

## **The Slayer of Roses**

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When Cleon was a small boy of barely five years a horde of barbarians attacked his village. They came thundering among the mud huts of the town in the early hours of the morning, the sun barely a whisper on the horizon. All of the men of the village stormed out to meet the barbarians, but they were vastly outnumbered, and were mostly slaughtered.

Cleon peered through the doorway watching the battle. He watched in horror as his Father was decapitated in full view of his child's eyes. The event was the founding of the rest of his life, everything he did contained a small glimmer of that moment, reflected in a thousand ways.

The only reason he didn't get to add the sight of his mother being killed, and probably raped in the bargain, was the timely arrival of an enormous group of King Arthur's Knight's. They came roaring over a hill and chased the marauding monsters out of the village, leaving little beyond smoldering ashes where the houses stood and wailing where the laughter of families once dwelled. Cleon never saw a war movie where the Calvary arrived, but if he had, the resemblance to his memory of that day would probably put a smile on his face.

In his memory the knights were soon departed as well, onward to some new adventure, looking for more people in distress. Even at the time this story truly begins, at age fourteen, Cleon could remember the way he felt that day when he was five. He remembered seeing the sun shining off of their silver helmets as the Knights rode off on their gigantic war horses, off to do battle with the mighty creatures of the forest, the dragons, the one-eyed ogres chronicled in Homer.

Cleon made an oath to himself that day. A child's oath that grew into a man's, or as much of a man any fourteen year old boy could hope to be. He swore that he would work to protect the innocent against those that would do them harm. In order to facilitate this goal he would become a Knight.

Today was the day of the trials, the ritualized tests that would establish which of the numerous candidates for squire would pass muster. Cleon had been training for the trials for four years in the knight's academy, learning to fight with a sword and with his mind. The training was run by old retired knights, one of whom, Cleon's favorite, was among the men who had saved his Mother that fateful day.

Although his formal training had begun four years earlier, in actuality it began the day the barbarians attacked his village. A naturally intelligent boy, Cleon was a sponge, soaking up every bit of information and knowledge that he could about knights, their history, their unique culture, their preferred methods of combat.

And it didn't stop there. Once he learned that the Knights were most fond of fighting with heavy broadswords, Cleon found himself an enormous stick that he would struggle over his head endless times each day, conditioning himself. His Mother would watch him staggering around the hut with the huge stick tottering at the edge of the boy's strength and laugh to herself, not knowing his internal reason for hefting the thing about. To her, Cleon looked like a wee puppy, trying to make off with some bigger dog's stick, one which is entirely too big for his little mouth.

He practiced so hard and for so long before going to the Knight's academy that in all honesty the place had little to teach him, Cleon was far and away the top student in his class. When he wasn't around the Knights would discuss how difficult it was to talk to the boy. It seemed like the young fella knew more about their own lives than they did. He would bring up obscure stories that the knight's themselves hadn't told over a mug of mead in years. This worried them. More than one knight had quietly suggested that it might be a good idea that the boy suffer some seriously debilitating injury, like the loss of a limb... or two. But the threat never came to pass.

Cleon passed the trial on horseback and the joust, taking his peers out with practiced ease. He showed excellent proficiency with the broad sword, (Thanks to years of stick practice.) he passed the written trials, corrected the date in one of the oral questions about the history of knighthood, and shod and bridled a horse faster than anyone had ever seen. His performance surprised no one, least of all Cleon, who after so many years felt absolutely confident he would pass the trials. They

were the last step, once he was apprenticed, his knighthood was guaranteed, a few short years cleaning up after somebody, and his dream would be fulfilled. Well, he was almost absolutely confident anyway, everyone has an achilles heel. Cleon's was archery.

For some reason he just couldn't get the hang of the weapon. He had a really hard time gauging the effect of the wind on his arrows. During his four years at the academy Cleon fired more arrows himself than both armies in the last two great wars combined. He had shot arrows until his arms were nothing more than quivering noodles attached to the trunk of his body by what felt like an alarmingly small amount of tissue.

But he still pretty much sucked. The other boys were rooting for Cleon to pass the trial. Even though he was a kiss ass and a ridiculous overachiever, the other kids respected how much he wanted to be a knight. No one in the field doubted Cleon wanted it real bad. This too worried the already ranking knights.

Cleon drew in his breath as one of the other kids advised. He stilled himself, the world slowly drawing away, the arrow of his intentionality finely focused on the target fifty yards away. He tried to allow his body to naturally adjust itself, to let his subconscious mind aim the bow. Had he known it he would have muttered Chevy Chase's mantra from "Caddyshack," "NA-NA-NA-NA-NA."

Slowly exhaling his breath he released the string, the sharp twang of it ringing in his ears. He drew in his breath again and held it as the arrow flew into the air in a high arc, nosing down toward the target. With a heavy thunk the arrow buried itself into the soft wood, the whole shaft quivering in the air.

Looking closer he could see he hit the target, but only on the outer circle, a shot which only earned him two points. He only had four arrows to make nine points. Cleon couldn't believe it. When he let the arrow go he would have sworn that it was the greatest shot he had ever fired in his life. There was almost a visible line in the air that he had lined the bow up to perfectly. But he only hit a two-pointer. His confidence suddenly plummeted in a way only someone who was completely sure of themselves could. His next arrow missed the target completely, snicking into the ground a full ten feet away.

In the stands a knight or two exchanged a smile. Cleon would have to get two bulls-eyes in a row in order to pass the archery test. On the field the boy lowered his bow. He stood with his eyes fixed on the ground immediately in front of him. There was silence in the field while everyone waited to see what Cleon would do.

Suddenly and with remarkable quickness Cleon snapped up his bow, notched an arrow, fired. Without even glancing toward the target he snatched up his last arrow and fired it into the air. Still without looking he tossed the bow aside and walked off towards the rest of the petitioners. He really had no idea where the arrows fell until the crowd reacted, erupting in applause and cheers.

Reluctantly Cleon turned around, astonished to see both arrows safely within the bulls-eye. He would be a squire after all. He would be the greatest squire that ever was. He basked in the crowd's applause, thinking to himself that he would make them cheer for him again, he would forever protect the people of Camelot.

In the stands there were quiet unhappy glances between the knights, even as they cheered and clapped their hands. Cleon's arrows had been very carefully tampered with, the shaft strategically weighted with iron to draw it off the mark. The wood of the shaft had also been carefully treated to make it flexible, causing the arrow to wobble in the air. It should have been enough. Now there was a problem. One that they would have to deal with when the time came. For the time being however, they would wait, there was nothing to be gained from haste.

