

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ERAGON*

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MURTAGH

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THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

Eragon

Eldest

Brisingr

Inheritance

The Fork, the Witch, and the Worm:

Tales from Alagaësia, Volume 1

FRACTALVERSE

To Sleep in a Sea of Stars

Unity

Fractal Noise



MURTAGH

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CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI

Alfred A. Knopf
New York

Argument



Behold, the land of Alagaësia, vast and verdant, full of mystery. Here stand mountains that scrape the stars, forests as fathomless as an ocean, deserts scorched to barrenness, and more besides. Throughout, one will find diverse peoples and creatures, from hardy humans to long-lived elves to deep-dwelling dwarves to war-wedded Urgals. And above all else, dragons—bright and brilliant and terrifying in their ancient glory.

For the past century, King Galbatorix reigned as tyrant over most of the human-settled lands and was a terror to the other races as well. By his will, the dragons were broken, and their numbers much reduced until only few remained.

Those brave folk who opposed Galbatorix fled into the hinterlands, where they came to call themselves the Varden. There they dwelt, with little hope for victory, until the dragon Saphira hatched for the human Eragon.

Together—and under the wise leadership of the Lady Nasuada—they marched against Galbatorix's Empire.

Now the king is slain, and the war to overthrow him is ended, and the land entered a state of renewal.

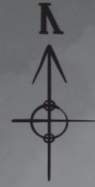
Yet even in this peace, shadows stir, and there are whispers of strange happenings about the edges of Alagaësia, and of these, one man seeks to know the truth....

*To hold the center amid a storm,
To cleave or cling or seize the standard?
'Tis a question troubles even
The broadest mind. A stand of aspen
Grows as tall and strong as the lonely
Oak. Honor demands, duty compels,
And love cajoles, but the self insists.*

—*Quandaries* 14–20
Atten the Red

CEUNON





Stormcloud Isle

BAY OF MUNDOR



CHAPTER I



Maddentide

Will you go alone?

Murtagh gave Thorn a quizzical look. The red dragon sat crouched next to him atop the rocky hill where they had landed. In the fading dusk, the sparkle of the dragon's scales was subdued, tamped down like coals in a banked fire, waiting for a breath of wind to flare back to brilliance.

"What? You'd go with me?"

A wolfish grin split Thorn's jaws, showing rows of sharp white teeth, each as long as a dagger. *Why not? They already fear us. Let them scream and scurry at our arrival.*

The dragon's thoughts resonated like a bell in Murtagh's mind. He shook his head as he unbuckled his sword, Zar'roc, from his waist. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Thorn's jaws hung open wider, and his burred tongue ran across his chops. *Maybe.*

Murtagh could just picture Thorn stalking down a narrow street, scraping the sides of buildings with his armored shoulders, breaking beams and shutters and cornices while folks fled before him. Murtagh knew how that would end, with fire and blood and a flattened circle of destruction.

"I think you'd best wait here."

Thorn shuffled his velvet wings and coughed deep in his throat. His way of laughing. *Then perhaps you should use magic to change the color of my scales, and we could pretend to be Eragon and Saphira. Wouldn't that be fine sport?*

Murtagh snorted as he laid Zar'roc across a patch of dry grass. He'd been surprised to discover that Thorn had a trenchant sense of humor. It hadn't been readily apparent when they'd been bonded, partly because of Thorn's youth and partly because of...attending circumstances.

For a moment, Murtagh's mood darkened.

No? Well then, if you change your mind—

"You'll be the first to know."

Mmm. With the tip of his snout, Thorn nudged the sword. *I wish you would take your fang. Your claw. Your sharpened affliction.*

Murtagh knew Thorn was nervous. He always was when Murtagh left, even for a short while. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

A puff of pale smoke rose from the dragon’s flared nostrils. *I don’t trust that shark-mouthed skulker.*

“I don’t trust anyone. Except for you.”

And her.

Murtagh faltered as he went to one of the saddlebags that hung along Thorn’s side. An image of Nasuada’s almond eyes flashed before him. Cheekbones. Teeth. Parts and pieces that failed to sum the whole. A memory of her scent, accompanied by a yearning and a sorrow, an aching absence for what might have been and now was lost.

“Yes.” He couldn’t have lied to Thorn even if he wanted to. They were too closely joined for that.

