

Christopher Paolini
INHERITANCE

BOOK FOUR IN THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

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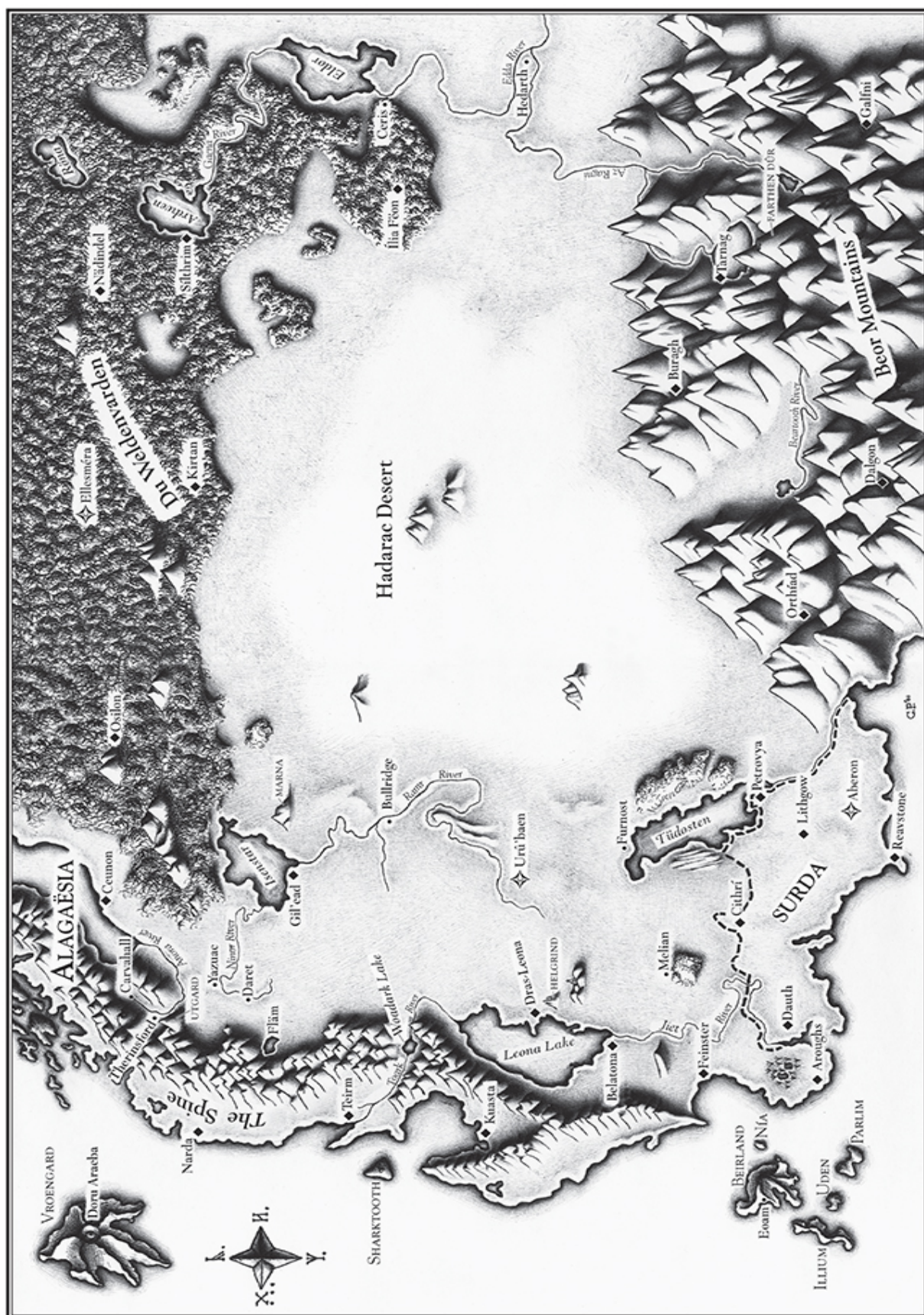
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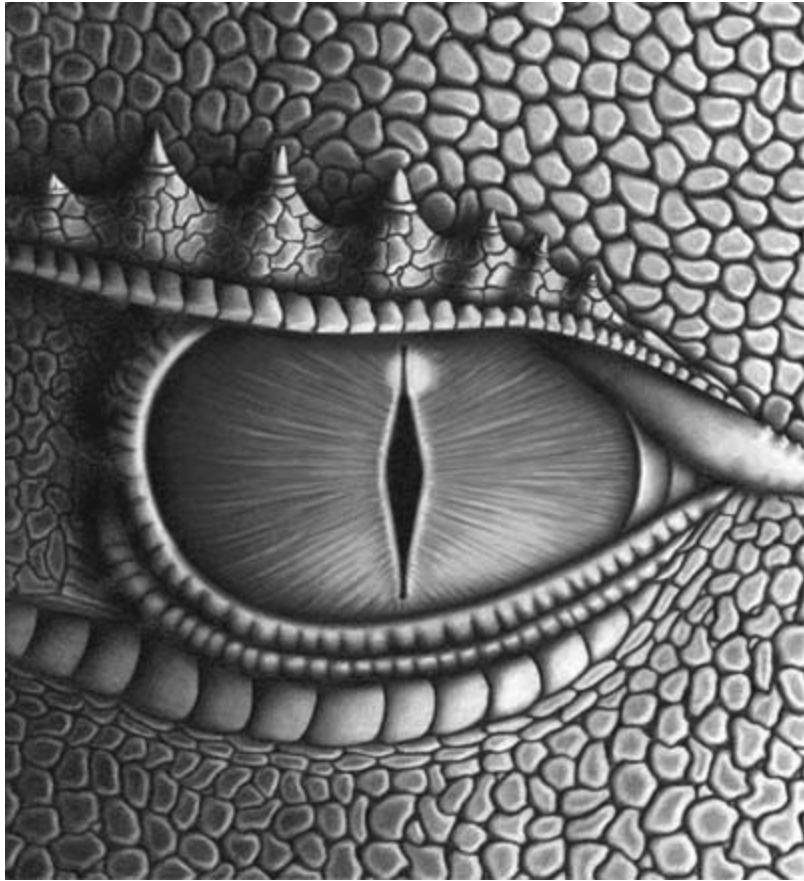
ABOUT THE BOOK