Cleon was assigned to Sir Garsious, the most famous dragon hunter in the kingdom. At the time he received the assignment he was elated, it was a prestigious role, one that would put Cleon on track to do what he most desired, hunt dragons. Although he had never seen one with his own eyes, Cleon knew that he only had the Knights to thank for it. They went out into the wilds of the forest and preemptively killed the beasts before they could get anywhere near Camelot proper. There were a few farmers who told stories of the beasts burning down their field with their fiery breath, but such things were only spoken of on festival days, and not until everyone was good and drunk. Cleon thought that getting the chance to protect people from such a dangerous and hideous threat was

about the best work a knight could do. He was willing to work as hard as necessary to learn the ways of the dragon.

And work hard he did. In fact, work was the only thing he did. There was no learning, no secrets of the dragons revealed. He was a house slave, an errand boy, the surfs got better treatment. In Cleon's first six months of service he never left the Garsious estate. He polished armor, shoed horses, washed underclothes, cooked food, and washed endless floors. And if he didn't finish a task quickly enough, or thoroughly enough he got a cuff upside the side of his head, often hard enough to drive him to the floor.

Then one day six months in Sir Garsious woke Cleon early in the morning, before the sun was up. "Get up boy." He commanded.

"What is it Lord?" Cleon asked, figuring he was going to have to wash the roof again.

"Get your things together, you are coming with me to kill a dragon that has drawn too close to the kingdom for it's own good."

Cleon's heart leapt in his chest. He was finally going to get the chance to prove himself to Sir Garsious. He would show him what a brave knight he was going to be. Cleon would do whatever the Knight asked and someday when the bards sang about him they would tell the story of the first day Sir Cleon killed a dragon. He gathered his things together and raced after the knight who had already turned around and was heading down the hall in the direction of the stables.

The opening to the cave was small, barely large enough for Cleon's shoulders to finagle through. He looked to Sir Garsious, his eyes asking the obvious question, "Do I really have to do this."

"Cleon, it is rare that dragon's lairs ever have an entrance like this, we are actually quite lucky. Most of the time we would have to climb to the top of the mountain and descend into the lair by rope, leaving us totally exposed to the dragon's every whim until we arrive safely at the bottom of the hole."

Cleon didn't feel lucky. He would much rather take his chances climbing than have to go into a cave. Although it wasn't unbearable, Cleon always had felt a touch claustrophobic. Not to mention the fact that Ogres and Trolls lived in caves too.

"But Sir, how are you going to fit in the hole?" he asked, hoping that the knight would realize his mistake and find another way to the dragon.

The Knight looked down at Cleon like he was somewhat of an idiot. "Well I cannot fit through the hole Cleon. Instead, I will wait here with my bow and finish off the beast in case he escapes your young clutches." He looked sternly at the boy. "Of course, you won't let that happen will you." He asked.

"No Sir. Of course not Sir." Cleon said, thinking, 'you jackass.'

Cautiously Cleon stuck his torch into the mouth of the cave. He could tell that the passage opened up a little once you got through the initial hole, sloping upwards into the murky darkness. He looked back at Sir Garsious quizzically.

"Well boy, get going already!" He shook his fist at him.

Thinking that he didn't need to get a clouting before he even saw the dragon Cleon said, "I'm going Sir."

He took his sword and a couple of extra torches from his rather nobby-kneed horse. The rest of his equipment he dropped. As an afterthought he grabbed a mutton sandwich and a small leather bag of nuts and stuck them into his jerkin. The sandwich was a little greasy up against his skin, but he ignored the sensation figuring he might get hungry if the nausea that was dominating his stomach ever faded away.

Taking one last long look at the sun and the blue sky Cleon once again immersed his head in darkness and wriggled his way into the mouth of the cave. Once he was all the way in he turned around and looked back at the entrance. Sir Garsious appeared at the mouth, blotting out most of the outside light.

"OK son," he said, "You just follow this cave to its end. You should find a large cavern with some kind of access to the outside that the dragon can fly through. We have no way of knowing if this particular smoker is at home right now, so if you find the cavern empty, you should just wait. Sometimes the dragon's leave their lairs for as much as a week, so I don't want to see you before

then, unless of course you slay the dragon earlier. I will be keeping a lookout, but I don't expect you to fail me. Now go."

Sir Garsious shooed him like he was dismissing a fly. Cleon turned back toward the darkness and began crawling, amazed at how fast his knees started to hurt. As he made his way through the narrow passage he kept asking himself one question over and over, "How the hell can I stay in here a week with nothing to eat but a sandwich and some peanuts?"

He shuffled forward on his hands and knees for what seemed like forever (It was fifteen minutes.) before the tunnel suddenly opened up into a large cavern. His knees and back thanked him immediately as he stretched them into a standing position. Cleon swung the torch around him. The room was completely dark except for the torch's light which meant there was no place for a dragon to enter and exit. About fifteen feet into the cavern the ground dropped down to what appeared to be a small underground lake. The walls all the way around were completely smooth, the cave ended in a dead end. Problem was, there were no other tunnels. He had come all the way in here for nothing.

Cleon went back to the cavern's entrance and headed back towards the exit of the cave, his knees immediately hurting twice as bad as they had the first time. About half way back he stopped and flopped onto his back. Reaching into his jerkin he yanked out his mutton sandwich and ate half in two huge bites, chewing contentedly on the mouthfuls for a full minute before swallowing. Once finished, Cleon resumed his trip out. About five minutes away from the exit he flipped over onto his back and shrugged his way along the floor, giving his knees a badly needed break. He had been locomoting along like that for about ten minutes before disaster struck.

He didn't expect things to work out the way they did. Cleon had just been thinking that he should be seeing a least a hint of the light from outside when suddenly the torch slid down his hand and burned him while going out in the process. Lying in total darkness Cleon wondered what the hell had happened, he shifted around onto his hands and knees again and reached carefully out in front of him. His hand came upon a huge rock. Once the incandescent eye dots stopped dancing in front of his vision he noticed that there was a tiny pinprick of light barely visible. He realized with a sudden terrible finality that there was a boulder where the entrance to the cave used to be.

He tried yelling for help, thinking that surely Sir Garsious must be on the other side of the boulder, desperately trying to remove it from the entrance. Perhaps a dragon had happened by while he was in the tunnel and Sir Garsious had shot it out of the sky. It was entirely possible that its body crashing into the earth could have propelled a boulder over the entrance. It would be a terrible piece of luck for him, but it was possible.

Eventually his voice became horse and he stopped yelling, doing his absolute best to not completely freak out. There was another possibility, the dragon and Sir Garsious were fighting and during the battle the boulder was knocked into the entrance. Maybe the dragon was ultimately victorious, which meant that nobody was ever going to save him because nobody knew where exactly they were.