The dragon was kind enough to return the conversation to safer ground. *Do you think Sarros has scented anything of interest?*

“It would be better if he hasn’t.” Murtagh excavated a ball of brown twine from the saddlebag.

But if he has? Do we fly toward the storm or away?

A thin smile stretched Murtagh’s lips. “That depends on how violent the storm.”

It may not be obvious. The wind can lie.

He measured a length of twine. “Then we’ll continue sniffing about until it becomes obvious.”

Hmm. As long as we can still change course if need be.

“One hopes.”

Thorn’s near eye—a deep-set ruby that gleamed with a fierce inner light—remained fixed on Murtagh as he cut the twine and used it to tie Zar’roc’s crossguard to belt and scabbard so the crimson sword couldn’t slide free. Then he placed Zar’roc in the saddlebag, where it would be safe and hidden, and returned to stand before Thorn.

“I’ll be back before dawn.”

The dragon hunkered low on his haunches, as if braced to take a blow. He kneaded the ground with his curved claws, like a great cat kneading a blanket, and small rocks popped and cracked with explosive force between his talons. A low hum, almost a whine, came from his chest.

Murtagh laid a hand on Thorn’s jagged forehead and strove to impress a sense of calm and confidence on him. Dark chords of distress echoed in the depths of Thorn’s mindscape.

“I’ll be fine.”

If you need me—

“You’ll be there. I know.”

Thorn bent his neck, and his claws grew still. From his mind, Murtagh felt a hard—if brittle—resolve.

They understood each other.

“Be careful. Watch for any who might try to sneak up on you.”

Another bone-vibrating hum emanated from the center of Thorn’s chest.

Then Murtagh pulled the hood of his cloak over his head and started down the side of the hill, picking a path between jags of solitary stone and clusters of prickly hordebrush.

He looked back once to see Thorn still crouched atop the crest of the hill, watching with slitted eyes.



A man with a dragon was never truly alone.

So thought Murtagh as he headed west with a long, loose-limbed stride. No matter how many leagues separated him and Thorn, a part of them would always remain connected, even if the distance kept them from hearing each other’s thoughts or feeling each other’s emotions. Magic of the oldest kind joined them, and never would they be quit of it until one of them died.

Yet magic was not their only bond. The experiences he and Thorn had shared—the hardships, the mental attacks, the torture—had been so intense, so singular in nature, Murtagh didn’t think that anyone else could truly understand what they had endured.

There was a certain comfort in the knowledge. Wherever he went, and whatever he did, Thorn would always be there for him. What’s more, Thorn would understand. On occasion disapprove, perhaps, but even then with empathy and compassion. And the same was true in reverse.

There was also a sense of confinement to the knowledge. Never could they escape one another. Not really. But Murtagh didn’t mind. He was well sick of being alone.

The land sloped away beneath him until, after several miles, it arrived at the Bay of Fundor. There, at the water’s edge, lay the city of Ceunon: a rough-walled collection of buildings, dark with shadow, save for the occasional lamp or candle—warm gems set against the encroaching night. Rows of fishing boats with furled sails floated alongside the stone wharves, and with them, three deep-sea vessels with tall masts and broad hulls, ships capable of surviving passage around the northern tip of the peninsula that separated the bay from the open ocean.

Across the bay stood the mountains of the Spine, sawtoothed and ridge-backed behind a bank of obscuring haze, and the salt water between appeared

deep and cold and unfriendly.

Grey clouds lay low upon bay and land alike, and a muffled stillness softened the sound of Murtagh's steps.

A cold touch on his hand caused him to look up.

Thick flakes of snow drifted downward: the first snow of the year. He opened his mouth and caught a flake on his tongue; it melted like a pleasant memory, fleeting and insubstantial.

Even this far north, it was unseasonably early for snow. Maddentide had been two days past, and that marked the first run of bergenhed, the silvery, hard-scaled fish that invaded the bay every autumn. The shoals were so large and dense you could nearly walk on them, and Murtagh had heard that, during their height, the fish would throw themselves onto the decks of the boats, driven to insanity by the intensity of their spawning urge.

There was a lesson in that, he felt.

Snow didn't usually arrive until a month or two after Maddentide. For it to be this early meant a bitter, brutal winter was on the way.

Still, Murtagh enjoyed the soft fall of flakes, and he appreciated the coolness of the air. It was the perfect temperature for walking, running, or fighting.

Few things were worse than struggling for your life while so hot as to pass out.