Not so very long ago, Eragon – Shadeslayer, Dragon Rider – was nothing more than a poor farm boy, and his dragon, Saphira, only a blue stone in the forest. Now, the fate of an entire civilization rests on their shoulders.

Long months of training and battle have brought victories and hope, but they have also brought heartbreaking loss. And still the real battle lies ahead: they must confront Galbatorix. When they do, they will have to be strong enough to defeat him. And if they cannot, no one can. There will be no second chances.

The Rider and his dragon have come farther than anyone dared to hope. But can they topple the evil king and restore justice to Alagaësia? And if so, at what cost?





INHERITANCE

or

THE VAULT OF SOULS

I N H E R I T A N C E

BOOK FOUR

Christopher Paolini

RHCP DIGITAL

*As always, this book is for my family.
And also for the dreamers of dreams:
the many artists, musicians, and storytellers
who have made this journey possible.*

IN THE BEGINNING:

A History of *Eragon*, *Eldest*, and *Brisingr*

In the beginning, there were dragons: proud, fierce, and independent. Their scales were like gems, and all who gazed upon them despaired, for their beauty was great and terrible.

And they lived alone in the land of Alagaësia for ages uncounted.

Then the god Helzvog made the stout and sturdy dwarves from the stone of the Hadarac Desert.

And their two races warred much.

Then the elves sailed to Alagaësia from across the silver sea. They too warred with the dragons. But the elves were stronger than the dwarves, and they would have destroyed the dragons, even as the dragons would have destroyed the elves.

And so a truce was struck and a pact was sealed between the dragons and the elves. And by this joining, they created the Dragon Riders, who kept the peace throughout Alagaësia for thousands of years.

Then humans sailed to Alagaësia. And the horned Urgals. And the Ra'zac, who are the hunters in the dark and the eaters of men's flesh.

And the humans also joined the pact with the dragons.

Then a young Dragon Rider, Galbatorix, rose up against his own kind. He enslaved the black dragon Shruikan and he convinced thirteen other Riders to follow him. And the thirteen were called the Forsworn.

And Galbatorix and the Forsworn cast down the Riders and burnt their city on the isle of Vroengard and slew every

dragon not their own, save for three eggs: one red, one blue, one green. And from each dragon they could, they took the heart of hearts—the Eldunarí—that holds the might and mind of the dragons, apart from their flesh.

And for two-and-eighty years, Galbatorix reigned supreme among the humans. The Forsworn died, but not he, for his strength was that of all the dragons, and none could hope to strike him down.

In the eighty-third year of Galbatorix's rule, a man stole from his castle the blue dragon egg. And the egg passed into the care of those who still fought against Galbatorix, those who are known as the Varden.

