

## CHAPTER 1

# The Sword in the Attic

When I was eleven, my parents told me there was a sword in our attic.

It was the strangest thing. I'd lived below the thing for so many years, and yet somehow I'd failed to hear of its existence. And, come to think of it, I was only just now learning that we even had an attic at all. I was an only child. I'd never had to share with anybody, so the space we had always suited me fine. My parents had spent the last several days bustling in and out through the hatch and ladder in our ceiling, collecting dust-coated cardboard boxes brimming with ancient belongings from photo albums and CDs to crumbling Christmas décor.

Spring cleaning, they called it. There was just too much clutter to be dealing with, and even though we'd never used the attic for any other reason than to store old bits and bobs, apparently it was time we went through and cleaned it out.

I helped, of course. Part of it was my own self-interest. I wanted to see this sword. Was it a real sword, like the kind from fantasy books? Or a sword like one of those Nerf rubber toys?

Among the items they had determined fit for donation was a medieval-type disc pommel arming sword, fit with a jewel-festooned hilt and handle. It had to be half as tall as I was. Heavy? I didn't know. Neither my mom nor dad let me touch it. I was transfixed, of course. What eleven-year-old kid in their right mind wouldn't be obsessed with such a spectacle?

One morning, while I was eating at the kitchen table during the mess of this spring-cleaning frenzy, minding my business, my parents buzzed between floors. I didn't know why my graduation from elementary school into middle school warranted such a job (or at least, I thought that was the occasion) but I think the latest shift in my life prompted something in my mom and dad that made them believe we were all due for a fresh start.

I heard my mom say, "You about ready to help, Artie?"

Artie. That was what they called me. It wasn't Artie – it was Andrea, but sometime back in grade one or two I'd been in a classroom with three other Andreas and 'Andrea M.' just hadn't stuck. Artie. It stayed that way for four or five years now.

I pretended to be busy with my cereal, flooding the dry oat rings with spoonfuls of milk until they sank. I did want to help my parents today, as I had in the previous days leading up, but I was a little pre-occupied by the fact that today marked

the end of summer, which also meant that today was the day I was set to attend Spring High Middle and leave behind all the friends that I had ever known for what my mom had coined as ‘the more prestigious of opportunities.’

The first day I spent at this school could make or break the rest of my three years here until high school. Worse – if I didn’t establish myself in a friend group pronto, then I could be setting myself up as the ‘loser outcast girl’ who didn’t have any friends and always ate her lunch alone in the hallways. I needed a plan.

“Did you at least feed Beau, Art?” I heard my dad call. His voice was rougher, raspier like there was always something scratchy in his throat.

Shoot. I thought I’d seen my family’s scruffy white schnauzer nosing insistently at his tin bowl. I slid off my chair and sifted through the cupboards until I found a large yellow baggie filled with dry, stink-smelling kibbles. As I poured half a cup into the dish, I heard the familiar, rapid pitter-patter of Beau’s paws come running in excitedly from the other room as he heard his breakfast being served.

Beau was aloof as pets went, and more cat than dog. He tended to roam his ‘grounds’ independently until feeding time or walkies, routinely surveying the neighbourhood by virtue of our upstairs window like a tiny white police dog, but there was a soft spot in his stubborn streak for yours truly. While he tended to give my parents the cold shoulder, he was my – for lack of a better word – dogged best friend, and possibly my only friend at all, if today didn’t go right as rain. No words had ever been exchanged between the pair of us, but I like to think

he saw me the same way. He'd been in my life for three or four years now, and being that I was eleven, that really felt like the bulk of it.

I patted Beau's back as he scarfed down his disgusting brown kibble entrée. My dad was passing through the doorway at this time, lugging a cardboard box stuffed with what must have been some very old scarves. As he ducked into the kitchen, I saw moths shoot up and scatter from the bundled fabric. "So, this sword..." he started to say, grinning. He knew that would get my attention. My mom was adamant that I do not go near the thing, probably for fear I'd prick a finger or something, but my dad had always been a kindred spirit. We both enjoyed our fantasy stories and movies, and he'd been the first to introduce me to 'Dungeons and Dragons.' He always played some kind of elven rogue character, where I loved a human fighter. There was something so genuine about playing an underdog character in a world where everyone was enhanced with magical abilities, racial traits, and super strength - and just being a human. A human who could kick some serious butt with a sword and shield.

