely was an interesting event.

The closer he got to his brother, the thicker the air was getting. It had weight to it, and seemed to undulate in front of him in cool waves that looked similar to heat rising from hot asphalt in the middle of August. "Weird," Antonio thought. Everything felt different, wobbly and fluid. Even his brother was shimmering.

Tomas slowly turned to face his older brother with a very odd look on his face. Tomas stepped to the side so Antonio could see the hawk. Antonio sucked in his breath as he realized the creature at Tomas' feet was no bird. It was a two-foot tall dragon.

Shocked, he stopped and stared at the creature. Glancing at his brother, who didn't seem able to utter even one word, Antonio realized that the dragon was female, even though he had no idea how he knew that. She looked straight at him, then lifted off the ground about two feet, moving toward the lightening tree. Sitting back down on her haunches, she tilted her elongated wedge shaped head at him. Her eyes connected to something deep inside of him, and his whole body trembled. Energy coursed through his body. She was beautiful. Her face and limbs were the color of cinnamon, with an underbelly the color of milky cocoa. Her heavily lidded eyes were a deep violet, framed by a fan like spray of triangular scales that sat behind her ears. Running down her spine from her ears to her tail were several rows of brown bony plates that protected her shoulders, wings, and back. Her tail came to a sharp point, and it looked lethal.

“She wants me to follow her.” Tomas said.

“Are you nuts? This thing is talking to you?” his brother said.

“Not really talking. But I can hear her in my head.”

“Tomas, this is crazy. Let’s go back to the house and see if dad’s home yet. He’ll know what to do. It must be some kind of a freak of nature. It can’t be what it looks like.”

“You mean, it can’t be a dragon?”

“Well, yeah.”

Making a loud screeching sound, the creature flew to the lightening tree again and roosted on the branch the boys had placed over the top of the shell for shade. Before Antonio could stop him, Tomas followed the dragon and tucked himself into the center of the burned out tree. Looking straight at his brother, there was a loud pop and Tomas disappeared.

“Tomas?” Antonio shouted, lunging straight at the trunk of the old tree in disbelief. “Tomas, where are you?” Antonio couldn’t believe his eyes. Astonished, he looked behind the tree, and ran around it shouting his brother’s name. The dragon then looked at the teen and tilted her head as if to say “you’re next.” His eyes locked on hers, and he felt a shiver down his spine as he felt a connection being formed between the two of them. Telepathically she then said to him, “are you coming?”

Standing there in shock, Antonio hesitated. He was the daredevil. Tomas was the timid one. He didn’t know where his brother went, but there was no way he was going to go back without him and try to explain THAT to his mother. Antonio had never been short on courage so it never occurred to him not to follow. He tucked himself into the hollow in the same way Tomas had done. At that instant, he heard a loud whoosh, everything went dark, and he felt himself falling. He hit soft dirt, did an unintended somersault down a grassy hill and crashed into Tomas. They continued to roll head over feet with legs and arms all over the place. They came to rest with a thud against a very dusty pair of worn leather knee high boots deep in thick green pasture grass.

“Well, what have we here? Two knights of the realm?” Queried a very tall man. He had long dark brown hair shaggily cut framing a very handsome face. “I must admit it has been awhile since any Templars have been in these parts.” Garbed in a heavy woolen shirt under a sleeveless leather jerkin decorated with ornate stitching, he towered over the two boys and had a definite smirk on his face. Slung over his right shoulder was a beautifully carved longbow, with a quiver of arrows on his back, secured with a wide leather belt wrapped around his torso. A very long sword with a fancy hilt rested against his left thigh.

“Hmmm, let’s see who you really are.” He pointed at them both, waved his hands over

them, and said a spell under his breath. As both Antonio and Tomas untangled themselves, and stood up, Tomas' makeshift costume transformed into authentic Knights Templar attire. Gone were the jeans and t-shirt. In its place were leather riding boots, a fabric tunic over riding pants, a long sleeved shirt under chain mail and the well-known overlay with the red cross. His wooden sword was now made of metal and gleamed in the twilight.

Antonio's jeans and t-shirt had morphed into black riding boots, leather pants, a long sleeved tunic, and a hooded cape with a jewel encrusted clasp of a dragon securely fastening it in place. His sword was now hanging on his hip. The hilt was a pattern of gleaming jewels. "Awesome! Tomas, look at my sword," Antonio exclaimed. "It's real." With that, he pulled it out with such enthusiasm it filled the air with the singing sound of sharp steel being unsheathed. He waved the sword in the air to get a feel for it.