Now the walls, invisible to his eyes in the darkness were creeping closer to him in his mind, he thought he could feel his own breath as it reflected off of the ever tightening walls. A little white mouse of panic raced through Cleon as he fought back the thought that he was now buried alive in a tomb of stone.

From where he was sitting Cleon decided that the only possible way he could retain his sanity was to go back to the cavern. At least there was water and some room to move around in, even if he couldn't see it. Cleon quickly found out that moving through tunnels in pitch blackness is something nobody should ever voluntarily do. Every ten feet or so he would crack his hand, his head, or both on a wall, the ceiling, or both. By the time he made it back to the cavern his entire body felt like it went ten rounds with Mike Tyson.

He knew he was back in the cavern when was able to go forward for thirty seconds without crashing into anything. He felt around to make sure he was out of the tunnel. The rock was gritty and unforgiving under Cleon, the lack of organic life make the cave seem alien and cold, a feeling accentuated by the brisk temperature of the air.

Tentatively Cleon stood up and stretched out his body. He felt immediate relief, even though stretching was painful, the cold having seeped into his body, making it feel like an old man's. The

adrenaline that came with the initial shock of ensured death was wearing off and his earlier tension had over-wound his muscles making them agonizingly sore.

He was surprised to find how quickly sitting around waiting to die became boring. He only sat around for a half hour before he started pattering around the floor of the cavern, trying to get a mental picture in his mind of what the place's parameters were. He paced the cave off in both directions, taking off his leather sandals so that he could feel when he reached the water. It was very cold and each time he stuck his foot in he involuntarily yelped from the temperature. He had a mental picture of sticking his foot into a bucket of ice water. He was surprised at how difficult it was to get an image of where he was in the cavern at any given time. The total darkness gave him no real referencing point and made making a mental picture almost impossible.

Over the course of an hour he discovered that he could know where he was if he started from one end of the water, the physical experience of the bracing liquid on his feet was somehow able to jump start his imagination into creating an adequate mental map. The deep sand at the water's edge was also helpful, the difference in the floor's texture gave his senses another stimuli to work with.

It was during one of his slow trips across the waterfront that his foot once again managed to find something to crush itself up against. One minute Cleon was sliding his foot out in front of him, his toes dragging through the sand, and the next his toes were crushed and causing him great pain. He yelped and crashed down on his ass, rubbing the offended toes with his fingers, trying to massage the pain out through the toenails.

Once he adequately rubbed his foot pain into submission he ran his fingertips through the cold sand looking for what he assumed was the offending rock. He felt an object, grabbed it up and almost threw it into the water before his brain managed to get a thought through his frustrated anger that said simply, "What you are holding is perfectly square, big, and from it's texture is probably made out of wood. Throwing this away would be a very stupid mistake."

He felt the object with his hands, brought it close to his nose and sniffed deeply. A strong sense of pine came wafting into his nostrils and he confronted what his hands were telling him. It was a little smaller than a shoebox. He massaged it this way and that, trying to find a clasp or a crease of some kind that would indicate it's being a box and not a random square hunk of pine. After a few minutes of fiddling he managed to push what turned out to be a grooved lid in just the right way, revealing the box's secret.

He removed the lid completely and felt around inside. The lining was soft and plush, probably silk. The first actual object he touched brought a song to his heart. There was one object other than the privy every person in Cleon's time could recognize in total darkness: flint and steel. After all, you couldn't light your lamp in the first place to see if you couldn't find your flint and steel in the dark. Excited he loped as carefully as possible to the mouth of the cavern where he had dropped his useless torches. With practiced ease Cleon lit the torch with only a few strikes.

He was blind for a good five minutes. He made the mistake of looking directly at the torch after lighting it and his enormously over-expanded pupils shrank back like a cat from a tub of water. While he sat waiting for his vision to return he noted the damp scent of the air. It smelled ancient. He kept trying to sneak glances around and was rewarded with fluctuated shadows.

When his vision was restored he looked into the box again and retrieved a thin sheet of paper, a note, a pot of ink, now dry, a quill, and a dagger. The sight of it stopped Cleon's throat. It was a ceremonial dagger. He owned one identical to it. They were given at graduation as signifiers of the rank of Squire to the Knight's of Camelot. Whoever had put the box there was a Squire, just like him.

Pounding the torch into the sand Cleon held the letter close to the fire, examining it. It wasn't a very large piece of paper, as long as an index card, but thinner. He examined the paper, there was writing on it in a shaky hand, the letters very small. Writing covered both sides of the paper from one edge to the other. After flipping it back and forth reading the first couple of words he found the beginning of the letter.

*To whoever finds this letter: My name is Trey Antipasta, I am the squire of Sir Lancelot, the man many think is the bravest in the kingdom. My presence here is all the hard evidence I can give you to demonstrate that this is a lie. I found out the truth and I was stuck in here. I brought*

*along the pen and paper so that I could sketch the dragon that I had been sent in here to kill.*

Cleon stopped reading, a confused anger rumbled through his entire body. Half of him wanted to burn the letter in his hand without reading another word. He would then have to do his absolute best to forget he ever found the thing. He would just sit here and die, and not think about what the letter said... His eyes went down to the paper.

*Only L didn't really send me here to kill a dragon, he sent me here to die. Once I was inside here he put a boulder in front of the entrance to the cave. What he must not have known is that there is a way out.*

Again Cleon stopped reading, this time due to nausea.

*In the water there is a passage, I honestly don't know how far it goes, but there is an air pocket after about ten feet, the water level gets lower and you can wade.*

*I will kill Sir Lancelot.*

The paper was almost all used up and the last sentence was even more crunched up than the rest of it. "*There is no such thing as dragons.*" It said.

After a minute of just sitting there, Cleon decided he was done being nauseous and promptly threw up, twice. Filling the air with the cloying smell of bile and mutton sandwich.

Sir Lancelot was from the first order of the Knights of the Round Table. Sir Garsious was from the third. Cleon was to have been from the fourth. Only he was pretty sure that was all over now. The question "Why?" kept invading his mind, banging around with pots and pans, demanding attention. Why was Sir Garsious trying to kill him? Why didn't he just run him through with a sword? As far as he knew he had done nothing to warrant such treatment, if there was some secret about the Knights he didn't know a thing about it. He thought the way they treated their squires was a little shabby, but that was just because he didn't like shoveling horse shit.