I moved to the dining table to collect my half-empty cereal bowl, trying to raise an eyebrow like I'd always practiced doing. (I wasn't very good at it). "What about it?"

"Your mom thinks it belonged to a very ancient ancestor of yours," my dad said, laying it on. My dad was a kind-faced man and uncomfortably tall to where he had to bend in and out of normally sized doorways. He had thinning brunet hair and wide-brimmed golden glasses. He always wore sweater vests, even when it was warm, because of something he said to do with 'keeping up appearances.' I could see sweat starting to

prickle his brow.

“Like from medieval times?” I asked, falling for the bait.

“Exactly. A knight. You learned about knights in school, haven’t you?”

I nodded. We had learned a little. Unfortunately, learning about medieval knights had taken a backseat to ‘more relevant’ history, like the fur trade, the Charter of Rights, and other far less interesting mumbo jumbo. I was a good student, but it didn’t mean that I loved every topic and every subject I ever encountered. (I was especially reluctant about arithmetic).

“Well, your mom says that the sword is called, ‘Sanglamore.’ She received it as an inheritance when her grandfather passed. It used to belong to someone very long ago, who practiced becoming a knight. Funny, isn’t it? Some of us inherit chinaware, and some of us inherit swords. My grandparents gave me a thimble collection.”

Sanglamore. What a mouthful. I wondered if this somehow meant that I would be the next to inherit the sword and if I could somehow claim as much to deter my mother from donating the antique to our local museum. It seemed like such a cool thing to put to waste, rotting away in a glass container for ogling at by museumgoers.

“I’d like to hold a sword,” I ventured hopefully.

“Wouldn’t we all.” My dad plunked down the cardboard box over the dining table and smiled at me – a real know-it-all

smile. “Why don’t you help me get these boxes out to the front lawn? Then we can talk about a ride to school.”

He said that like he wasn’t already planning on packing me and my haul of school supplies into the back of our family van. This new school was much further than my elementary school had been, and far enough that I didn’t qualify for the bus list.

Unfortunately, that just added another tally on the side of ‘Loser-ville’ in my charts, because I didn’t have the added grace of making friends on the bus ride to school. In the deepest, most irrational parts of my brain, I worried that I’d arrive at the school grounds to find that everyone had already grouped up and left me on the outside.

The last thing I wanted to do was help with my parents’ spring-cleaning ordeal, but I managed to muster the energy to take the box my father had carried down and lug it outside along with all the rest. The slanting sun came at my face in such a way that blinded me momentarily, crossing into the realm of troublesome as I set the box down. I paused to stroke my hand across my forehead in a way that would suggest I’d been working for a lot longer and harder than I had been.

Half an hour later, it was time to go. My dad was already starting the family van up, and the driver’s side seat swung wide-open. As the car revved to life, he turned to me with a bright grin and asked, “Ready, milady?” – Like the car was a carriage and we were royals.

See, my dad had a way of always trying to make things better, even if he wasn’t really good at it. I appreciated the gesture, nonetheless, but I really hoped he would cut the

‘milady’ business by the time we reached my new school.

Sucking in an inhale that was probably too big than it needed to be, I nodded. Alright, middle school. I was totally ready.

I totally wasn’t.

\*\*\*

Spring High Middle was a warzone. Or at least it felt the part.

I had a strange feeling as my dad let me off and I stepped up onto the sidewalk leading up to what would be the place where I spent much of my next three years. Halfway up the steps to the front door, I glanced back and saw that my dad had already peeled away from the curb and was steaming his way home. So much for an exit strategy.

The halls were thick with students, scrambling to their respectively assigned homerooms. All our parents had been sent an email the night prior directing us to where we would be spending the first fifteen minutes of each day before splitting off into our individual classes. Mine was lucky number seven, which meant I’d have to hike all the way down the hall each morning and past every single student’s locker. It felt like the slow approach before the dragon’s lair.