Stepping back, the traveler bellowed, "Careful now, young lad, you might want to practice a bit with that thing before you hurt someone."

Antonio sheepishly sheathed the sword in its new home, but his insides were flipping all over the place with excitement. "Sorry. Where are we? What just happened? What's with the new clothes?"

"It appears that you have entered this realm as a dragonrider, which is quite amusing since the dragons in your world have been cloaked for centuries and I doubt that you have much practical experience." Looking at Tomas, he said "You, young master, are a Knights Templar."

With that, the dragon that had guided them through the portal catapulted back through the opening and landed on the ground near the wizard. Morphing into a full size dragon, she opened her wings to the fullest, shook them, then tucked them into her sides. The boys went mute.

"Ah, I see you have met Zashira. She came to collect you." Zashira looked straight at Antonio and in his head said "*Welcome back, young master*" as she dipped her wings in a bow.

"Thank you, Zashira," the stranger said. Looking at the two boys, the dragon told them both telepathically, "We will meet again." With that, she nodded, then spread her wings and lifted off, spiraling upwards, catching the wind, and flew away.

Antonio was stunned. He looked down and touched his new clothes. Trying to sort out what had just happened, he looked at the man and asked "What did you call me?"

"A dragonrider."

Looking at his brother, Antonio asked "Tomas, why did you follow the dragon?"

Tomas was also fingering his shirt and the overlay, and lightly touching his sword. Shaking his head, he said "I couldn't help it. I don't know why, I just knew the dragon was in my head and I had to do what she said."

Antonio watched as Tomas looked around, taking in this new place. By nature, Tomas was more thoughtful and less rash than his older brother. They were at the bottom of a steep hill that framed a meadow. The valley undulated with rolling hills with trees as far as he could see. Everything familiar was missing. No freeway humming in the distance with a constant stream of cars and trucks. No neighbors, no houses, no telephone poles. No sight of their home in the distance and their horses grazing in the field.

Just below them was a road that wound its way into the forest. The biggest horse they had ever seen was grazing nearby, the soft jangling of his bridle blending with a loud chomping sound. The color of a new copper penny, with a flaxen mane and tail, the stallion's mane hung halfway to the ground. They had Quarter horses at home, but none that looked like this.

Tomas' voice cracked with fear when he asked the stranger, "What is going on? Where are we?"

"Why, young lads, you are in The Land of Anara. Well, almost, anyway."

Antonio nervously laughed. "Where is that, exactly?"

"You have entered another realm."

"What?" Antonio asked, very excited. "We didn't really do anything, it just happened."

"You followed your instincts." The wizard said. "That is more than some would do. Many things are possible here, as you will see. You have crossed time, into our dimension through a portal that opened up just for you. It's an invitation few will ever receive."

Antonio was having a hard time containing his excitement. "It opened up just for us. Cool!"

Tomas wasn't exactly thrilled. "Who are you?"

"My name is Shadikar. I live in the forest that is south of the great lands of Castle Caernag. I am a wizard. There is quite a bit more to explain but all in good time. We should make for the border. We are not too far from the main portal. It will bode well for us to be within the safety of Anara before it gets dark. And you are?"

Antonio stepped up in a protective way. "I'm Antonio and this is Tomas, my younger brother. He is 12. I'm 15. We're from California. Why should we go anywhere with you?"

"There doesn't seem to be many other options, I'm afraid." Bowing, he said, "Still, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"How did we get here?" Tomas asked. "We have to go back. Our parents will be

worried.”

“Well, young lads, I have no control over that. Besides, time is different here. They won’t know you are gone. You will have to talk to Tarnas about returning. He deals with the quantum physics. You must have been invited. It is pretty difficult to get in here otherwise. We have all been aware that visitors were coming. Zashira was sent for the two of you, and I was to meet you here.”

Antonio was worried about traveling with this man, but didn’t really feel they had a choice. Shadikar addressed them both. “Young dragonrider and knight in training, we must proceed to the Gate of Gaverrin. It will be dark soon.”

Antonio looked suspiciously at Shadikar and took a step back. Surprisingly, his brother said, “It’s ok, Tonio. We are safe with him.”

