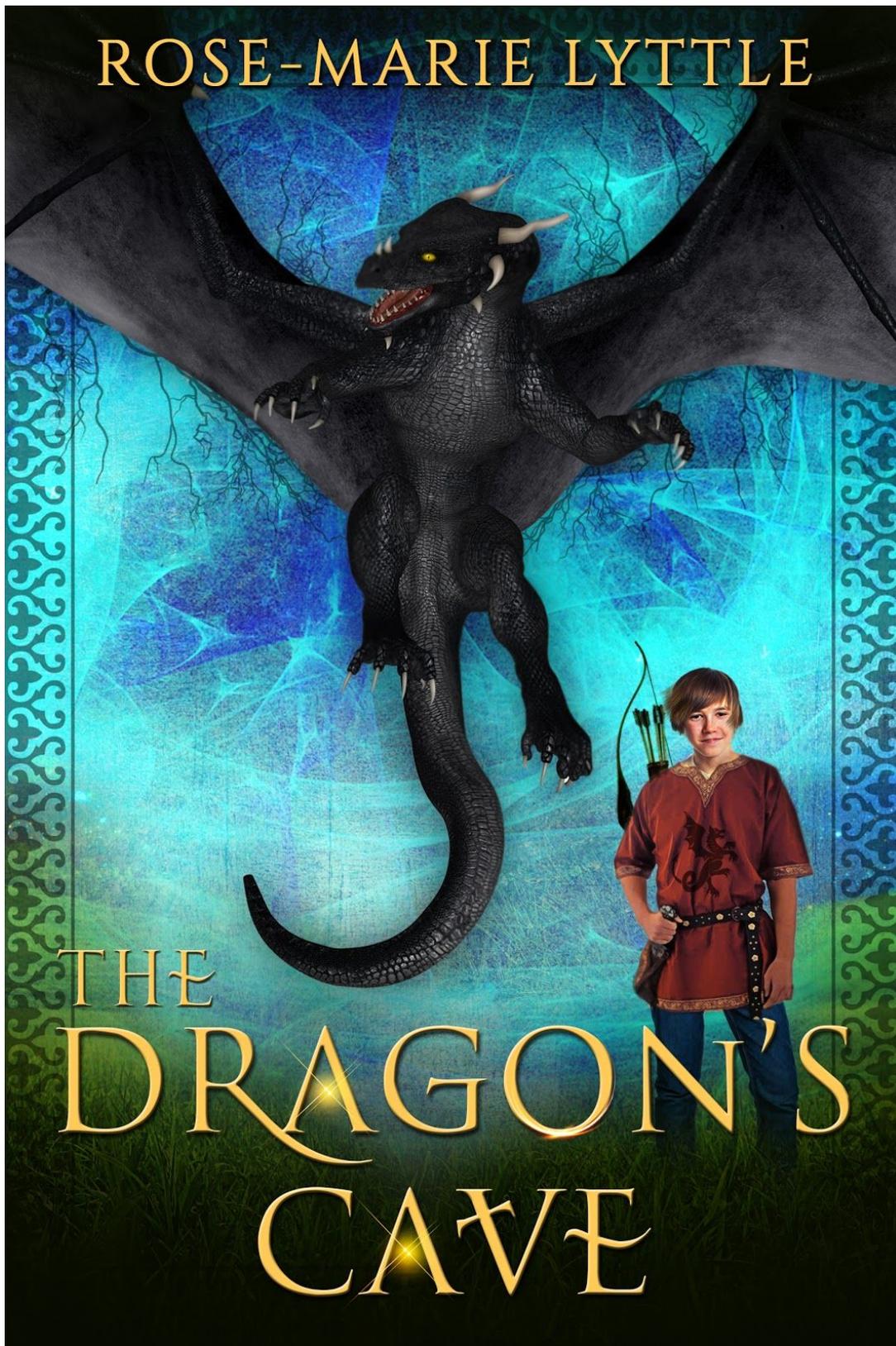


ROSE-MARIE LYTTLE



THE
DRAGON'S
CAVE

THE DRAGON'S CAVE

By Rose-Marie Lyttle

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Chapter One

Seamus never asked to be Sunnyfield Middle School's cross-country star. If it weren't for wanting to please Coach Peterson, his best friend's dad, he wouldn't even stay on the team. He'd rather be skateboarding, or playing Minecraft, or doing anything else that let him fly under the radar.

