

# ✱ ONE ✱



**S**O THEY WENT NORTH, THE MAN AND THE BOY, AND THE roads narrowed, and big slate-headed mountains reared up ready to eat the sky.

The boy came from a softer country. He didn't like those hills. The hills he was used to were grassy, rounded things like green pillows, with houses on them sometimes, or sheep, and maybe a river at the bottom like a curve of mirror glass. These

northern hills were so high he had to lean backward to try and see the tops of them. They were so rocky that his eyes kept snagging on crags and spears and spines of stone as he looked up and up in search of a summit, in search of an end to the hard confusion of them. Fields of snow showed white up there, spread like raggedy bedsheets across the gaps between black crags. The rivers were white too, spraying in skinny cataracts down the faces of terrifying cliffs. It was as if God had seized hold of this piece of the world in a rage and wrenched it up on end.

The boy's name was Ansel, the man's was Brock. In the lands they'd ridden from, it was already spring. They had seen spring's tokens there: new leaves on the trees and kingcups in the water meadows and sunlight flashing on millstreams and maypoles. But up in these mountains the winter lingered. There was snow on the steep slopes and sleet on the wind. It seemed to Ansel a bad time to be traveling in such country, but Brock had told him that this was the best season by far for the hunting of dragons.

Sometimes as they rode Brock sang old songs, and sometimes he talked. Jokes, stories, comments about the places they were passing. He seemed carefree for a man setting off to fight dragons. Most of the time he didn't even bother to look back at the boy struggling along behind him on his weary pony. He just tossed words over his shoulder and expected Ansel to catch them.