The sixers – all of us in grade six – were the youngest kids in Spring High Middle, which I knew already put me at a disadvantage. Luckily, everyone was preoccupied enough with having to find their own respective homerooms, so I didn’t



run into much trouble and ducked into the door labelled '07' without too much trouble.

The classroom held twenty or so other children, all already present and waiting at their chosen desks. They were spitballing – literally and figuratively – and the ruckus had ascended to a level where the teacher, scribbling on the whiteboard furiously, had to verbally quiet the commotion. Standing beside her was a remarkably tall man with a bald head and sun-bronzed skin.

As I scrambled through the rows to find my way to the last available desk, kids mumbling on all sides of me, I heard the teacher call again, “If you’ll be quiet, everyone, we can get started.”

I could barely hear her over the commotion. Her frail voice cut and faltered.

Then the tall man waved his hand and, as if by magic, the children stuttered, stalled, and stopped all at once. An otherworldly silence fell over the classroom. The same man, firmly thumbing the peaked lapel on his beige suit, smiled kindly, and said, “Thank you, students. My name is Mr. Ellis, and I’ll be your principal here at Spring High Middle. Your teacher, Ms. Kurio, is very excited to be having you all in her homeroom. For some ground rules...”

He prattled. If his presence hadn’t been so authoritative, I’m sure I would have heard a collective groan from every sixth grader in that room.

Then he asked, “Why do we treat others with kindness?”

An uncertain pause. No one seemed sure whether this was the kind of question you answered out loud, in unison, because it seemed so obvious, or if we needed to put up our hands. I was that kind of kid that always stuck up my hand first. (Although, I wondered if this wasn't the time to be showing off my eagerness – yet).

“Because,” Mr. Ellis continued, drawing, “we treat others kindly not because the gesture will be returned, or that it will make everyone kind, but because we are no greater than anyone else. We don't have Spider-Man to stick up for the little guy. We're all the little guy. We stick up for each other.” He wrapped his wrist with two fingers. “My apologies, Ms. Kurio. There's another homeroom I must attend to shortly. Will you be OK to carry on?”

“Certainly,” Ms. Kurio answered, smiling. Her accent sounded vaguely foreign, but I couldn't place the origins. Her bright shade of lipstick stuck out prominently on her darker skin tone – almost too much. Was she normally so lavishly adorned? She had a pearl necklace and a knee-length green dress. Her voice seemed a little too quaint to carry across the room when she spoke like she was doing this for the first time.

“First order of business is attendance. If I mispronounce any names, please speak up to correct me. Or, if you have a name you prefer over the one that I have listed, let me know.”

She went down the list. I faded out. My last name was Martin, so I generally came about halfway through the list. When I heard my full name being announced, I threw up my right hand and asked, “Could you change that to Artie, Miss?”

Ms. Kurio raised a thinly shaped eyebrow but didn't comment. She scribbled over what was probably my name on the list and carried on. As she did, I couldn't help but overhear the three boys adjacent to and behind me chattering about my interruption.

“Did she say Artie? Like –”

“– I thought I heard tardy.”

“– hey, do you think she hears –”

Boys. I stopped myself because I realized that I was about to interrupt Ms. Kurio if I spoke up, and I really didn't want to start the school year with any kind of mark on my name. That was when I felt a poke at my shoulder.

“Hey Paul Bl-Artie. What's wrong with Andrea? Too girly?” asked the gawky boy sitting directly behind me, his weapon of choice – a pen – gripped firmly between his fingers. He smiled a smile that was absent one or two teeth.

I didn't deign to respond. This was exactly how I hadn't hoped today would go. I should've stuck with Andrea, I thought. Maybe it was time that I opted for the full version of my name over the childish abbreviation of 'Artie.'

When the time came to break up into our respective classes, I was relieved to find that at no point during the day were the three boys simultaneously assigned to any one of my classes. One of them – Chandran – was in my science class, and the other two, who I later learned were twin brothers, weaselled their way into my P.E. and social studies classes.