His pulse quickened, and he tossed back his hood and broke into a quick trot, feeling the need to move faster.

He kept a steady pace as he ran onto the flats surrounding Ceunon, past creeks and copses, over stone fences and through fields of barley and rye ripe for harvest. No one marked his passage save a hound at a farmhouse gate, who gave him a perfunctory howl.

And the same to you, Murtagh thought.

His connection with Thorn thinned as he ran, but it never vanished. Which was a comfort for Murtagh. He felt as nervous as Thorn when they were apart, although he worked to hide the feeling, not wanting to worsen the dragon's concern.

Murtagh would have preferred to land closer to Ceunon. If he needed help, every second would count. However, the risk of someone spotting Thorn was too great. Best to keep their distance and avoid a potential confrontation with local forces.

Murtagh rolled his neck. Being on his feet—lungs full of clean, crisp air, pulse pounding at a quick, sustainable beat—felt good after spending most of the day on dragonback. His knees and hips ached slightly; he wasn't bowlegged like so many of the cavalymen of Galbatorix's army, but if he continued to spend

most of his time on Thorn, it could yet happen. Was that an inevitable part of being a Dragon Rider?

A crooked smile lifted his lips.

The thought of far-famed Riders—especially the elven ones—walking around with legs as bent as those of a twenty-year veteran lancer was amusing. But he doubted that had been the case. The Riders likely had a way to counter the effect of being in the saddle, and at any rate, once a dragon was large enough, it became impossible to sit on like a horse. Shruikán—Galbatorix’s mountainous black dragon—had been like that. Instead of a saddle, the king had installed a small pavilion on the hump of Shruikán’s enormous shoulders.

Murtagh shivered and stopped by a lightning-struck tree. A sudden chill washed his arms and legs.

He took a deep breath. And another. Galbatorix was dead. Shruikán was dead. They had no hold on him or anyone still living.

“We’re free,” he whispered.

From Thorn came a sense of comforting warmth, like a distant embrace.

He pulled his hood back over his head and continued on.



When Murtagh arrived at the coastal road south of Ceunon, he paused behind a nearby hedgerow and poked his head over the top. To his relief, the road was empty.

He pushed through the hedge and hurried north, toward the wide, slumped bulk of the city. The faint light that penetrated the clouds had nearly vanished, and he wanted to be in Ceunon before full dark fell.

Deep wagon tracks ridged the well-worn road, and pats of cow dung forced him to switch lanes every few steps. The snow was gathering on the ground in a soft, thin layer that reminded him of the decorative lace that ladies would wear to high events at court.

He slowed as he approached Ceunon’s outer wall. The fortifications were stout and well built, if not so high as those of Teirm or Dras-Leona. The blocks of rude-surfaced blackstone were mortared without gaps, and the wall had a properly angled batter at the bottom, which he noted with approval.

Not that any of it mattered if you were facing a dragon or Rider.

A pair of watchmen leaned on their pikes on either side of Ceunon’s southern gate. Murtagh glanced at the battlements and machicolations above. No archers were posted on the wall walk. *Sloppy.*

The watchmen straightened as he neared, and Murtagh let his cloak fall open to show that he was unarmed.

A *clink* sounded as the watchmen crossed their pikes. “Who goes?” asked the man on the left. He had a face like a winter rutabaga, with a fat nose cobwebbed with burst blood vessels and a yellow bruise under his right eye.

“Just a Maddentide traveler,” said Murtagh in an easy tone. “Come to purchase smoked bergenhed for my master.”

The man on the right gave him a suspicious once-over. He looked as if he could be the cousin of fat-nose. “Says you. Where do you hail from, traveler? An’ what name might you use?”

“Tornac son of Tereth, and I hail from Ilirea.”

Mention of the capital put some stiffness into the watchmen’s backs. They glanced at each other, and then fat-nose hacked and spat on the ground. The gob melted a patch of snow. “That’s an awful long way on foot w’ no pack an’ no horse fer a few bushels of fish.”

“It would be,” Murtagh agreed, “but my horse broke her leg last night. Stepped in a badger hole, poor thing.”

“An’ you left yer saddle?” said the right-hand man.

Murtagh shrugged. “My master pays well, but he’s not paying me to lug a saddle and bags halfway across Alagaësia, if you follow.”

The watchmen smirked, and fat-nose said, “Aye. We follow. Have you lodging secured? Coin fer a bed?”

“Coin enough.”