The elf Arya carried the egg between the Varden and the elves in search of the human or elf for whom it would hatch. And in this manner, five-and-twenty years passed.

Then, as Arya traveled to the elven city of Osilon, a group of Urgals attacked her and her guards. With the Urgals was the Shade Durza: a sorcerer possessed by the spirits he had summoned to do his bidding. After the death of the Forsworn, he had become Galbatorix's most feared servant. The Urgals slew Arya's guards, and before they and the Shade captured her, Arya sent the egg away with magic, toward one who she hoped could protect it.

But her spell went awry.

And so it came to pass that Eragon, an orphan of only five-and-ten years, found the egg within the mountains of the Spine. He took the egg to the farm where he lived with his uncle, Garrow, and his only cousin, Roran. And the egg hatched for Eragon, and he raised the dragon therein. And her name was Saphira.

Then Galbatorix sent two of the Ra'zac to find and retrieve the egg, and they slew Garrow and burnt Eragon's home. For Galbatorix had enslaved the Ra'zac, and of them only a few remained.

Eragon and Saphira set out to avenge themselves on the Ra'zac. With them went the storyteller Brom, who had once

been a Dragon Rider himself, ere the fall of the Riders. It was to Brom that the elf Arya had meant to send the blue egg.

Brom taught Eragon much about swordsmanship, magic, and honor. And he gave to Eragon Zar'roc, that had once been the sword of Morzan, first and most powerful of the Forsworn. But the Ra'zac slew Brom when next they met, and Eragon and Saphira only escaped with the help of a young man, Murtagh, son of Morzan.

During their travels, the Shade Durza captured Eragon in the city of Gil'ead. Eragon managed to free himself, and as he did, he freed Arya from her cell. Arya was poisoned and gravely wounded, so Eragon, Saphira, and Murtagh took her to the Varden, who lived among the dwarves in the Beor Mountains.

There Arya was healed, and there Eragon blessed a squalling infant by the name of Elva, blessed her to be shielded from misfortune. But Eragon spoke badly, and without realizing it, he cursed her, and his curse forced her to instead become a shield for others' misfortune.

Soon thereafter, Galbatorix sent a great army of Urgals to attack the dwarves and the Varden. And it was in the battle that followed that Eragon slew the Shade Durza. But Durza gave Eragon a grievous wound across his back, and Eragon suffered terrible pain because of it, despite the spells of the Varden's healers.

And in his pain, he heard a voice. And the voice said, *Come to me, Eragon. Come to me, for I have answers to all you ask.*

Three days after, the leader of the Varden, Ajihad, was ambushed and killed by Urgals under the command of a pair of magicians, twins, who betrayed the Varden to Galbatorix. The twins also abducted Murtagh and spirited him away to Galbatorix. But to Eragon and everyone in the Varden, it looked as if Murtagh had died, and Eragon was much saddened.

And Ajihad's daughter, Nasuada, became leader of the Varden.

From Tronjheim, the seat of the dwarves' power, Eragon, Saphira, and Arya traveled to the northern forest of Du Weldenvarden, where live the elves. With them went the dwarf Orik, nephew of the dwarf king, Hrothgar.

In Du Weldenvarden, Eragon and Saphira met with Oromis and Glaedr: the last free Rider and dragon, who had lived in hiding all the past century, waiting to instruct the next generation of Dragon Riders. And Eragon and Saphira also met with Queen Islanzadí, ruler of the elves and mother to Arya.

While Oromis and Glaedr trained Eragon and Saphira, Galbatorix sent the Ra'zac and a group of soldiers to Eragon's home village of Carvahall, this time to capture his cousin, Roran. But Roran hid, and they would not have found him if not for the hatred of the butcher Sloan. For Sloan murdered a watchman so as to let the Ra'zac into the village, where they might take Roran unawares.

Roran fought his way free, but the Ra'zac stole from him Katrina: Roran's beloved and Sloan's daughter. Then Roran convinced the villagers to leave with him, and they journeyed through the mountains of the Spine, down the coast of Alagaësia, and to the southern country of Surda, which yet existed independent of Galbatorix.

The wound upon Eragon's back continued to torment him. But during the elves' Blood-oath Celebration, wherein they celebrate the pact between the Riders and the dragons, his wound was healed by the spectral dragon the elves invoke upon the conclusion of the festival. Moreover, the apparition gave Eragon strength and speed equal to those of the elves themselves.