After thinking for a few more minutes Cleon got up, blew out the torch, and began to strip out of his clothes. He waded into the water. It was freezing cold and he locked his jaws together to keep his teeth from chattering. It never really got very deep, it was about to the level of his chest when he reached the far wall. With his foot he very cautiously probed for the tunnel Antipasta had written about. After a few minutes of looking he felt the wall recede back from his foot. He held his breath and went under the water, using his hands to scope out the size of the hole. It was about three feet in diameter, and completely smooth. He came up for air again and plunged back. Before he had time to convince himself that it was crazy he headed into the tunnel kicking his legs quickly, and propelling himself by bracing his arms across the tunnel and pushing.

When he figured about half of his air was gone he pushed his slowly up towards the roof of the tunnel, hoping to find air. No luck. He reversed course, pushing himself back out of the tunnel. By the time he popped his head into the cavern again, he was really winded, his chest burned from the lack of oxygen.

Cleon didn't let himself rest. He knew that he had to move quickly or the despair of death would take him and he wouldn't even try to escape. He waded back out of the water, wrapped the box and the torches into his clothes, tied his clothes to his leg, and waded back out into the water. He again found the entrance, took a deep breath, and headed back into the tunnel. This time he didn't waste the energy kicking his legs, all the propulsion was from his arms anyway. Intermittently he would run his hand along the ceiling hoping to feel the chill of air. Each time his hand felt nothing but wet and underwater.

Cleon had to admit to himself that things were starting to look bad. His strong desire to breathe was becoming a necessity. He wasn't sure how long he could hold out. He pushed off again with his arms. At least, he thought, I won't have to wait to die, I am going to die right here in this tunnel from drowning in three feet of water.

His old friends the dots were once again dancing in front of his eyes when his hand suddenly felt something that it hadn't before. It felt nothing. The ceiling was rising up. It was still underwater, but it was rising up and that could only be a good thing. No longer able to hesitate, Cleon put his feet on the bottom of the tunnel and pushed up with the last energy he had in his legs. His head might come up against hard rock without ever finding air, but he had to try.

Instead of stone his starving lungs found air. Unfortunately he continued up out of the water and managed to crack his head on the roof of the new tunnel he entered. In pain for what seemed

like the tenth time that day, in total darkness, and unbelievably still alive Cleon stopped and cried for a while. If there was someone there to ask him why he was crying he would have responded differently every second or two.

He reached under the water, untied his clothes and the box from his leg, squeezed the excess water out of them and let out a triumphant Yah Hoo- which echoed back to him off the reflective cave walls. Once he was moving again he basically crawled along, pushing the water in front of him with his hands. He tried to decode the information that was coming to him in the form of the waves reflecting off of the walls of the tunnel, giving him a sense of how wide it was and if there was anything directly in front of him. In it's own way the method was almost as useful as sight. He knew, for instance that new passage was gradually getting wider, and he could hear the water brushing up on the shore a full five minutes before he set foot on it. He untied his clothes and laid them out. He opened the wooden box again and was thrilled to find that it remained essentially water tight. The torches were damp but not soaked though.. He found a wall, leaned the torches upside down against it and fell asleep in the sand by the water.

He didn't know how long he slept, but when he woke up his clothes were dry and the torches were only damp. He decided to shorten his jerkin a little bit and loosely wrapped the chunk of shirt around the end of the drier of the two torches. With a few strikes of the flint and steel his shirt was smoldering. A few well applied breaths and the thing caught fire. He was in a large cavern, not far from one wall. The other wall was a good twenty feet away. The whole thing curved around a corner and out of sight.

Cleon got dressed, took everything out of the box and left it behind. As he made his way through this new tunnel Cleon thanked God every step that he didn't have to crawl, he wasn't sure that he could deal with crawling at that particular point in his day.

Gradually he noticed that there was light in the tunnel, it was coming from far ahead, but the total inky nothingness gave way to a murky inky nothingness, a definite improvement. The air lost a bit of the staleness it had been suffering from. Ten more minutes of walking and things were positively dim. The ceiling was rapidly rising as the light grew, this continued until Cleon finally reached the source of the light, a narrow hole in the ceiling situated against a wall almost fifty feet above the floor he stood on. It was daylight outside, probably around noon and the circle of light looked like some divine gift.

Then Cleon noticed the bones. A whole range of small animal bones were piled directly underneath the hole, but one set stood out as significantly larger.

It was a human skeleton, the skin and muscle had eroded away but there were still scraps of the thick hemp clothing the owner had been wearing when he met his demise. The skeleton's skull lay separated from the pile, lodged into it was a broad sword. Kneeling down to investigate the weapon in the daylight. Cleon immediately recognized the crest that adorned the center of the hilt. It was Lancelot's. He recognized the sword from the numerous illustrations he had seen of it in Knight school. The sword was even emblazoned on the School Banner. Looking up at the hole again Cleon felt a menace coming from it that hadn't been there a moment before.

The sword that was laying at his feet was quite famous. It was the sword Lancelot was supposed to have lost fighting the greatest battle of his life against the legendary dragon Smoker. It was said that Lancelot and the dragon had battled for four days and four nights before Lancelot lost the sword into a deep ravine. In an act of desperation he had drawn his ceremonial knight's dagger and thrown it overhand into the one spot on a dragon's neck that remains uncovered with scales, killing the beast almost instantly. Or at least that's how the story went.

The truth it seemed was a little different. Lancelot had left Trey Antipasta to die but must have known that it was possible to escape. He probably lay in wait and killed Trey before he had gotten his entire body out of the hole, before he could see one last sunrise. The only inconvenience was that in dying he took Lancelot's sword from him. Apparently unperturbed Lancelot went back and made up the story about Smoker.

It was very possible that the same fate awaited Cleon at the mouth of the cave and he knew it. Thinking rapidly Cleon figured he had two things in his favor. If Sir Garsious was up there he surely thought he had the element of surprise and second, it was the time of month when the moon sat low in the sky, only a sliver of its face showing. It was possible that he could get out of the hole and onto

his feet before Garsious had a chance to react. And even though he was armed with only a dagger, that was still one more weapon than Trey had when he was killed.

Wait a minute, Cleon thought, laughing at how stupid he was. Dagger hell, there was a sword laying right there. It's ownership by Lancelot, one of Cleon's biggest heroes, (At least until a few hours ago.) made it seem unobtainable in spite of the fact that it was just sitting there on the ground in front of him. He dislodged the blade from the skull as respectfully as he could and began devising a way to carry the thing up with him in such a manner that it would be easily and quickly accessible once he got himself out of the cave.

He rigged up a harness and sat down to wait for the light shining down through the hole to fade away. After a while he drifted back into sleep and dreamt of drooling monsters wearing the distinctive garb of the knights of the round table, they went around killing people and unbelievably people thanked them for the privilege.