The twins, Arlo and Sebastian, were relentless. Where Chandran kept to himself when untethered from the rest of his raucous crew, the brothers were a force to be reckoned with. By the time the final bell rang, and I was walking my way to the meet-up spot where my dad would be waiting for me in the van, they had been in trouble for separate instances of badgering other students. Me? I just made sure to stay well out of their way. Their assigned lockers were at the end of the hallway, so I already knew that homeroom at the beginning of each day was going to be a serious obstacle. Maybe, I thought, I could arrive early each day and get through to Ms. Kurio's room before they did. Or, I could show up just in time to come into class when they were already sitting down. That would avoid any conflict, I reckoned.

As I made my way down the sidewalk, just about to cross the road, I heard feet approaching me from afar. I made the mistake of looking – oh, how I wished I hadn't. Chandran, Arlo, and Sebastian were coming up the way, clearly vying for trouble.

“It's Fartie!” Arlo – or Sebastian – exclaimed horribly, grinning. He was identical to his brother, down to his dirty blond hair, freckled face, and stupid smile where one corner of his lip perked up just enough to reveal his teeth underneath. The only difference was that one of them was taller by an inch or so, but I had yet to figure out which.

“Artie,” I correctly said softly, although I knew I shouldn't have. I wasn't a fighter – not even the verbal variety. I had rarely dealt with bullies in the past, but that was usually because I had come from a school where that sort of thing never happened.

“Same-same,” the other twin jibed. Maybe this one was Sebastian.

“Not taking the bus, Blartie? S’probably a good idea,” added Chandran, not to be left out on the jibes. He was shorter than the other two with black hair and dark eyes hooded under two thick, caterpillar-esque brows. “You’d stink it up.”

I heard the dying of an engine and dared to glance across the street. Lo and behold, my father had pulled up – impeccably timed. I turned my head, not daring to feed the fire further.

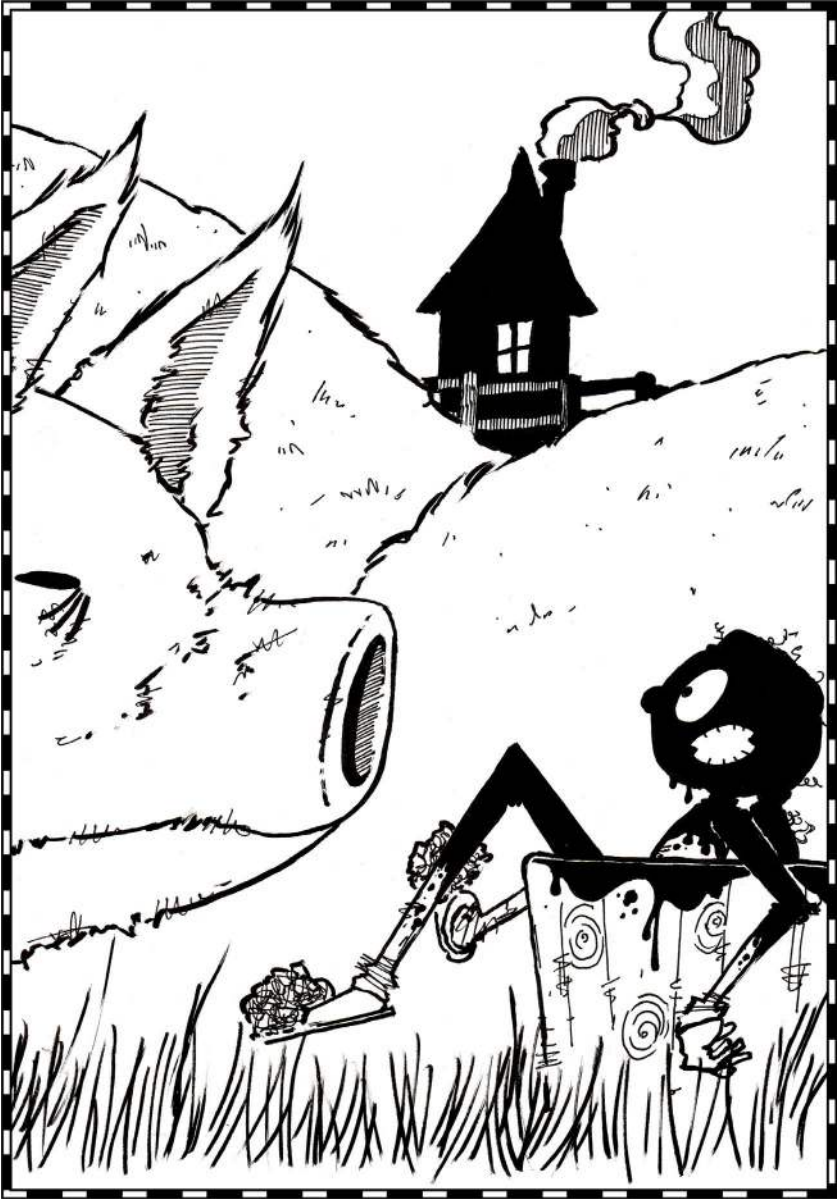
“Where are you going, Art? Hey!” Arlo (probably) tried to beckon me back. I wouldn’t be summoned – not to stand there and soak up further insults. I had to get out of there.