It wasn't his fault he happened to be a better runner than Andy, Coach Peterson's son, the one kid who would give his left thumb to take Sunnyfield to State. Unfortunately, Andy wasn't even close to qualifying.

He sat beside his friend, putting the cleats on his shoes, trying to get Andy to relax. "We have another week until Sectionals. This is just a practice meet—no big deal."

"Easy for you to say," Andy muttered, standing up and bouncing in place like a boxer about to go in the ring. "If I don't place today, Coach Malcolm might not even let me race at Sectionals." Malcolm was their head coach, the man who made all their practices miserable.

"Okay, boys, you ready to show your stuff today?" Coach Peterson asked, coming up behind them and dropping a large hand on each of their shoulders. He wore his customary white baseball cap to cover his bald head, which he shaved regularly. The tattoo of a medieval sword stood out on his muscled forearm, giving him ninja points with all the kids, Seamus included.

"I'm ready." Andy's eyes were locked on some point in the distance, his arms flailing about as he kept up his manic dance.

"Me, too."

"Andy, don't burn yourself out early. Keep your pace steady and you'll make your time. Seamus, will you pace with Andy going out?"

He winced.

Andy whipped his head around, losing the fixed stare into the distance. "I don't need—"

"Yeah, sure," he cut in. "No problem."

Actually, it was a very big problem because Andy would hate being his charity case. But he couldn't refuse Coach Peterson anything; the man was the closest thing he had to a father.

"Thanks, buddy. You can pick up your pace after the quarter-mile mark. I'm expecting to see you shave another five seconds from your time today."

He nodded. "Right. I'll try."

Coach Malcolm blew his whistle, bellowing orders for the girls, who lined up to run first. Seamus watched Lacey Stocker, the girl he liked. She consistently outran everyone on the team, even the boys. She would definitely be qualifying for State next week. She tucked the wisps of hair that had come loose from her ponytail behind her ears and toed the starting line.

“Lacey, try to act like a team player for once and pace with the other girls,” Malcolm yelled, loud enough for everyone to hear. “This team isn’t all about you.”

“Yeah, Lacey, it isn’t all about you,” Lance Barkin, one of the guys near them, mimicked with a laugh.

“Shut up,” Seamus growled, loud enough for Lance to hear but hopefully quiet enough that Coach Malcolm wouldn’t catch it.

“What?” Lance asked.

He shook his head. “Just shut up.” He didn’t see why everyone, Coach Malcolm and Andy included, hated Lacey, just because she ran fast. Like girls weren’t allowed to beat boys or something.

Coach Malcolm blew his whistle again and the girls took off.

“You should keep pace with her,” Andy said, his brows lowered.

He shrugged, figuring the less he said about the pacing issue, the better. He did prefer to run with Lacey, which was another sticking point between him and Andy.

Coach Malcolm called the boys to line up, and Andy stalked off without glancing back. Seamus sighed and jogged after him, but had to take a place farther down, because Andy had chosen a spot between two other runners.

The whistle blew and he let the others rush ahead, falling back to get a bearing on Andy. When he ran up beside him, his friend didn’t turn his head to acknowledge him.

“You don’t have to run with me,” Andy said.

“It’s okay.”

“No, I mean, I don’t want you to. I don’t need you taking me under your wing. I don’t want your help.”

“I want to run with you.”

“No you don’t,” Andy snapped.

“Dude—”

Andy veered in a sharp left, taking off faster to get away from him.

He shook his head and let him go, focusing on finding his pace. Up ahead, Andy bolted, running way too fast. He wouldn’t be able to sustain that pace for long. Seamus had let down Coach Peterson, but it wasn’t his fault.

Seamus scanned the runners, searching for Lacey. He found her up ahead, her long legs kicking out behind her, the strawberry-blonde ponytail swaying in rhythm with her feet. He picked up his speed to join her.

“Hey,” she said, when he reached her side.

“Hey. Mind if I run with you? Andy left me in the dust.”

Her eyes slid sideways and she raised her eyebrows, like she knew exactly how screwed-up his friendship with Andy had become because of running. “Sorry.”

He shrugged. “It’s cool.” It wasn’t, actually, but the way she understood him was.

They were on the neighborhood “track”—a route that ran from the back door of the school through the neighborhood streets to the south, ending back at the school yard. Almost everyone preferred it to just running around and around the track, mainly because it offered a bit more shade. At the moment, the afternoon sun beat down on the tops of their heads and the backs of their necks.