When Cleon woke up the light was gone from the hole and he was sitting in darkness nearly as total as he had been experiencing for the last day or so. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness as much as possible. Staring up at the hole he looked for some tell-tale sign that there was a fire burning somewhere in the vicinity of the hole. He thought he could detect a slight flickering but he couldn't be sure. Once he was satisfied that his eyes were seeing everything he could Cleon grabbed two handfuls of wall and began to pull himself up.

He tried to keep his head up as much as possible while he climbed. If he was going to be attacked he wanted to be ready for it. If worse came to worse he would just drop back into the hole. He might break a leg or something but that was better than having a sword in his head. Five feet from the mouth of the hole Cleon stopped and waited, listening with all of his might, trying to catch some clue as to whether there was anyone up there. He couldn't tell. There was no indication that there was somebody there, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

As he hung there in the dark closeness of the vertical tunnel Cleon thought about all the times as a younger boy he had played pretend. Sneaking carefully up on some evil foe and dispatching them with enviable ferocity and efficiency. In all his scenarios of play he never imagined that his first real foe would be one of the very knights he emulated as a kid. Yet here he was. Life was funny like that sometimes. Not ha-ha funny, slightly nauseating funny. Laugh or start screaming funny.

Before he worked himself into a depression Cleon took a deep breath and climbed up the remaining distance as quickly as he could manage, nearly shooting out of the hole, adrenaline pumping him full of energy that he hadn't possessed ten seconds earlier. With admirable fluidity he drew the sword from its makeshift scabbard and prepared to battle anyone and anything that stood against him.

His only foe was the summer breeze.

Even though there was nothing funny, Cleon laughed. He took a deep lungfull of air, tasting its sweetness. Apparently Garsious heard about the first part of Lancelot's clever plan, he apparently didn't tell anyone about the second part. It was understandable. Why would Lancelot admit to the part where he killed the unarmed boy as he climbed out of what was supposed to be his sarcophagus?

Suddenly thinking of the possibility of an arrow out of the darkness, Cleon stopped loitering and bent over low, headed for the cover of some trees. He felt a bit foolish, but he didn't want to take any chances. When after five minutes nothing happened Cleon let his guard down. Now that he was safely back into the world he had to take some time and think over his options.

Finding a safe place in the crook of a tree Cleon sat down and mulled over the different scenarios of what to do next. The most obvious reaction, to be grateful for survival and haul ass for the farthest town Cleon rejected out of hand. His entire worldview was shattered in a single afternoon and he would be damned if he was going to leave without finding out why. One thing was for sure, he wasn't going to grow up to be a Knight of the Round Table, which meant that no matter how this thing worked out, when it was over he was going to have to learn to be good at something else. Surprisingly, the prospect didn't really bother him much. The second impulse to find Garsious and string him up like a pig initially made Cleon feel better emotionally but decided to set the idea aside until he could decide if it was a good idea or not.

It didn't take Cleon long to decide that no matter what Sir Garsious's cover story was, it would

surely include Cleon's untimely and tragic death. Immediately he chose to allow Garsious's cover story to take root. With a little luck Garsious would claim to have personally seen Cleon die, which would be even more incriminating when he returned to Camelot and revealed himself.

Since he was supposed to be dead it wouldn't do to just go marching into town, he needed a disguise. Not a discreet one like a mustache or a beard. Extreme, he would have to adjust his height, his age, his total appearance would have to be altered in order for him to travel freely in Camelot. His face, like all of the people who were connected to the Knights was very well known and it was crucial that he get close enough access to the castle so that he could pick up Garsious's trail. There was certainly a sizable chunk of his mind that intended to kill the man for what he did.

Cleon's biggest problem was that he didn't know how far the conspiracy, whatever it was, went. It could just be a couple of Knights, or it might be the entire order. Cleon knew that there was no way for him to know which was which, and any mistake he made would end badly, probably with a sword in his chest. He also had the not insignificant problem of total ignorance as to the true nature of the conspiracy. The most important thing was to find out what was being hidden, and to drag the secret out of the shadows.

Hopping out of the tree Cleon headed away from Camelot. He would find the things he needed and make his way back when he was ready.

The Hall of the King was a beautifully architected monstrosity. Every inch of the place was covered with some kind of flourish or accent. It was garish in the way only enormous wealth or total insanity can achieve garish. A level of intricacy two steps beyond what almost anyone would consider prudent, bordering on fractal. The centerpiece of the entire room was of course the throne upon which sat King Arthur the Third, a squat man of about 22. A young King, Arthur relied heavily on his knights for council and wisdom. A slothful fellow by upbringing and nature, Arthur was mostly content to hang around the castle and the throne room, eating mountains of food and listening to the stories and legends of his knights. He wasn't an evil man, just a man of privilege who never considered the possibility that his privilege was neither deserved nor fair. He was a creation of his culture and as such, was just fulfilling his role.

Above anything else, above food, above even sex, Arthur loved a really good story. Especially when the stories involved the safety of his own kingdom. As such, like his Father before him, Arthur insisted that his Knights regale him with the stories of their adventures once they returned to Camelot.

It was in this spirit that Garsious entered the great throne room, his head hung low, a sorrowful expression on his face.

"Ho there!" Cried the King, excited to see that his favorite Knight had returned from what was advertised as a great adventure against the powerful dragon Appamatax, an enormous brute who was supposed to live in the mountains on the outskirts of Camelot. "How goes the news Sir Garsious, Captain of my beloved Knights?"

"Your Lordship, I bring both good and dark tidings. I will say two things first, before my tale is properly told so as to give your majesty fair warning. First know that I have successfully slain the dragon Appamatax, but know too that in the battle I lost my valued and promising squire, the boy Cleon."

A gasp erupted from the ever-present gallery, women began to cry and men bowed their heads in respect. It had been two generations since Camelot had lost one of its small cadre of protectors. Not since Lancelot's battle with Smoker had a Knight or Squire been lost to the perilous dragons. It was greatly due to the remarkable success rate of the Knights that their legend had grown so large.

"So now man, tell me the story of what happened. I must know everything."

"As you wish your majesty, I shall tell you all."

"I went, as you know deep into the Mountains to the east of Camelot. There had been rumors of late about a particularly large and fierce dragon eating the livestock of the surrounding farmers. As is custom I brought my squire Cleon on the adventure with me, so that he would know more of what it was to be a Knight of the Round Table. Many days did we walk through perilous countryside, twice we were forced to do battle with forest Orcs who were bound to do us harm. Cleon fought

valiantly easily killing one foe for every five I slew, a good ratio for a squire on his first quest.