“How do you know that? We just met him.” his brother said under his breath.

Tomas shrugged. “I know we just met, but I also know we are safe with him. I can feel it inside.” Antonio was surprised by what Tomas said, but went along. He was too excited about where they were to worry. “Ok. Let’s go.”

They walked down to where the horse was grazing. The stallion grabbed one last mouthful, then lifted his head. “This is Brigadar. Do you boys know how to ride a horse?” asked Shadikar.

Antonio said, “Yes. We have horses at home, but none of them are this big.” Standing next to the horse made Antonio feel very small.

Shadikar was pleased, and smiling, said “That makes for a good start, young knights.” He gave the older boy a leg up, then hoisted Tomas up behind him.

“I don’t mind walking,” the Wizard said with a playful grin. “It will make for a nice change.” Shadikar lifted the reins over the horse’s head and handed them to Antonio as they began their journey to the border.

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Shadikar motioned to Brigadar to halt, then raising his finger to his lips, motioned for silence from the two boys astride the horse. They had been descending a trail out of the forest, the horse given his head to pick his way between the roots growing across the path and the rocks that made the going precarious. The wizard had heard something on the wind that called for caution. Giving a signal for the horse to stay, Shadikar quietly moved down the trail and slipped behind an

old tree. Not a stone's throw below where he stood another trail merged with theirs, and coming toward them was a troop of hunters, laughing and rejoicing at their luck today. Two large bucks hung over two pack horses being led at the rear of the procession. As the deer heads swung back and forth, their points goosed the horses, who crow-hopped to get away from the torment.

Relaxing his grip on the hilt of his sword, Shadikar recognized a friend as he stepped from behind the tree. His sudden appearance startled the lead rider, whose horse rose to his full height, squealing, with front legs flailing in the air. The wizard waited for the rider to settle his horse, and smiled.

"Brimlee, it is good to see you again," Shadikar said.

"By the by, Shadikar, you looked like the ghost of Aerlin himself stepping out from behind that tree with this mist settling in. What brings you outside the borders of Anara?"

"I have picked up my two young charges. We are on our way to the Gate of Gaverrin. Looks like you have had a good day."

"Aye. We had been tracking one of these stags most of the day. He gave us quite a run, but just at the border he broke left and hurtled through a portal. We followed. I had a lucky shot as he climbed a hillock."

"There is no luck where your skill with a bow is concerned, old friend. It is a good day's work, well earned. On your travels have you met with any others on the trail this afternoon?"

"We did see two of the old ones with a young girl, but kept to the high trail and stood silent as they passed below us. We keep to ourselves. There is news of others, but we paid no mind."

The wizard turned and whistled. Brigidar answered with a loud whinny and a snort and started down the trail with the boys clinging to the saddle. As he came alongside his master, the stallion trumpeted a greeting to the mares within the troop. The geldings snorted as the mares whinnied in response.

"We are going to try and get to Aylith's tonight." Shadikar said.

"That is a fair ways from here, but a good plan. There is talk of strange doings on this side of the border," Brimlee said. "Prince Nicholas has been out with Ralf scouring the forest. They have spotted more than one black gryphon, but were unable to capture it."

Raising his eyebrows, Shadikar said, "I wouldn't be surprised if that is Malleus or one of his captains. Their kind have been using them to shape shift as long as I can remember. That is one of the old wizard's favorite creatures to inhabit. We will stay on alert."

Shadikar motioned to the two boys on his horse. "We better get going. Nodding to

Brimlee, he said: "It is good to see you my friend but we must be on our way." Brimlee and his troop moved to the side of the trail to let the wizard through. Antonio and Tomas stared at the massive bucks as they passed.

Antonio whistled. "Wow, Tomas, did you see that? I have never seen a deer that huge. Well, maybe in pictures."

Tomas just looked at his brother. Everything was strange to him here. Nothing was like it was at home. He kept silent, but continued to scan the forest and the trail ahead. Something was bothering him. His senses were heightened. He felt like they were being watched. He could also hear muffled voices as they traversed the trail. A deep voice in his head said, "I am watching you, young knight. You are protected." He looked at the back of his brother's head and Shadikar a few steps ahead and opened his mouth to say something. He then thought better of it, and rode along in silence. What in the heck was going on?