When they passed the quarter-mile mark, he couldn’t help checking to see how Andy fared. His friend had stopped just ahead of him leaning against someone’s split-rail fence, doubled over.

Seamus groaned. “Gotta go. I’ll try to catch up later.” Running over to Andy, he asked, “Cramp?”

“Charlie horse in my calf.” Andy grimaced.

“Try walking it out.”

“No duh, genius.” Andy didn’t look at him as he continued to hobble forward. He started to run again, but yelped a few steps in, hopping in pain.

“Maybe you’re dehydrated.” He handed Andy the water bottle he always ran with.

Andy batted the bottle away with the back of his wrist.

“I guess you have it all figured out.” Well, Andy had started it. He ground his teeth as he took off running again. If Andy wanted to be a jerk, he could be a jerk alone. Seamus didn’t need to hang around for it.

“Yeah, you better keep going. I wouldn’t want to slow down Sunnyfield’s big star or anything,” Andy hollered from behind.

His jaw clenched, and he lengthened his strides to catch up with Lacey.

“Is he okay?” she asked when he arrived.

“I wouldn’t know,” he muttered.

“Ah.”

Once more, he was sure she got him. The sky had clouded and a few drops of water began to fall.

“Rain,” Lacey announced.

“Yep.” They kept talking to a minimum when they ran to save their breath.

A bolt of lightning flared in front of them, followed by a clap of thunder.

“Ooh!” Lacey chirped.

He grinned. Lacey loved rain, which made it fun to run with her during monsoon season.

She jerked her head toward the dirt path which ran alongside the street that led them back to the school. She raised her eyebrows in question. Lacey had a weird obsession with the number five, and taking the dirt path meant five laps instead of four. When he ran with her, they always had to take this route.

He considered. It wouldn’t be cheating the clock, because it was actually one-tenth of a mile longer than staying on the paved route. Still, this was supposed to be a practice meet. But he and Lacey already had their times down. “Okay,” he agreed.

The two peeled off from the pack, cutting onto a dirt trail that ran alongside the wash. He loved this stretch of the run, especially when no one else took it. Vines and greenery sprawled onto the path, making it seem like a forgotten garden. He'd bet most people hated all the weeds and bushes, but he liked the wildness. Lacey must, too, because she always pointed out flowers in bloom or pretty rocks.

They ran in silence, water pouring down their faces, puddles forming under their feet and making a satisfying splashing sound with each footfall. In Sunnyfield, Arizona, when the monsoons came, things flooded. The ground was too sunbaked to allow moisture to soak in, so it flowed into fast-moving streams. The wash beside them, normally a dry riverbed, had already filled at least a foot deep and raced past them at breakneck speed.

The trail grew slick, mud sliding under their shoes the way a bar of soap slips around the bathtub. It caked on the soles of their runners and made it even worse. Lacey skidded, one leg shooting out in front so fast she landed on her butt before she'd even yelped. It wouldn't have been a big deal, except she fell right on the edge of the embankment, which gave way, sending her plunging into the wash.

"Lacey," he yelled at the same moment she screamed, their voices mingling with equal shock. He scrambled to the edge in time to see her entire body submerge. His heart jumped into his throat.

Oh crap, crud, *crap!* This was bad. Very, very bad.

Her head emerged, arms flailing, but the water carried her fast, debris tumbling against her body so her legs flew up over her head, and she dunked underwater again.

Clearly, the wash ran deeper than a foot now. He remembered learning in Scouts that Arizona slot canyons filled with water within minutes after it began to rain, drowning anyone unlucky or stupid enough to be caught in them.

He sprinted forward, trying to get ahead of her.

There. Her head emerged again, and she caught hold of a bush of some kind. "Seamus!" she screamed.

"I'm coming!" He launched over the side of the ditch, tripping and falling until he reached the waterline. "Here," he yelled, but another boom of thunder drowned out his voice. "Lacey, grab my hand!" He hung onto a bush and reached his palm out to her.

She lunged for him, slid, and fell back into the water with a scream of pure terror. Fortunately, her grasp on the bush held her weight. She used it to drag herself back out, reaching again for his hand.

He wiggled his fingers, stretching his arms so far he thought they'd dislocate.