Then Eragon and Saphira flew to Surda, where Nasuada had taken the Varden to launch an attack against Galbatorix's Empire. There the Urgals allied themselves with the Varden, for they claimed that Galbatorix had

clouded their minds, and they would have their revenge against him. With the Varden, Eragon met again the girl Elva, who had grown with prodigious speed because of his spell. From a squalling infant to a girl of three or four she had become, and her gaze was dire indeed, for she knew the pain of all those around her.

And not far from the border of Surda, upon the blackness of the Burning Plains, Eragon, Saphira, and the Varden fought a great and bloody battle against Galbatorix's army.

In the midst of the battle, Roran and the villagers joined the Varden, as did the dwarves, who had marched after them from the Beor Mountains.

But out of the east rose a figure clad in polished armor. And he rode upon a glittering red dragon. And with a spell, he slew King Hrothgar.

Then Eragon and Saphira fought the Rider and his red dragon. And they discovered the Rider was Murtagh, now bound to Galbatorix with oaths unbreakable. And the dragon was Thorn, second of the three eggs to hatch.

Murtagh defeated Eragon and Saphira with the strength of the Eldunarí that Galbatorix had given him. But Murtagh allowed Eragon and Saphira to go free, for Murtagh still bore friendship for Eragon. And because, as he told Eragon, they were brothers, both born of Morzan's favored consort, Selena.

Then Murtagh took Zar'roc, their father's sword, from Eragon, and he and Thorn withdrew from the Burning Plains, as did the rest of Galbatorix's forces.

Upon completion of the battle, Eragon, Saphira, and Roran flew to the dark tower of stone, Helgrind, that served as the Ra'zac's hiding place. They slew one of the Ra'zac—and the Ra'zac's foul parents, the Lethrblaka—and from Helgrind rescued Katrina. And in one of the cells, Eragon discovered Katrina's father, blind and half-dead.

Eragon considered killing Sloan for his betrayal, but rejected the idea. Instead, he put Sloan into a deep sleep and told Roran and Katrina that her father was dead. Then he asked Saphira to take Roran and Katrina back to the Varden while he hunted down the final Ra'zac.

Alone, Eragon slew the last remaining Ra'zac. Then he took Sloan away from Helgrind. After much thought, Eragon discovered Sloan's true name in the ancient language, the language of power and magic. And Eragon bound Sloan with his name and forced the butcher to swear that he would never see his daughter again. Then Eragon sent him to live among the elves. But what Eragon did not tell the butcher was that the elves would repair his eyes if he repented of his treason and murder.

Arya met Eragon halfway to the Varden, and together they returned, on foot and through enemy territory.

At the Varden, Eragon learned that Queen Islanzadí had sent twelve elven spellcasters, led by an elf named Blödhgarm, to protect him and Saphira. Eragon then removed as much of his curse as he could from the girl Elva, but she retained her ability to feel the pain of others, though she no longer felt the compulsion to save them from their misery.

And Roran married Katrina, who was pregnant, and for the first time in a long while, Eragon was happy.

Then Murtagh, Thorn, and a group of Galbatorix's men attacked the Varden. With the help of the elves, Eragon and Saphira were able to hold them off, but neither Eragon nor Murtagh could defeat the other. It was a difficult battle, for Galbatorix had enchanted the soldiers so that they felt no pain, and the Varden suffered many casualties.

Afterward, Nasuada sent Eragon to represent the Varden among the dwarves while they chose their new king. Eragon was loath to go, for Saphira had to stay and protect the Varden's camp. But go he did.

And Roran served alongside the Varden, and he rose through their ranks, for he proved himself a skilled warrior and a leader of men.

While Eragon was among the dwarves, seven of them tried to assassinate him. An investigation revealed that the clan Az Sweldn rak Anhûin was behind the attack. The clanmeet continued, however, and Orik was chosen to succeed his uncle. Saphira joined Eragon for the coronation. And during it, she fulfilled her promise to repair the dwarves' cherished star sapphire, which she had broken during Eragon's battle with the Shade Durza.

Then Eragon and Saphira returned to Du Weldenvarden. There Oromis revealed the truth about Eragon's heritage: that he was not, in fact, Morzan's son but Brom's, though he and Murtagh did share the same mother, Selenia. Oromis and Glaedr also explained the concept of the Eldunari, which a dragon may choose to disgorge while living, though this must be done with great care, for whosoever owns the Eldunari may use it to control the dragon it came from.

While in the forest, Eragon decided that he needed a sword to replace Zar'roc. Remembering the advice he had gotten from the werecat Solembum during his journeys with Brom, Eragon went to the sentient Menoa tree in Du Weldenvarden. He spoke with the tree, and the tree agreed to give up the brightsteel beneath its roots in exchange for an unnamed price.