Finally after a week of searching in the dragon's last reported vicinity we spotted the beast flying in the direction of a particularly steep mountain in the pass of Normia. In his claws helplessly hung two large cows, each bleating with terror. We watched as he found his nest and settled down to eat. We waited until nightfall hoping to sneak up on the monster in its sleep, for it is well known that dragon's like to sleep after meals, indeed it is the only time they do. Of course, even in sleep dragon's keep one eye open, which is but one of the reasons they are so perilous."

Garsious paused to let this new bit of dragon lore sink in with the assembled courtesans. He took a long slow drag from the glass of wine a steward had left near to hand and also removed a couple of grapes from a sprig and popped them into his mouth. Reluctantly, trying to drag the final battle out as long as possible Garsious finally continued.

"We came upon the dragon's lair under the cover of a low sliver of a moon and were greatly pleased to hear the dragon's deep rumbling snores as we came around the final corner and into his line of sight. At first everything went very well. We drew lots to see which side we would approach from and by luck we picked the closed eye. This meant we would have a very good chance to slay the thing before it even woke up. Until that point I had been focusing on the dragon's head, wanting to know if we had surprise on our side, satisfied that we would I took a moment to examine the whole of the creature, to see the dragon through the trees as it were. Well no sooner did I take the entire creature in that I realized he was Alcazar, the legendary progeny of the great dragon Smoker. I knew that I was in the vicinity of where Lancelot claimed his victory over the great monster and now I realized that Cleon and I were in the very same den!"

The assembled group gasped in unison. Alcazar was a famous dragon indeed, it rivaled Smoker for its reputation for nastiness. It was said (by the Knight's mainly) that Alcazar could eat the snowy tops off of mountains when he became thirsty. They had been saying for years that the creature regularly ate entire herds of cattle, and just for a midnight snack.

"At the same time I realized who we were up against the dragon's eye popped open, full of awareness and sinister intelligence. He huffed a plume of smoke out of his nose and immediately began raising himself onto his feet. I fired two arrows at the monster, one stuck into his side and the other bounced harmlessly off of his scaly hide. Cleon rushed at the monster striking it an important blow on its forward shoulder, slowing its ability to run. Unfortunately, the dragon was able to swing its head around and it sent the boy tumbling across the rocky ground where he ended up in a heap. Enraged I charged the beast and ran it through its neck. Because of Cleon's blow he was unable to swing his body back toward me, giving me time to pull the sword free of Appamatax's neck. When I did a terrible burst of flame shot out from the wound. I couldn't believe the terrible luck when the dragon staggered over to the far wall still occasionally sending an arc of flame out of his nose or mouth. In the corner, where Cleon's body lay was only a pile of ash and the sickly smell of roasted flesh, hair, and cloth only familiar to those of our order and those fortunate enough to have seen a witch burning with their own eyes."

At this Sir Garsious stopped and put a hand up to his face. He stood motionless counting silently to twelve, a number he felt would demonstrate to the assembled group and the King deep emotion without being so long to appear as weakness.

"I scattered the boys ashes to the four winds on the peak of the mountain he gave his life within. I took the head of the dragon and prepared it in the manner which is our custom."

Garsious uncoiled the rope that held shut a large sack. From the sack he pulled an enormous skull, it was as big as Garsious's head and chest and twice as thick. It wasn't too heavy though. It had long ago been explained that the dragons bones had to be light so that the creature could fly. Still the head was the largest one anyone had ever seen, Garsious was setting a new standard. When the people saw the skull they oohed and aahed, genuinely impressed.

"Behold!" He shouted bringing the skull up over his head like it was the Stanley Cup. "The head of Appamatax, he will endanger us no more. I dedicate this kill to my faithful squire Cleon who held such promise, but was struck down before he could hone his skills to the razor's edge necessary to be a Knight of the Round Table."

With that the King ordered wine for all. He further decreed that the next three days should be spent feasting, maybe there was an orgy thrown in for good measure, but such details do not

concern us here.

When the days of celebration were ended and Sir Garsious' sizable "bonus" was paid in gold coins he announced that he would be going on a retreat into the mountains to regroup and prepare himself for another battle with the forces of darkness. This was a common practice with the Knights of the Round Table and the announcement raised no suspicions.

People lined the streets to bid Sir Garsious farewell. Roses were thrown upon himself and his horse. The King had decided to wait until Garsious returned to assign him a new squire and so he sent Sir Gombash as a travelling companion. There was also to be a meeting to discuss the Cleon matter. More accurately, there was planned at Garsious's retreat yet another feast to celebrate the successful dispatch of what could have been a significant threat to the order. The remaining Knight's would be coming two days hence.

As Garsious and Gombash rode out of the gates of Camelot and into the wilds of the woods, neither man heeded the glare of the one face in the crowd that wasn't smiling, that didn't clap at them with glee.

Cleon was busy in the four days since his escape. About a half a mile from the mouth of the cave Cleon came across the place where Garsious camped after knocking the boulder across the hole. There were several torn sacks that contained a chalky white powder, there was also the broken remains of what looked like a mold. With great care Cleon had reconstructed the mold over the space of half a day and when he was done he had what was unmistakable as a dragon's skull. This then was how they did it, how they faked the existence of the dragons. The rest they left up to the imaginations of the superstitious villagers. If all the teachers tell you a thing is true, there are few who will come to a differing opinion.

The slow methodical work of reconstructing the mold gave Cleon some time to consider his situation and get some perspective on it. He knew the mold alone would convince no one. Everyone would just think that he was the one who came up with the idea. After a day of thinking about it Cleon realized that there really was nothing that he could do to prove in any conclusive way what Garsious did. Even if Garsious made up a story that said he saw Cleon die, he could just say that he made the story up to hide the truth that Cleon ran away in terror the minute he saw the dragon. Garsious could just saying he was trying to save the reputation of a boy who he never expected to be stupid enough to return to Camelot. Given all this it seemed that Cleon might be forced to torture the truth out of Garsious or maybe outright kill him.

Cleon knew there was a chance that he was being hasty, that there was more going on than he knew. It had even flitted across his mind a few times that maybe every squire went through a similar kind of initiation. Maybe the box was planted there. After all, the flint and tinder was *awfully* convenient. When the cave entrance was covered there was no evil heckling or taunts just rock. Maybe he was supposed to escape and the way he reacted afterward would decide if he was really cut out to be a Knight of the Round Table. He even managed to convince himself a few times that he saw one of the Knights following him.

Truly vexed, Cleon had decided to allow his anger to make the decisions for him. Although anger wasn't necessarily the best way to deal with his situation, it was a productive engine and at the early stages, doing something while contemplating was more important than idling. Better to be prepared for the challenge should you decide that you have to meet it. If it was truly a test than surely someone would stop him before he got as far as murder.