She caught his grasp, her palm slippery, but her grip as hard as iron. He pulled and she stumbled forward, reluctant at first to release the bush then scrambling toward him with a wild look. She continued right past him, slipping and scraping to reach the bank. Once there, she collapsed on her belly in the mud, her back heaving with the effort of breathing.

"Lacey?" He touched her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She lifted her head and wiped at the mud on her cheek, making it smear. “Yeah,” she said, but he knew it was a lie.

He tucked a hand in her elbow and tugged her up. “Let’s get out of here.” He no longer enjoyed any part of the storm.

She nodded, still appearing shaken. “Yeah.”

They walked. Apparently neither one of them wanted to run now, even though it would get them out of the rain sooner. His legs still shook from the fright, so he didn’t know how Lacey even managed to walk, considering she’d just come inches from drowning. His mind shut down as they trudged back, shock setting in. He considered how his mom would react if he told her what had happened. She would probably throw her arms around him and cry with relief to hear how it all turned out. He was all she had.

By the time they got back to school, none of their teammates remained outside. They must all be in the locker rooms, drying off. Coach Malcolm stood at the door, his arms folded across his chest. “Where have you two been?” he demanded. “You think you’re too good for practice meets?”

“No,” he said. “Lacey fell into the wash and—”

“Why were you running along the wash? That wasn’t part of the course.”

“It was crowded, and it’s not like it’s a shortcut or anything—”

Coach Peterson jogged up, the lines in his face deepened with worry. “There you two are. I’ve been looking all over for you. Didn’t you hear us blowing the whistle to stop the time trial and come in? There was lightning close by.”

“Yeah, Lacey—”

“Apparently, they couldn’t be bothered to take this practice meet seriously. I guess they think they get special treatment since they lead the team’s times.”

“That’s not true.” Lacey’s jaw jutted forward.

He didn’t blame her for being defensive—Coach Malcolm was always a jerk to her.

“Well, if you can’t take practice seriously, I don’t see how you’ll take Sectionals seriously, either. Neither one of you will be running for Sunnyfield next week.”

Seamus sucked in his breath. He felt like he’d just been punched in the gut. That was not fair—not even a little bit.

“Are-are you serious?” Lacey asked.

“Listen, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Coach Peterson interceded. “I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for why they disappeared, right, kids?”

His chest tightened. He had completely failed Coach Peterson.

“Yes,” Lacey said.

“Too bad.” Coach Malcolm walked into the gym, leaving them standing there in the rain. “Maybe next time you’ll take my practices more seriously.”

Coach Peterson gave them a grim shake of his head. “I’ll talk to him.” He touched Seamus on the shoulder and followed the head coach inside.

Seamus just stood there, frozen, rain pooling in his ears and on his eyelids.

“I hate him.” Lacey’s face had hardened into a frozen mask—the one she wore every time Malcolm lashed out at her.

He felt terrible. Unlike him, Lacey cared about running. Qualifying for State meant everything to her. “Yeah. Me, too.”

“I’ll bet he doesn’t even know why he dislikes us so much.”

Andy opened the door. He’d showered and changed into his street clothes. “What’s going on? What happened?”

“Coach Malcolm just benched us for Sectionals,” he said.

He shouldn’t have looked. He should’ve anticipated Andy’s reaction, but he was too stunned to think.

Excitement lit his friend’s face.

Of course, because without Seamus racing, Andy had a better chance. Scowling, Seamus stalked off toward the front of the school. He didn’t need to stay for this. He didn’t care that his homework and his clothes were still in his locker, or that he usually rode home with the Petersons. He’d rather walk home alone in the rain.

He scanned at the blackened sky. A huge bolt flashed right in front of him, brighter than anything he’d ever seen. At the same instant, a deafening crack of thunder boomed. Something knocked his body into the air as white light seared his vision. His heart and breath seemed to stop completely.

And then everything went black.

Chapter Two

Seamus opened his eyes, blinking to make out the picture in front of him. Treetops. Filtered sunlight. The air smelled woodsy.

“Seamus, what are you doing, boy? Taking a nap?” a man’s voice said, his English—or was it Scottish?—accent unfamiliar.

Seamus scrambled to his feet and dusted himself off. And then froze.

What was he wearing? Tights? Leather lace-up boots? And where on earth was he? It appeared to be some sort of meadow, not...his mind grew fuzzy trying to remember where he had just come from. All he remembered was the brightest flash of light he’d ever seen.

“Seamus!” the man snapped.

His head jerked up, and he realized the older man was speaking to him. “Yeah?”