Fat-nose nodded. “Aight. We’re not wanting strangers sleep’n on our streets. We find you mak’n use of ’em, we’ll see the backside of you. We find you mak’n trouble, out you go. From midnight t’ the fourth watch, the gates are closed, an’ they’ll not open for aught but Queen Nasuada herself.”

“That seems reasonable,” said Murtagh.

Fat-nose grunted, and the watchmen moved their pikes aside. Murtagh gave them a respectful nod and passed between them to enter the city.



Murtagh scratched his chin as he moved deeper into Ceunon.

He had grown a beard at the beginning of the year, to help conceal his identity. He thought it was working; so far no one had accosted him. The beard was itchy, though, and he wasn’t willing to let it get long enough that the hair became soft and pliable. Untidiness bothered him.

Trimming the beard with his dagger had proved impractical, and he was reluctant to resort to magic, as shaping the beard with nothing more than a word and an imagined outcome was an uncertain prospect. Besides, he didn’t trust a

spell to remove the hairs but not his skin, and there was a craftsman-like satisfaction in attending to the task by hand.

He'd bought a pair of iron clippers from a tinker outside Narda. They worked well enough, as long as he kept them sharp, oiled, and free of rust. Even so, he found maintaining the beard almost as much trouble as shaving.

Maybe he would remove it after leaving Ceunon.

The main street was a muddy strip twice the width of the southern road. The buildings were half-timbered, cruck-framed structures with lapstrake siding between the wooden beams. The beams themselves were stained black with pine tar, which protected them against salt from the bay, and many were decorated with carvings of sea serpents, birds, and Svartlings. Iron weather vanes sat idle atop every shingled, steep-sided roof, and a carved dragon head decorated the peak of most houses.

Murtagh forced himself to stop scratching.

He could have recited the whole history of the city, from its founding until the present. He knew that the carvings were in the style commonly called *kysk*, which had been invented by some anonymous craftsperson over a century past. That the blackstone in the outer walls came from a quarry not two dozen miles northeast. And that the good folk of Ceunon had a deathly fear of the elves' forest, Du Weldenvarden, and went to great lengths to keep the ranks of dark-needed pinetrees from encroaching on their fields. All that and more he knew.

But to what end? He'd received the finest education in the land, and then some, and yet his life was now one of rough travel, where sharpness of hearing and quickness of hand meant more than any scholarly learning. Besides, understanding what *was* and what one should *do* were two very different things. He had seen that with Galbatorix. The king had known more than most—more even than some of the oldest elves or dragons—but in the end, his knowledge had brought with it no wisdom.

Few people were out on the streets. It was late, and the days following Maddentide were full of feasting, and most of the citizens were inside, celebrating another successful harvest of bergenhed.

A trio of laborers staggered past, stinking of cheap beer and fish guts. Murtagh held his course, and they diverted around him. Once they turned a corner, the main thoroughfare again fell silent, and he didn't see another person until he crossed the city's market square and a pair of feathered merchants burst out of a warehouse door, arguing vociferously. A short, bearded figure followed them into the square, and his voice bellowed loudest of all.

A dwarf! Murtagh ducked his head. Ever since the death of Galbatorix and the fall of the Empire over a year ago, dwarves had become increasingly common throughout human-settled lands. Most were traders selling stones and metals and

weapons, but he'd also seen dwarves working as armed guards (short as they were, their prowess in battle was not to be underestimated). Murtagh couldn't help but wonder how many of them were acting as eyes and ears for their king, Orik, who sat upon the marble throne in the city-mountain of Tronjheim.

The backlit dwarf seemed to look his way, and Murtagh reeled slightly—another Maddentide drunk on his way home.

The ruse worked, and the dwarf returned his attention to the squabbling merchants.

Murtagh hurried on. The spread of the dwarves had made travel even more difficult for him and Thorn. Murtagh had nothing against the dwarves as a race or culture—indeed, he quite liked Orik, and their feats of architecture were astonishing. However, they held a deep and abiding hatred of him for killing King Hrothgar, Orik's predecessor...and uncle. And dwarves were known for the tenacity with which they held their grudges.

Could he ever make amends to Orik, his clan, and the dwarves as a whole? Were it possible, Murtagh had yet to think of the means.

Unfortunately, his situation with the dwarves wasn't unique. The elves maintained a similar animosity toward him and Thorn, on account of the role they had played in killing Oromis and Glaedr, the last surviving Rider and dragon from before Galbatorix's rise to power.