Garsious and Gombash rode quickly, their horses were the best in the land and it was not long before Cleon lost sight of them and he was forced to rely on his tracking skills to follow the pair. It wasn't difficult, they were riding side by side and staying to the road, their prints freshly marked in the earth.

It didn't take Cleon more than a few miles to figure out where the Knights were going. Far north of Camelot lay the Haunted Forest of Ogres and Monsters, a legendary place that was supposed to be the source of all evil in the world. The Haunted Forest was the battery that gave life to the things that went bump in the night. Nobody ever went there, not even children on a dare. Every generation or two some kid would go to the Forest and not return, or so the stories went.

Like everyone else Cleon was terrified of the place; at least he was until then. Once Cleon

saw that neither Knight had the slightest intention of turning off the path to the east or west a lifetime's worth of fear dissolved in a heartbeat. Cleon understood where the legends came from, the Forest wasn't evil, it was the Knight's hideout.

Using the forbidden forest as a base of operations was a brilliant idea. After all, if anyone saw a Knight riding out from its dark shade he could just say he was pursuing a monster or something. Indeed, being caught leaving the hideout would only improve the stature of the Knight who was seen.

"What a racket." Cleon said to himself aloud, shaking his head in disbelief and bemused horror.

Sure enough the Knight's tracks went straight into the forest. Taking a long look behind to see if he was being followed as well as following, Cleon spurred his stolen horse into the darkness.

The first few hundred yards were oppressive, the trees were dense and a thick underbrush covered the ground, the canopy was also low, Cleon had to duck under five branches in the first two minutes. The only positive aspect to the situation was the ease with which he could follow the path of Garsious and Gombash.

Then with abrupt suddenness the forest opened up and a clear and relatively well traveled path appeared in front of him, snaking off to the northwest. In that direction a small chain of mountains jutted up out of the middle of the forest and ran for about twenty miles before they spread out and angled south into the hills that surrounded all of Camelot. It was said, (Of course.) that the devil lived in these mountains and nobody ever came anywhere near the peaks. It was a good thing for the Knight's too because just above the tree line they had constructed a rather large and elaborate building that served as the Knight's home away from Camelot. It sat in a large natural crevice that made the place invisible from anyone looking from the south.

From Cleon's direction you could see the Knight's hideout within a half mile of the point where the forest opened into the rather pleasant glade Cleon found himself riding in. At the sight of the place, which would rival the White House in square footage, Cleon urged his horse to a stop and sat marveling. Now here was some evidence. Too bad he would have to club someone to get them to come this far into the Forest so that they could see for themselves. Again Cleon found himself stymied by the power people put into their own delusions.

After a minute or two Cleon went forward again, now more determined than ever to get the truth about what the hell was going on in Camelot. Once he was close enough to see some details he stopped again and took a closer look at the building he was approaching. Most of the place was built directly into the rock of the crevice which gave the entire structure an uneven, sprawling appearance. There were also free standing buildings visible, including what appeared to be a giant greenhouse complete with sand scratched glass. The sunlight of the afternoon glittered off the roof. In its own way the entire complex was as magnificent as the castle at Camelot even though the aesthetic was completely different.

Carefully Cleon followed the slope of the crevice up towards the compound. Although there was a massive gate installed around the perimeter it was wide open and there were no guards visible. After a minute or two of consideration Cleon decided to head along the wall to where it intersected with the face of the mountain. The junction would provide easier climbing handholds and judging from the fact it was probably safe to walk through the front door Cleon actually felt pretty comfortable sneaking in from the back.

As he hoped there was nobody around. From the top of the wall Cleon could see Garsious and Gombash talking to one another in the greenhouse. He carefully climbed back down to the ground inside the wall and snuck right up to the greenhouse. Conveniently there were thick bushes all along three of the four walls and he could walk freely up to where the men were talking. Every few feet there were levered windows made up of several strips of glass that could be closed to overlap one another or be opened for fresh air and to let the bees come and go.

He sat underneath the window in a small space that was completely covered unless you drew the bushes aside. Cleon focused on deciphering the thin volume of the voices that trickled out from the greenhouse. The dark outlines of the two men were visible through the sanded glass as they strolled through the plants. Cleon hoped that he was as invisible as he thought he was, the bush was

thick enough to cut off any light that might give away his own silhouette, so he figured (correctly) that he was invisible to the men inside.

Cleon figured the two men would be planning something diabolical. As he approached the windows he had thought of himself as a great hero sneaking up to learn the most dastardly secrets of the enemy. Either that, or maybe he would hear something that would demonstrate that he was being tested. Like maybe Garsious would say, "Now I wonder what the hell's taking Cleon so long to escape that stupid cave, I really want to go hunt a real dragon."

In his heart of hearts Cleon knew he wouldn't hear anything like that, but consciously he still hoped, in the way a 4<sup>th</sup> grader hopes for snow when he goes to sleep knowing there's an unstudied for test in the morning. Even if it's May.

No matter what it was, good or bad, Cleon didn't think that there was anything the two men could be talking about that would surprise him. No amount of evil machinations would have surprised him, no scheme would be too foul to make his ears go red.

That's what Cleon thought, but when he heard what the two men were discussing, his mouth his chest in amazement.

"Smell this one Gombash, isn't it just heavenly."

The loud sound of sniffing.

"Yeah Garsious, that's a wonderful scent. And the depth of the red in the rose is marvelous, what are you using for fertilizer?"

"Crushed egg shells and a wee dash of shite. But you haven't even noticed the best part." Garsious replied.

There was a moment of silence and suddenly Gombash gushed, "Oh my God, you've bred out the thorns. I can't believe it."

"I had this weird dream about these extremely strange long bushy haired men singing about roses having thorns, and there was this terrible music..."

Garsious paused obviously disliking even the memory of the experience. "I figured if I could breed out the thorns, then perhaps that song would go away, that was the idea's genesis anyway."

"They come from the strangest places don't they?"

"That they do."

Cleon couldn't believe that not only were the men he had spent his life looking up to liars and killers, but flower gardeners as well!! There was no disgrace in being a gardener, but the men did it to please the ladies and give the area around their homes a sophisticated and civilized air. Male gardeners didn't go on about how pretty the roses smelled. (This was long ago in a land far, far away, the people were all sexist creeps, such is history.)

His mind reeling Cleon snuck away from the greenhouse and went searching for a weapon. He knew there was no way he could realistically overcome two full grown Knights, even with surprise on his side. Although filled with reservations, he knew the only real shot he had was to kill one man with a well placed arrow and defeat the other with his sword. The problem was he still sucked at archery. He continued to practice every day of his apprenticeship, but in spite of loosing a couple of hundred arrows a day, he saw only the slightest improvement.