The man frowned. “You mean, *yes, sir.*”

Bewildered, he peered around for some clue to help him understand where he was and what was happening. A flicker of panic bubbled up in his chest. Realizing the man waited for a response, he said, “Yes, sir?”

“Come. Supper is ready.” The man wore strange clothing—a cream-colored tunic with the emblem of a crimson dragon embroidered on the front, like a knight from the Medieval Dinner Theatre where his mom once dragged him. Something about the knight seemed familiar, although he had never seen his face before.

He glanced down and realized he, too, wore a tunic with a crimson dragon. Was this some crazy dream? He touched his face. Who was he? Did he appear different? Had he somehow fallen into another boy’s body? Some kid in medieval Scotland? A tickle on his neck made him bring his hand back to find shoulder-length hair. He pulled it out to see the color—a darker brown than his sandy-blond mop back home.

The knight’s eyebrows drew together. “Come on, boy, what is the matter with you tonight?” He didn’t wait for an answer, just turned and walked away while Seamus trotted to keep up. They entered a clearing where many other knights milled about, some sitting on logs and rocks eating, some standing and talking. A large tent on one side bore the same dragon emblem they wore on their tunics. A fire burned in the middle of the clearing, and a large kettle hung over it, suspended by a chain and a tripod of sticks.

The sight of a boy his age made goose bumps prick his skin. *Andy.* The memory of their parting scene came back in a rush—Lacey falling in the wash, Andy’s joy that he couldn’t race, the bolt of lightning... Had it struck him? Had he died and come here, to this place? It sure didn’t seem like any version of heaven he’d ever imagined. Nor did it appear to be hell or even purgatory. What was this—medieval times?

He blinked at the kid in front of him and rubbed a hand across his eyes. It didn't actually resemble Andy, and yet he somehow knew it was. His friend sat on a log eating from a bowl, wearing a uniform like his, the costume of a...what were they called? Page? Or squire? Yeah, squire.

And then he understood why the knight also seemed familiar. He was Coach Peterson—Andy's dad.

"Where were you, Seamus?" Andy asked, his mouth full of meat. "I looked all over, but you were nowhere to be found." His friend also spoke with the Scottish accent.

"I...uh..." Seamus stared at him. "Andy?" he tried, hoping his friend might share a recollection about present-day Sunnyfield.

"Huh?" his friend grunted, looking puzzled.

"Do we...know each other from somewhere else?"

Andy scrunched up his face. "What do you mean? And why are you talking funny?"
You're the one talking funny.

He gave a quick shake of his head and tried to fake the accent. "Nothing. Never mind. I'm just...confused."

What is going on? Where am I? If this was a dream, he was ready for it to end.

"I'll say, mate. What did you call me? Andy?"

He froze. What was his friend's name? How did he get him to tell it without appearing foolish? He forced a laugh. "Yeah, do you like it?"

Andy's brows scrunched together. "Nay, I think Andrew suits better, don't you?"

He exhaled. *Andrew*. Not too far off. Once again, he wondered what this strange place was, where people seemed the same as real life but looked different? For one nauseating moment, he considered this might be real life, and Sunnyfield just a dream. But he pushed the thought away. "Yes...I mean, aye" he said.

"Have you already eaten?" Andy asked, lifting his chin toward the pot of food on the fire.

He glanced around for a plate or fork.

"What do you need?" Andy demanded before shoving a potato into his mouth on the point of...was that a knife? A sharp knife, too. The kind you could slice your tongue open with. He suppressed a shudder.

"Uh, where are the bowls?"

Andy looked at him as if he was nuts. "What are you talking about? Isn't your bowl in your satchel where you always keep it?"

"Uh, right! Yes, I'm sure it is," he said. What the heck was a satchel? Something like a backpack? He glanced around for his satchel.

Andy's gaze went to a small horse hobbled nearby, and butterflies took flight in Seamus's belly. Was that his horse? Oh no. He had absolutely no idea how to ride. He walked slowly toward the large animal, hoping not to spook it. Wasn't there some rule—like you should

never walk behind a horse or they'll kick you? He wished he'd paid more attention on that ranch tour the Scouts took.

Not that horses were frightening—they just were so... *big*. The horse stamped a foot and he skittered back, closing his mouth on a yelp. Okay, yeah. They were frightening.

He walked forward, holding out his hand like he would to a dog. The horse lowered his head and nuzzled him when he arrived, and he exhaled. At least his horse knew him, even if he didn't have a clue how to ride.