Murtagh could hardly blame them.

The average human was no fonder of them, as it was widely believed they had betrayed the Varden to Galbatorix during the war. Traitors earned only contempt from both sides in a conflict, and rightly so—Murtagh himself had no sympathy for snake-tongued oathbreakers like his father—but that did not make it easy to be falsely branded as one.

No safe harbor for us, thought Murtagh. A hard, humorless smile formed on his lips. So it had been his whole life. Why should it be any different now?

The stench of fish, seaweed, and salt grew stronger as he moved along the wharves and past rows of drying racks set beside the street.

He glanced up. Midnight was still three or four hours away. Plenty of time to conclude his business and depart Ceunon. After so long spent out of doors, in the wild reaches of the land, the closeness of the buildings felt uncomfortably constraining. In that, he was becoming more and more like Thorn.

Music and voices sounded ahead of him, and he saw the common house that was his destination: the Fulsome Feast. The low, dark-beamed building had crystal windows set in its front-facing wall—a rare luxury in this part of the world—and petals of yellow light spread across the paving stones on the street: a welcome invitation to enter, rest, and make merry.

Sarros had picked the place as the location of their next meeting, and that alone made Murtagh wary. Still, the Fulsome Feast seemed innocuous enough—just one more disheveled, hard-run establishment like so many others. Aside from the crystal windows, the common house could have been in any seaside town or village throughout the land. But then, Murtagh had learned long ago that appearances were rarely to be trusted.

He steeled himself against the noise to follow and pushed open the door.

CHAPTER II



The Fulsome Feast

The inn was a warm, homey place, neat and well tended. Fresh-cut rushes covered the floor, the tables were clean, and the casks, bottles, and mugs behind the polished bar were arranged in mannered rows. A crackling fire warmed the great room from behind a blackstone hearth free of soot, and by the fire, a goateed man with extravagant, double-belled sleeves was plucking at a lute.

Whatever he sang was hard to hear over the clamor of conversation rising from the packed room. Maddentide was over, and the folk of Ceunon were happy of it.

The innkeep was a short, balding man with a dirty apron and a sweaty forehead who bustled from table to table, delivering drinks and plates of smoked herring. Not, Murtagh noted, smoked bergenhed.

They must have eaten enough of it to last the year, he thought.

He shook a scattering of snow from his cape and moved toward the one open table by the fire. As he sat, the innkeep hurried over and said, “Sigling Orefsson at yer service, Master...”

“Tornac son of Tereth.”

Sigling wiped his hands on his apron. “Honored, t’ be sure. An’ what might I get fer you?”

“Something hot from your kitchen. My stomach is stuck to my spine.” Murtagh wasn’t about to miss an opportunity for a hot meal, not when *he* didn’t have to cook it for once.

“An’ fer drink?”

“A mug of ale. Not too strong, if you please.” And Murtagh pressed three copper coins into the innkeep’s hand.

Sigling was already moving toward the back room. “Won’t take more ’n two shakes of a lamb’s tail, Master Tornac.”

Master Tornac. Hearing the name said back to him always gave Murtagh pause. He hoped his old fencing instructor wouldn’t have minded

him using it, given how tarnished Murtagh's reputation was at the moment. He only meant to honor Tornac's memory, same as when he'd given the name to his stallion after Tornac died during their escape from Urû'baen....

Annoyance caused Murtagh's brows to narrow. He never *had* found out what happened to the horse when Galbatorix had arranged for him to be ambushed and kidnapped in Tronjheim.

He looked around the room. The dockworkers, fishers, and other inhabitants of Ceunon were a boisterous lot. Many an absent father returned from weeks at ship and sea to celebrate the Maddentide bounty. They seemed friendly enough. Still, Murtagh made sure he'd worked out the shortest path to the front and back entrances.

It never hurt to be prepared.

Sarros was nowhere to be seen, but Murtagh wasn't concerned. The trader was the one who had decided on the day of their meeting, and Murtagh knew Sarros would sooner cut off his own hand as miss a chance to earn more of Murtagh's coin.

A pair of laborers—masons, if their leather aprons and thick, mortar-smearred arms were anything to go by—bumped into the chairs on the other side of Murtagh's table. They pulled the chairs out, and he said, "Sorry, but I'm expecting a friend." And he smiled in what he hoped was an inoffensive way.