Moving quickly so that he wouldn't lose his nerve Cleon jogged through the buildings, looking for a bow and some arrows. It only took a few minutes, after all, it was a hideout for Knights. There was a whole stack of them leaning against a wall with eight or nine quivers full of arrows. Smiling, Cleon grabbed a bow and quiver and headed back towards the greenhouse.

He decided to wait for the two men to exit the greenhouse, he would kill Gombash with the bow and fight Garsious by hand. Cleon was moving quickly and didn't even stop to consider his theory that he was being tested. The mere fact that the hideout existed went a long way to dispel the idea from his mind, the fact that the men were tending roses while they were supposed to be fighting dragons didn't hurt either.

He stood at the corner of a building about twenty yards from the entrance to the greenhouse. He could still see the two men walking around inside. Cleon held the bow at rest and waited.

Gombash took the wine from the work table and hefted the bottle to his lips. His atom's apple bobbed up and down as he chugged it down, a thin stream of red running down the side of his

mouth. He laughed heartily.

"Can you believe it Garsious?" Gombash asked, his voice slurring the Knight's name so it sounded like "Garseeouss."

"Believe what my friend?" he asked, laughing at Gombash's inebriation.

"The lifes we haavfe. We are the Kingses. Not that fittle boy down there in the villegee. We do whatever we want to whovver we want and nofuddy can stop us."

"True, although it is not wise to talk of such things out of doors my friend." Garsious said, leading the larger man towards the door. Gombash's reputation for waxing philosophical about the Knight's true status when drunk was well known in the order and Garsious decided to take him indoors. You never knew when the walls had ears, and it was better to be safe than sorry. It was this motto that Garsious had always lived by. It was why he killed Cleon, it was why he would kill Gombash if he didn't shut up until they went inside. Luckily for him, Gombash changed the subject.

"These really are beautiful rosesesss. I wish I could give one to my wife." Then like it had just occurred to him, "Hey Garsseous, do you think I could have a couple of roses to give to my wife. She's never really been fond of them, she says she likes the smell but she hates the thorns. Well you took care of that buddy..."

The two men walked through the door of the greenhouse. They were greeted by Cleon standing before them with a notched arrow pointed straight at Gombash's chest. Garsious just stood there, his jaw at his chest. He felt like he was seeing a ghost, there was no way that boy escaped the... Garsious saw the sword stuck into the earth next to the boy, the fancy crest of Lancelot was as distinctive as Captain Crunch to an eight year old. There must have been another way out. Lancelot never did admit how he really lost the sword. Most of the Knights who came after him assumed he lost it in a poker game somewhere.

In the meantime Cleon fired the arrow. Even though he was within his range of good accuracy, the arrow missed its mark and passed through a large hunk of Gombash's arm, hurtin him bad enough to sober him up in a hurry, but that was about all. Before Cleon even took the second arrow from the quiver both Knight's had their swords drawn and halved the distance between them. It was a race. Cleon was able to fire the second arrow, but Gombash's blade knocked it harmlessly away milliseconds after Cleon released the string. He threw the bow in the big man's face and rolled for the sword. He plowed straight into something solid. Looking up he saw Gombash staring down at him, fury in his eyes. Desperate, Cleon shut his foot into Garsious's crotch, dropping like a sack of apples. Cleon sprang to his feet and felt for a second like he could win when his hand closed around Lancelot's sword. Then there was a heavy thud on the side of his head and everything went black. The last thing he saw was a blurred vision of Gombash, a big rock in his hand, the arrow still sticking out of his arm.

When Cleon came to he was lying flat on his back. He was totally bound to what felt like a stone slab. The ceiling above him was vaulted, his peripheral vision could make out a balcony that ran around the perimeter of the room. It was full of men in deep velvet robes, thick with billowing folds.

Then over him appeared Garsious's face. He was sneering at the Cleon. He clearly didn't appreciate Cleon's unsuccessful attempt to kill him and his successful attempt to crush his boys.

"Garsious. You have some explaining to do I think." Said Cleon.

As a response Garsious plunged the first of five ceremonial daggers into the boy's gut. Pain seared through the boy like fire. He immediately went into shock. Two men in robes approached and poured a foul tasting liquid down Cleon's throat. The pain was immediately diminished and Garsious's face swam back into focus.

"We will explain to you why you must die, we will tell you everything. Because as much as you anger me, you deserve it. You did a brave and noble thing, trying to do what you believed in. That is why we killed you. Because we knew that you were capable of such acts. Imagine if we had let you live until you were a full grown adult, you probably would have killed both me and Gombash. We couldn't let that happen."

"Gonna kill you anyway." Cleon muttered.

"Exactly why we won't let you. Boy, everything that you believed in so blindly was a lie. But

it's not just us. I bet you believe that King Arthur really pulled that sword out of the stone by magic. The truth is Arthur was the son of a rich nobleman and the boy paid a gang of laborers to beat the stone into sand. Technically he did pull the sword from the stone, but a woman of eighty could have achieved the miracle just as easily because by the time he got there the stone was just sand. He read the legend, paid to find out if anyone would believe it, and was reportedly quite shocked to find out that it worked."

"Do you know how many barbarians there are? Thousands, they could overrun us 5 to 1 if they wanted to. But they don't because we signed a treaty with them two generations ago. It was a qualified total success. In return for allowing our autonomy, they are allowed a certain freedom to raid Camelot's outlying villages a certain number of times a year. This is done with the understanding they will withdraw in mock terror should a band of Knights happen to ride by, which certainly happens on occasion. So in that sense we do serve a protective service. After all boy, isn't it true that your own mother would have been a victim if it wasn't for the fortunate arrival of one of our order? You owe your mother's life to that treaty."

"And my Father's death you monster."

"You are wrong boy, we are not monsters. We are but practical men, trying to live our lives in a difficult and dangerous world. Camelot is a bastion of civilization in an untamed world and if that means that we have to break a few dishes in order to serve the entire party, so be it."

One dagger was thrust into his right shoulder, one into his left shoulder. A third was used to cut a lock of Cleon's hair from his head. The strands were passed around and each Knight took one strand and placed into his mouth, taking in the boy's courage.

Garsious looked directly into Cleon's eyes and the boy knew that he was seconds from what would be his death. Before he went though he wanted to know one thing.

"Why do you have to kill me?"

"There is only one thing in the universe that has the power to kill Legend and that is the truth. In this instance you are truth and we are legend and sometimes it is necessary to kill truth in order that legend may survive."

There was an unmistakable twinge of sadness in his voice. The fifth dagger went into his heart and with a final rush of air, truth died.

Garsious found the hole that Cleon had escaped from. Exactly one year after Cleon's death Lancelot's sword was returned to the hole, a new skull pierced on its blade.