Then the elf smith Rhunön—who had forged all of the Riders' swords—worked with Eragon to make a new blade for him. The sword was blue, and Eragon named it Brisingr—"fire." And the blade burst into flame whenever he spoke its name.

Then Glaedr gave trust of his heart of hearts to Eragon and Saphira, and they made their way back to the Varden, while Glaedr and Oromis joined the rest of their kind as they attacked the northern part of the Empire.

At the siege of Feinster, Eragon and Arya encountered three enemy magicians, one of whom was transformed into the Shade Varaug. And with Eragon's help, Arya slew Varaug.

As they did, Oromis and Glaedr fought Murtagh and Thorn. And Galbatorix reached out and took command of Murtagh's mind. And with Murtagh's arm, Galbatorix struck down Oromis, and Thorn slew Glaedr's body.

And though the Varden were victorious at Feinster, Eragon and Saphira mourned the loss of their teacher, Oromis. But still the Varden continued, and even now they march deeper into the Empire, toward the capital, Urû'baen, wherein sits Galbatorix, proud, confident, and disdainful, for his is the strength of the dragons.

INTO THE BREACH

THE DRAGON SAPHIRA roared, and the soldiers before her quailed.

“With me!” shouted Eragon. He lifted Brisingr over his head, holding it aloft for all to see. The blue sword flashed bright and iridescent, stark against the wall of black clouds building in the west. “For the Varden!”

An arrow whizzed past him; he paid it no mind.

The warriors gathered at the base of the slope of rubble Eragon and Saphira were standing upon answered him with a single, full-throated bellow: “The Varden!” They brandished their own weapons and charged forward, scrambling up the tumbled blocks of stone.

Eragon turned his back to the men. On the other side of the mound lay a wide courtyard. Two hundred or so of the Empire’s soldiers stood huddled within. Behind them rose a tall, dark keep with narrow slits for windows and several square towers, the tallest of which had a lantern shining in its upper rooms. Somewhere within the keep, Eragon knew, was Lord Bradburn, governor of Belatona—the city the Varden had been fighting to capture for several long hours.

With a cry, Eragon leaped off the rubble toward the soldiers. The men shuffled backward, although they kept their spears and pikes trained on the ragged hole Saphira had torn in the castle’s outer wall.

Eragon’s right ankle twisted as he landed. He fell to his knee and caught himself on the ground with his sword hand.

One of the soldiers seized the opportunity to dart out of formation and stab his spear at Eragon’s exposed throat.

Eragon parried the thrust with a flick of his wrist, swinging Brisingr faster than either a human or an elf could follow. The soldier's face grew slack with fear as he realized his mistake. He tried to flee, but before he could move more than a few inches, Eragon lunged forward and took him in the gut.

With a pennant of blue and yellow flame streaming from her maw, Saphira jumped into the courtyard after Eragon. He crouched and tensed his legs as she struck the paved ground. The impact shook the entire courtyard. Many of the chips of glass that formed a large, colorful mosaic in front of the keep popped loose and flew spinning upward like coins bounced off a drum. Above, a pair of shutters banged open and closed in a window of the building.

The elf Arya accompanied Saphira. Her long black hair billowed wildly around her angular face as she sprang off the pile of rubble. Lines of splattered blood striped her arms and neck; gore smeared the blade of her sword. She alit with a soft scuff of leather against stone.

Her presence heartened Eragon. There was no one else whom he would rather have fighting alongside him and Saphira. She was, he thought, the perfect shield mate.

He loosed a quick smile at her, and Arya responded in kind, her expression fierce and joyous. In battle, her reserved demeanor vanished, replaced by an openness that she rarely displayed elsewhere.

Eragon ducked behind his shield as a rippling sheet of blue fire appeared between them. From beneath the rim of his helm, he watched as Saphira bathed the cowering soldiers in a torrent of flames that flowed around them, yet caused them no harm.

A line of archers on the battlements of the castle keep let fly a volley of arrows at Saphira. The heat above her was so intense that a handful of the arrows burst into fire in midair and crumbled to ash, while the magical wards Eragon had placed around Saphira deflected the rest. One

of the stray arrows rebounded off Eragon's shield with a hollow *thud*, denting it.

The plume of flame suddenly enveloped three of the soldiers, killing them so quickly, they did not even have time to scream. The other soldiers clustered in the center of the inferno, the blades of their spears and pikes reflecting flashes of bright blue light.