One mason looked like he wanted to argue, while the other seemed to see something he didn't like in Murtagh's face. He tugged on his friend's arm. "Comeon, Herk. Lemme get you a beer a' the bar."

"Ah, fine. Aight. Hands off." But his friend kept tugging on his arm until the other man followed him toward the bar.

Murtagh relaxed slightly. He really didn't want to get caught in a meaningless brawl.

Then a name leaped out at him from the general hubbub of the common room: "*—Eragon—*"

Murtagh stiffened and twisted in his seat as he searched for the source of the word. There. The goateed troubadour plucking on his lute. At first the words of his song were hard to make out, but Murtagh watched the man's lips and concentrated, and by and by, he made sense of them.

And the troubadour sang:

—and so to dread Urû'baen.

Rejoice! Rejoice! The dauntless Dragon Rider flew to fight,

*To free our land from danger and fright.
Then mighty Eragon faced the king in bloody conquest,
In a great and terrible contest.
And with flaming blade and blinding light,
He slew that horrid tyrant, that ageless blight,
Galbatorix, bane of dragons and Riders alike.*

Murtagh's lip curled, and he felt an urge to throw a boot at the man. Not only were the verses badly composed and badly sung—no bard would have dared sing so off-key at court for fear of being beaten—but they were *wrong*.

“He would have lost if not for me,” Murtagh muttered, thinking of Eragon. And yet, aside from those who had been present in Galbatorix's throne room at the end, no one knew and no one cared. He and Thorn had quit the capital following the king's death, preferring to remove themselves from civilization rather than contend with the hostility of an ignorant public.

It had been the right choice. Murtagh still believed that. But it meant they lost the opportunity to defend themselves in the court of popular opinion. And if Eragon or Nasuada or the elves' queen, Arya, had spoken in defense of him or Thorn, to explain the role they had played in killing Galbatorix and Shruikan, word of it had yet to reach Murtagh. The fact sat badly with him. Perhaps the truth needed more time to spread among the common folk. Or perhaps Eragon, Nasuada, and Arya were content to let the world think the worst of him, to use him as a convenient scapegoat, a monster in the dark that might focus people's fears and leave the three of them free to govern as they pleased.

The thought made his stomach twist.

Either way, as far as most folk were concerned, Eragon was the greatest hero who had ever lived, and none could stand before him.

Murtagh snorted softly. *Hardly*. But there was no fighting a song or story once it became popular. So often the truth bent to what felt right. At least the troubadour hadn't bothered to describe Eragon's supposed triumph over Murtagh and Thorn. At that, Murtagh really did think he would have thrown his boot.

“An' there you go, Master Tornac!” proclaimed Sigling as he slid a plate and mug under his nose. “You need aught else, you shout my name, an' I'll be back right quick-like.”

Before Murtagh could thank him, the innkeep rushed off to tend another table.

Murtagh picked up the wrought-iron fork on the side of the plate and started eating. Roast mutton and turnips with half a loaf of black rye bread on the side. Humble fare, but it tasted better than anything he'd cooked in the past three months. And though, as he'd requested, the ale was hardly stronger than water, that was all right too. He wanted his wits about him in Ceunon.

While he ate, he balanced the plate on his knee and leaned back in the chair, stretching out his legs as he would before a campfire.

It felt strange to be around so many other people. He'd gotten used to being alone with Thorn over the past twelvemonth. To the sound of the wind and the calls of the birds. To hunting his food and being hunted. Talking to the watchmen and Sigling—and even the masons—had been like trying to play a badly tuned instrument.

He sopped up the juice from the mutton with a piece of rye bread and popped it in his mouth.

The door to the inn swung open, and a young girl rushed in. Her dark hair was done up nicely in a pair of curled plaits, her dress was embroidered with bright patterns, and she looked as if she'd been crying.

Murtagh watched as the girl moved across the great room, light as feather down. She slipped around the end of the bar, and Sigling said something to her. Standing one next to the other, Murtagh saw a family resemblance. The girl had the innkeep's mouth and chin.

The girl reappeared around the end of the bar, carrying a plate loaded with bread, cheese, and an apple. She lifted the plate over her head and, with practiced skill, wove between the crowded tables until she arrived in front of the great stone fireplace. Without asking, she plopped herself into the chair across the table from Murtagh.

He opened his mouth and then closed it.

The girl was no older than ten and perhaps as young as six (he had never been good at judging children's ages).