I dashed across the road, feeling red run into my cheeks. I bullied the passenger-side door open and threw myself into the van, chucking my backpack into the empty space below my feet. My unsuspecting dad asked a question – very likely to do with how I’d enjoyed my first day – and I couldn’t help it: I snapped at him.

“Fine!” I grunted. The sharpness in my eyes silenced him. I hated to take my frustration out on my dad – on either of my parents, really, but my shame and embarrassment from earlier had overflowed. I shied my face away from him on the ride home, unable to bring myself to apologize or sufficiently explain what had led to my outburst.

All I knew was that I didn’t want to go back to Spring High Middle – not ever. Not with those boys there. The dragons at

the end of the hallway. And here I was, without a sword or a shield.



## CHAPTER 2

# Cassandra's Pig Farm

I stood in the shadow of the attic ladder. Why did this climb suddenly seem so high? I was starting to feel a deep sense of uncertainty with what I had *thought* I'd planned to do. Now, I was beginning to lose my nerve a little.

More than anything else, I was starting to wonder how I'd never noticed we'd had an attic before. (People tend to notice these things, right? An entire additional floor to your home – possibly a mire of treasures and troves untouched – that was something people tended to pay attention to.) Its outline was stencilled into the ceiling at the end of the hallway, bordering my very own bedroom. I continued to think, if such a place had existed all my life, I would have somehow avoided looking up in this exact spot for more than ten years. The ladder was certainly new – my parents had pulled it down to quicken the whole ordeal of their cleaning endeavour earlier today – but it put a start in me how obvious the hatch's faint impression was now that I was staring at it for long enough.



A small wet nose prodded gently against my calf. I looked down to see Beau standing next to me, his curly white tail high and confident over his back. It was nice to have a friend after my experience with the three boys at school today, even if this one wasn't exactly communicative nor especially interested in any activities beyond the classic game of fetch.

“Wanna see a sword?” I asked him. His tail flitted once, imploringly. His black eyes batted, not understanding a word I'd said, but happy to be there all the same.

I was due for something good after school, especially if my parents expected me to return to Spring High Middle tomorrow morning. I didn't think I could handle another day, much less an entire year full of those boys' torment. I didn't like to cry, and I certainly hadn't on that ride home with my father in our family van, but it had been a close call.

I hooked Beau under one arm and struggled my way up the ladder. He weighed hardly more than my backpack, sacked with school supplies, but as someone who wasn't exactly what you would call 'athletically gifted' – well, I struggled.

The attic was awash in a fine layer of greying silt with several large box-shaped impressions where my parents had already removed several storage components. There were a few leftover, in part due to sentimental value and some boxes – like the one I knew contained the Sanglamore sword – simply because there was no place to put them for the time being. My mother may have mentioned its donation in passing, but not until a later date when she could realistically sacrifice the time it would take to drive to their local museum and back.