Try though she might, Saphira could not so much as singe the survivors. At last she abandoned her efforts and closed her jaws with a definitive *snap*. The fire's absence left the courtyard startlingly quiet.

It occurred to Eragon, as it had several times before, that whoever had given the soldiers their wards must have been a skilled and powerful magician. *Was it Murtagh?* he wondered. *If so, why aren't he and Thorn here to defend Belatona? Doesn't Galbatorix care to keep control of his cities?*

Eragon ran forward and, with a single stroke of Brisingr, lopped off the tops of a dozen polearms as easily as he had flicked off the seed heads of barley stalks when he was younger. He slashed the nearest soldier across the chest, slicing through his mail as if it were the flimsiest of cloth. A fountain of blood arose. Then Eragon stabbed the next soldier in line and struck the soldier to his left with his shield, knocking the man into three of his companions and bowling them over.

The soldiers' reactions seemed slow and clumsy to Eragon as he danced through their ranks, cutting them down with impunity. Saphira waded into the fray to his left—batting the soldiers into the air with her enormous paws, lashing them with her spiked tail, and biting and killing them with a shake of her head—while, to his right, Arya was a blur of motion, every swing of her sword signaling death for another servant of the Empire. When Eragon spun around to evade a pair of spears, he saw the fur-

covered elf Blödhgarm close behind, as well as the eleven other elves whose task it was to guard him and Saphira.

Farther back, the Varden poured into the courtyard through the gap in the castle's outer wall, but the men refrained from attacking; it was too dangerous to go anywhere near Saphira. Neither she nor Eragon nor the elves required assistance in disposing of the soldiers.

The battle soon swept Eragon and Saphira apart, carrying them to opposite ends of the courtyard. Eragon was not concerned. Even without her wards, Saphira was more than capable of defeating a large group of twenty or thirty humans by herself.

A spear thudded against Eragon's shield, bruising his shoulder. He whirled toward the thrower, a big, scarred man missing his lower front teeth, and sprinted at him. The man struggled to draw a dagger from his belt. At the last moment, Eragon twisted, tensed his arms and chest, and rammed his sore shoulder into the man's sternum.

The force of the impact drove the soldier backward several yards, whereupon he collapsed, clutching at his heart.

Then a hail of black-fletched arrows fell, killing or injuring many of the soldiers. Eragon shied away from the missiles and covered himself with his shield, even though he was confident his magic would protect him. It would not do to become careless; he never knew when an enemy spellcaster might fire an enchanted arrow that could breach his wards.

A bitter smile twisted Eragon's lips. The archers above had realized that their only hope of victory lay in somehow killing Eragon and the elves, no matter how many of their own they had to sacrifice to do so.

You're too late, thought Eragon with grim satisfaction. *You should have left the Empire while you still had the chance.*

The onslaught of clattering arrows gave him the chance to rest for a moment, which he welcomed. The attack on the city had begun at daybreak, and he and Saphira had been at its forefront the whole while.

Once the arrows ceased, Eragon transferred Brisingr to his left hand, picked up one of the soldiers' spears, and heaved it at the archers forty feet above. As Eragon had discovered, spears were difficult to throw accurately without substantial practice. It did not surprise him, then, when he missed the man he was aiming for, but he *was* surprised when he missed the entire line of archers on the battlements. The spear sailed over them and shattered against the castle wall overhead. The archers laughed and jeered, making rude gestures.

A swift movement at the periphery of his vision caught Eragon's attention. He looked just in time to see Arya launch her own spear at the archers; it impaled two who were standing close together. Then Arya pointed at the men with her sword and said, "Brisingr!" and the spear burst into emerald-green fire.

The archers shrank from the burning corpses and, as one, fled from the battlements, crowding through the doorways that led to the upper levels of the castle.

"That's not fair," Eragon said. "I can't use that spell, not without my sword flaring up like a bonfire."

Arya gazed at him with a faint hint of amusement.

The fighting continued for another few minutes, whereupon the remaining soldiers either surrendered or tried to flee.

Eragon allowed the five men in front of him to run away; he knew they would not get far. After a quick examination of the bodies that lay sprawled around him to confirm that they were indeed dead, he looked back across the courtyard. Some of the Varden had opened the gates in the outer wall and were carrying a battering ram through the street leading to the castle. Others were assembling in

ragged lines next to the keep door, ready to enter the castle and confront the soldiers within. Among them stood Eragon's cousin, Roran, gesturing with his ever-present hammer while he issued orders to the detachment under his command. At the far end of the courtyard, Saphira crouched over the corpses of her kills, the area around her a shambles. Beads of blood clung to her gemlike scales, the spots of red in startling contrast to the blue of her body. She threw back her spiky head and roared her triumph, drowning out the clamor of the city with the ferocity of her cry.