He pulled the leather bag hanging from the saddle and searched it for the bowl. Examining each item as he pulled it out. There was a woolen hoodie of some kind—like the kind Little Red Riding Hood wore, only not red—his was grey. There was a leather pouch filled with liquid—was that a primitive form of a water bottle? He also found a length of twine and a small bag of grain. There—at the bottom of the bag he found the wooden bowl, obviously hand carved. By whom, he wondered. Him?

He tried not to panic about his present circumstances. He and Andy were here together, at least he had that. And Coach Peterson was a knight he seemed to serve. Or was Coach Peterson his father? That hope lifted him more than he dared admit. For most of his life, he had wished Coach Peterson had been his dad, not Andy's. His own father had been a firefighter who'd died in the line of duty when Seamus was a baby. He'd gone into a burning factory, and the entire thing had blown up. After that, Seamus's mom decided they needed to move closer to his grandparents so they wound up in Arizona. They'd moved into the neighborhood where Andy and his family lived, so the two had been friends ever since. Coach Peterson had stood in as a dad for him from the start.

He brought the wooden bowl to the pot and served himself a large scoop of the stew. He glanced at Andy, who was eating with the small knife, stabbing things out of his bowl and taking them with his teeth. So where was his knife? He touched his sword belt where he found two daggers and a similar knife. *Score!* One more small problem solved.

“Sir Peter said we are close to the dragon's lair,” Andy—no, Andrew—said when he sat down beside him. “We might reach it tomorrow.”

Er...dragon's lair? For real? Did dragons exist?

He made a grunt of interest and worked on stabbing his food the way his friend did. He popped what he thought was a potato in his mouth. It had a sweeter taste, but was chewier than any potato he'd eaten. He examined one. On a closer look, he saw it didn't look like a potato at all. It had purple veins running through it and a whiter “meat.” Some kind of root? He didn't know, but it certainly was tasty. Which was good, because the broth was almost too salty to stomach.

“I cannot wait until we arrive, can you?”

“No,” he agreed.

“Do you expect one of us will slay him?”

“Uh...” *Not really.* He swallowed the meat, which was tough and salty. He wondered what kind of animal it came from. No, actually, he’d probably rather not know. “I hope so?”

“Do you think they will allow us to fight?”

He made a noncommittal sound, still reeling from the idea of seeing a dragon. Did they really exist? Or would the troop discover it had all been folklore and fairy tale as he’d been raised to believe?

“You remember what Sir Edwin said—an entire troop disappeared last time they set off to take the treasure from the dragon’s lair. That was in our great-grandfather’s time. So they might make the squires stay back. I hope not.”

He choked on his stew. Entire troop disappeared? “Yeah, me, too. How many men do we have this time?” he asked, scanning the troop.

Andrew shrugged. “I don’t know—thirty? I suppose the king will lead as he sees fit. But maybe we should ask Sir Peter to put in a good word.”

Seamus tried to determine who the king might be. Over by the tent stood a man wearing a crown upon his head. *Well, duh. That wasn’t too hard, was it?* He almost snorted. Rulers actually wore crowns? Maybe this was a fairy tale, and he’d been somehow transported into it. The crown shone with a polished silver and fit over the man’s protective helmet. As Seamus watched, the king pulled both the helmet and the crown from his head in one piece and tossed them to a waiting squire.

The glitter of crimson rubies caught in the sunlight and Seamus’s eyes widened. Just like the movies, or the fairy tales. Something about the man, himself, rang bells, too, as if he ought to know him. Not from a fairy tale or a history book, but from a personal connection. Like he was a distant family member—one of those old great aunts he ought to remember but really didn’t. Even more, he had a feeling he disliked the man.

He’d eaten all the meat and vegetables from his stew, so he brought the bowl to his lips to drink the rest of the broth before wiping the bowl clean with the edge of his tunic the way he’d seen Andrew do.

“All men to arms practice,” Coach Peterson called out in a deep, resonant voice. The man appeared as suited to knighthood as he did to coaching their cross-country team. He seemed to belong here. Seamus realized he must be the “Sir Peter” Andrew had mentioned. Which meant he wasn’t Andrew’s father here. Probably not his, either, or Andrew would have said, “your dad” or “your father” or whatever they said in medieval times. Too bad.

“Seamus, don’t just stand there; move, boy,” Sir Peter scolded.