I inched nearer to the forbidden box. To be frank, I didn't know much about my family's heritage or anything in that realm. There wasn't much I'd ever latched on that had stood out to me in any one way when I'd asked before. The fact that my relation to a knight from the medieval era had gone under the radar until the reappearance of the Sanglamore sword itself, well – I couldn't trace why it was of such interest to me.

I reached into the box.

Beau observed with rounded bitter-black eyes as I clasped the weapon by its hilt and, inch-by-inch, gradually pulled it free. Small curls of packing paper came with it, twisting and bending as they floated to the floorboards. I touched the blade on its flat side. It was cool (to my surprise) despite the attic space being rather warm.

I lifted it higher. It was rather heavy – my arms physically strained to heft the thing any higher than my waist level. I felt like something so old, possibly dating back into the early 10th to 13th centuries would not be as well preserved as it was. If this was truly a surviving specimen, then it had held up well to the ravages of time.

Look, holding a sword is any eleven-year-old's dream, whether they'll admit it to you or not. (Had I known what was coming next, I might have kept it in its box.)

Suddenly, Beau loosed a curdling yelp and his claws scabbled on the floor. I heard him try to run, but something seemed to have interrupted him from doing just that.

The world glowed around me like a brilliant white, as if someone had snuck up behind me and taken a photo directly in my face with the flash switched on. I felt my stomach rise into my throat, then drop, then rise again. There was a flash of heat. All at once, I was falling.

I felt like I was dropping through a layer of clouds the way the world around me went cold and warm and back to cold too many times too fast. There was a radiant sort of blinding light, and for a moment I felt like I might have fallen faint. But fainting, I told myself, I couldn't feel like how I did now – half afraid and half solely riveted on trying to orient myself to where I could find the ground again. And then I hit.

Mud filled my mouth. It tasted rancid and clotted my airway. I shot upright, spitting out dirty clumps. I could tell through the wash of grit and brown that I was no longer at home, nor was I no longer inside any building. The outdoor air hit me like a punch. And it stank.

Before I could regroup, a gargantuan pink nose appeared in front of me and heinously snuffled, inhaling strands of my mud-sodden hair. I'd half-expected this snout to be attached to Beau, but it was too large. Much too large.

I sat up and stared at the pig, squatting in the mud before me.

I probably should have screamed. That would have been appropriate. Instead, I felt my cheeks colour and I fell back onto my backside, scuttling as far away from the swine as I could until my back firmly struck a hard surface – a fence. The pig's huge head only swayed towards me, mud and other indecipherable

crud drooling from its puffy lower lip. It was almost completely pink, all the way to its curly tail tip, apart from a black patch over its left eye.

Somehow, I had fallen into a pig pen. I didn't know where from, or how I'd gotten here, but here I was, knee-deep in sludge (and pig you-know-what.) At around the same time, I heard another ear-splitting yelp come from Beau – Beau, who had somehow appeared here with me! I felt the scramble of paws spraying up mire as he backpedalled away from the behemoth boar. I turned just in time to see his small body squeeze itself under the bottom rung of the fence and escape, leaving me alone with the snorting swine.

I swept mud off my face and tried to gather my bearings. I'd fallen – that much was obvious but from where? The sky? I tried to think of what could have triggered this seeming transformation, or perhaps transportation. The most logical conclusion I could come to was that I was asleep or daydreaming, or even hallucinating. It was hot here, sort of like spring or summer, even though it had been autumn back at home and just starting to get crisp.

Then I realized I was very much so not alone. Heavy boot steps approached.

“Hey! What are you doing here?!”

A brutish but female-sounding voice called out to me from outside the pen. I squinted and saw just the faint outline of a structure just outside the fence – likely the dwelling of whoever owned the pig. I hazily took in the outline of a tall woman examining me, with a scowl etched on her face.

“How in the world did you get in there?” she asked, coarsely. She sounded more miffed than angry. Her voice was stern but didn’t rise. She was patient, despite the suddenness of my arrival, which I figured would give a start to just about anyone.

## ENJOYING THIS SAMPLE?

To hear the rest of the story, download our e-book or [purchase the real one at amazon](#)