Then, from inside the castle, Eragon heard the rattle of gears and chains, followed by the scrape of heavy wooden beams being drawn back. The sounds attracted everyone's gaze to the doors of the keep.

With a hollow *boom*, the doors parted and swung open. A thick cloud of smoke from the torches within billowed outward, causing the nearest of the Varden to cough and cover their faces. From somewhere in the depths of the gloom came the drumming of iron-clad hooves against the paving stones; then a horse and rider burst forth from the center of the smoke. In his left hand, the rider held what Eragon first took to be a common lance, but he soon noticed that it was made of a strange green material and had a barbed blade forged in an unfamiliar pattern. A faint glow surrounded the head of the lance, the unnatural light betraying the presence of magic.

The rider tugged on the reins and angled his horse toward Saphira, who began to rear onto her hind legs, in preparation for delivering a terrible, killing blow with her right front paw.

Concern clutched at Eragon. The rider was too sure of himself, the lance too different, too eerie. Though her wards ought to protect her, Eragon was certain Saphira was in mortal danger.

I won't be able to reach her in time, he realized. He cast his mind toward the rider, but the man was so focused on his task that he did not even notice Eragon's presence, and his unwavering concentration prevented Eragon from gaining more than superficial access to his consciousness. Withdrawing into himself, Eragon reviewed a half-dozen words from the ancient language and composed a simple spell to stop the galloping war-horse in his tracks. It was a desperate act—for Eragon knew not if the rider was a magician himself or what precautions he might have taken against being attacked with magic—but Eragon was not about to stand by idly when Saphira's life was at risk.

Eragon filled his lungs. He reminded himself of the correct pronunciation of several difficult sounds in the ancient language. Then he opened his mouth to deliver the spell.

Fast as he was, the elves were faster still. Before he could utter a single word, a frenzy of low chanting erupted behind him, the overlapping voices forming a discordant and unsettling melody.

"Mäe—" he managed to say, and then the elves' magic took effect.

The mosaic in front of the horse stirred and shifted, and the chips of glass flowed like water. A long rift opened up in the ground, a gaping crevice of uncertain depth. With a loud scream, the horse plunged into the hole and pitched forward, breaking both of its front legs.

As horse and rider fell, the man in the saddle drew back his arm and threw the glowing lance toward Saphira.

Saphira could not run. She could not dodge. So she swung a paw at the dart, hoping to knock it aside. She missed, however—by a matter of inches—and Eragon watched with horror as the lance sank a yard or more into her chest, just under her collarbone.

A pulsing veil of rage descended over Eragon's vision. He drew upon every store of energy available to him—his

body; the sapphire set in the pommel of his sword; the twelve diamonds hidden in the belt of Beloth the Wise wrapped round his waist; and the massive store within Aren, the elf ring that graced his right hand—as he prepared to obliterate the rider, heedless of the risk.

Eragon stopped himself, however, when Blödhgarm appeared, leaping over Saphira's left foreleg. The elf landed on the rider like a panther pouncing on a deer, and knocked the man onto his side. With a savage twist of his head, Blödhgarm tore open the man's throat with his long white teeth.

A shriek of all-consuming despair emanated from a window high above the open entrance to the keep, followed by a fiery explosion that ejected blocks of stone from within the building, blocks that landed amid the assembled Varden, crushing limbs and torsos like dry twigs.

Eragon ignored the stones raining on the courtyard and ran to Saphira, barely aware of Arya and his guards accompanying him. Other elves, who had been closer, were already clustering around her, examining the lance that projected from her chest.

"How badly—Is she—" Eragon said, too upset to complete his sentences. He yearned to speak to Saphira with his mind, but as long as enemy spellcasters might be in the area, he dared not expose his consciousness to her, lest his foes spy on his thoughts or assume command over his body.

After a seemingly interminable wait, Wyrden, one of the male elves, said, "You may thank fate, Shadeslayer; the lance missed the major veins and arteries in her neck. It hit only muscle, and muscle we can mend."

"Can you remove it? Does it have any spells that would keep it from being—"

"We shall attend to it, Shadeslayer."

Grave as priests gathered before an altar, all the elves, save Blödhgarm, placed the palms of their hands on

Saphira's breast and, like a whisper of wind ghosting through a stand of willow trees, they sang. Of warmth and growth they sang, of muscle and sinew and pulsing blood they sang, and of other, more arcane subjects. With what must have been an enormous effort of will, Saphira held her position throughout the incantation, though fits of tremors shook her body every few seconds. A thread of blood rolled down her chest from the shaft embedded within.