He shook himself trying to hide his confusion. Who was Sir Peter to them? He attempted to remember what he knew about medieval times—which mostly came from the movies. Pages and squires each served a knight. So Sir Peter must be his boss—or his knight. Trotting after Andrew, he gathered with the other men in the clearing.

Andrew looked pointedly at Seamus’s empty hands and back at his face. “Where’s your bow?”

He realized everyone held a weapon. The knights mostly carried swords; the squires had bows and arrows, like Andrew. His gaze jerked to his horse again. There, hanging from the tree where the horse was tied, dangled a bow and a container of arrows. He jogged over to retrieve them, the leather boots on his feet barely giving him any cushion. Yeah, he missed his trainers.

He'd never shot a bow before. Nervous energy fired through his arms, chilling his fingers. But, really, how hard could it be? He picked out an arrow and fit the notched end against the string, sighting down the length of the whittled oak.

"Watch where you point that thing," Andrew muttered, shoving the tip of the arrow away from his direction.

"Sorry." He dropped the bow to his side. "Where's the target?"

Andrew's brows quirked, but he lifted his chin toward a tree where a colorful ribbon had been nailed. A line of men formed behind a tree bough laid on the ground like a starting mark. He followed Andrew to join the end of the line.

The clank of steel against steel made him jerk his head around to watch the sparring behind them. He drew in a breath, mesmerized. The men with swords had paired up and Sir Peter, who seemed to be a coach of some kind here, too, paced among them, offering encouragement or feedback. The swords appeared heavy, and the men swung them with force, knocking their opponents back when they struck their swords or shields. He wondered how often one of them lost a hand or arm just "practicing" because it didn't seem like anyone was holding back. Maybe that was why the squires didn't have swords. He wondered when they earned their swords.

When it was Andrew's turn to shoot, Sir Peter appeared beside them with the same steady, quiet presence he offered during their cross-country meets.

Andrew lifted his bow and stretched the string back, holding the arrow snugly against the frame. He jerked the bow up when he released the arrow and it went high, arcing then falling point down into the ground. Andrew frowned. Seamus tensed, knowing his friend well enough to expect him to be upset.

"Keep the bow steady as you release the string," Sir Peter advised.

Andrew glowered. "Aye, sir." He sounded sullen rather than respectful. He fit a second arrow into his bow and shot again, jerking less this time but still sending the arrow away from the target, this time to the left.

"Try once more," Sir Peter directed.

Andy's face hardened, his mouth a grim slash. It was the same expression he'd worn at the cross-country meet when his leg cramped. Seamus knew before he even began that Andrew would throw this try away. His friend didn't even bother sighting down the length of the arrow before he let it fly, and it went so far wide, he might have been aiming for something else altogether.

Sir Peter showed nothing on his expression. "Seamus."

Seamus drew a breath. Did he shoot any better than Andrew? He sort of hoped not. He didn't want his friend hating him here, too. His hand shook when he fit the arrow against the string, and he had to stop and redo it several times before the string sat in the notch in the end of the arrow. It took more effort to stretch the string back than he'd expected, his muscles flexing hard, the string biting into the pads of his fingers. Squeezing one eye closed, he sighted down the length of the arrow toward the ribbon on the tree. On an exhale, he unbent the fingers holding the string, keeping the rest of his body perfectly still. The arrow soared straight at the ribbon, arriving in the tree just an inch beside it.

"Ahoy, Seamus," some of the boys in the line behind him called out.

Sir Peter clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice, son. Now try another."

Satisfaction surged, even though he knew Andrew would be mad. He fumbled for another arrow. They had flint tips, mean-looking barbs that looked lethal. Feathers on the back end of the shaft made them more aerodynamic. He fit the arrow to the string, pulled it back again, and released it. Once more his arrow flew straight and true, striking less than an inch away from the target.

"Well done, Seamus, and your third?"

He repeated the action once more, this time feeling the strength in his arms. This body seemed more powerful than his own—or his Sunnyfield body, that is. He stretched the string all the way back to his ear before he let the arrow fly with a soft thwack. The arrow struck the ribbon this time, and a cheer went up from the line. A surge of warmth filled his chest when Sir Peter tousled his hair. Remembering Andrew, he kept his face neutral as he walked forward to pull his arrows out of the tree, hiding his pleasure. When he reached the end of the line, Andrew didn't make eye contact.