As Blödhgarm moved to stand next to him, Eragon spared a glance for the elf. Gore matted the fur on his chin and neck, darkening its shade from midnight blue to solid black.

"What was that?" Eragon asked, indicating the flames still dancing in the window high above the courtyard.

Blödhgarm licked his lips, baring his catlike fangs, before answering. "In the moment before he died, I was able to enter the soldier's mind, and through it, the mind of the magician who was assisting him."

"You killed the magician?"

"In a manner of speaking; I forced him to kill himself. I would not normally resort to such an extravagant display of theatrics, but I was ... aggravated."

Eragon started forward, then checked himself when Saphira uttered a long, low moan as, without anyone touching it, the lance began to slide out of her chest. Her eyelids fluttered and she took a series of quick, shallow breaths while the last six inches of the lance emerged from her body. The barbed blade, with its faint nimbus of emerald light, fell to the ground and bounced against the paving stones, sounding more like pottery than metal.

When the elves stopped singing and lifted their hands from Saphira, Eragon rushed to her side and touched her neck. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her how frightened he had been, to join his consciousness with hers. Instead, he settled for looking up into one of her brilliant blue eyes

and asking, "Are you all right?" The words seemed paltry when compared with the depth of his emotion.

Saphira replied with a single blink, then lowered her head and caressed his face with a gentle puff of warm air from her nostrils.

Eragon smiled. Then he turned to the elves and said, "Eka elrun ono, älfya, wiol förn thornessa," thanking them in the ancient language for their help. The elves who had participated in the healing, including Arya, bowed and twisted their right hands over the center of their chests in the gesture of respect peculiar to their race. Eragon noticed that more than half of the elves assigned to protect him and Saphira were pale, weak, and unsteady on their feet.

"Fall back and rest," he told them. "You'll only get yourselves killed if you stay. Go on, that's an order!"

Though Eragon was sure they hated to leave, the seven elves responded with, "As you wish, Shadeslayer," and withdrew from the courtyard, striding over the corpses and rubble. They appeared noble and dignified, even when at the limits of their endurance.

Then Eragon joined Arya and Blödhgarm, who were studying the lance, a strange expression on both their faces, as if they were uncertain how they ought to react. Eragon squatted next to them, careful not to allow any part of his body to brush against the weapon. He stared at the delicate lines carved around the base of the blade, lines that seemed familiar to him, although he was not sure why; at the greenish haft, which was made of a material neither wood nor metal; and again at the smooth glow that reminded him of the flameless lanterns that the elves and the dwarves used to light their halls.

"Is it Galbatorix's handiwork, do you think?" Eragon asked. "Maybe he's decided he would rather kill Saphira and me instead of capturing us. Maybe he believes we've actually become a threat to him."

Blödhgarm smiled an unpleasant smile. "I would not deceive myself with such fantasies, Shadeslayer. We are no more than a minor annoyance to Galbatorix. If ever he truly wanted you or any of us dead, he only needs to fly forth from Urû'baen and engage us directly in battle, and we would fall before him like dry leaves before a winter storm. The strength of the dragons is with him, and none can withstand his might. Besides, Galbatorix is not so easily turned from his course. Mad he may be, but cunning also, and above all else, determined. If he desires your enslavement, then he shall pursue that goal to the point of obsession, and nothing save the instinct of self-preservation shall deter him."

"In any event," said Arya, "this is not Galbatorix's handiwork; it is ours."

Eragon frowned. "Ours? This wasn't made by the Varden."

"Not by the Varden, but by an elf."

"But—" He stopped, trying to find a rational explanation. "But no elf would agree to work for Galbatorix. They would rather die than—"

"Galbatorix had nothing to do with this, and even if he did, he would hardly give such a rare and powerful weapon to a man who could not better guard it. Of all the instruments of war scattered throughout Alagaësia, this is the one Galbatorix would least want us to have."

"Why?"

With a hint of a purr in his low, rich voice, Blödhgarm said, "Because, Eragon Shadeslayer, *this* is a Dauthdaert."

"And its name is Niernen, the Orchid," said Arya. She pointed at the lines carved into the blade, lines that Eragon then realized were actually stylized glyphs from the elves' unique system of writing—curving, intertwined shapes that terminated in long, thornlike points.

"A Dauthdaert?" When both Arya and Blödhgarm looked at him with incredulity, Eragon shrugged, embarrassed by