She tore a piece off the heel of bread on her plate and chewed with determined ferocity. Murtagh watched, curious. It had been years since he'd been around a child, and he found himself unexpectedly fascinated. *We all start like this*, he thought. So young, so pure. Where did it all go wrong?

The girl looked as if she were about to cry again. She bit into the apple and made a noise of frustration as the stem caught in the gap between her front teeth.

“You seem upset,” Murtagh said in a mild tone.

The girl scowled. She plucked out the stem and flung it into the fire. “It’s all Hjordis’s fault!” She had the same strong northern accent as her father.

Murtagh glanced around. He still didn’t see Sarros, so he decided it was safe to talk a bit. But carefully. Words could be as treacherous as a bear trap.

“Oh?” He put down his fork and turned in his seat to better look at her. “And who is this Hjordis?”

“She’s the daughter of Jarek. He’s the earl’s chief mason,” said the girl, sullen.

Murtagh wondered if the earl was still Lord Tarrant, or if the elves had installed someone else in his place when they captured the city. He’d met Tarrant at court years ago: a tall, self-contained man who rarely spoke more than a few words at a time. The earl had seemed decent enough, but anyone who stayed in Galbatorix’s good graces for years on end had ice in their heart and blood on their hands.

“I see. Does that make her important?”

The girl shook her head. “It makes her *think* she’s important.”

“What did she do to upset you, then?”

“Everything!” The girl took a savage bite out of the apple and chewed hard and quick. Murtagh saw her wince as she bit the inside of her cheek. A film of tears filled her eyes, and she swallowed.

Murtagh sipped of the ale. “Most interesting.” He dabbed a fleck of foam off his mustache. “Well then, is it a tale you feel like telling? Perhaps talking about it will make you feel better.”

The girl looked at him, suspicion in her pale blue eyes. For a moment, Murtagh thought she was going to get up and leave. Then: “Papa wouldn’t want me t’ bother you.”

“I have some time. I’m just waiting for a certain associate of mine who, alas, happens to be habitually late. If you wish to share your tale of woe, then please, consider me your devoted audience.”

As he spoke, Murtagh found himself reverting to the language and phrasing he would have used at court. The formality of it felt safer, and

besides, it amused him to talk to the girl as if she were a noble lady.

She bounced her feet off the legs of the chair. “Well...I’d like t’ tell you, but I can’t possibly ’less we’re friends.”

“Is that so? And how do we become friends?”

“You have t’ tell me your name! Silly!”

Murtagh smiled. “Of course. How foolish of me. In that case, my name is Tornac.” And he held out his hand.

“Essie Siglingsdaughter.”

Her palm and fingers were startlingly smooth and small against his own as they shook. Murtagh felt the need to be gentle, as if he were touching a delicate flower.

“Very nice to meet you, Essie. Now then, what seems to be bothering you?”

Essie stared at the partially eaten apple in her hand. She sighed and put it back on the plate. “It’s all Hjordis’s fault.”

“So you said.”

“She’s always being mean t’ me an’ making her friends tease me.”

Murtagh assumed a solemn expression. “That’s not good at all.”

The girl shook her head, eyes bright with outrage. “No! I mean... sometimes they tease me anyway, but, um, Hjordis—When she’s there, it gets really bad.”

“Is that what happened today?”

“Yes. Sort of.” She broke off a piece of cheese and nibbled on it, seeming lost in thought. Murtagh waited patiently. He decided that, as with horses, gentleness would go a lot further than force.

Finally, in a low voice, Essie said, “ ’Fore harvest, Hjordis started bein’ nicer to me. I thought—I thought maybe things were going t’ be better. She even invited me t’ her house.” Essie gave him a shy, sideways glance. “It’s right by the castle.”

“Impressive.” He was starting to understand. The richer tradesmen always cozied up to the nobles, like ticks to dogs. Envy was a universal human trait (and the other races weren’t exempt from it either).

Essie nodded. “She gave me one of her ribbons, a yellow one, an’ said that I could come t’ her Maddentide party.”

“And did you?”

Another bob of her head. “It—it was today.” Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked furiously.

Concerned, Murtagh produced a worn kerchief from inside his vest. He might be living like a beast in the wilderness, but he still had *some* standards. “Here now.”

The girl hesitated. But then the tears spilled down her cheeks, and she grabbed the kerchief and wiped her eyes. “Thank you, mister.”

Murtagh allowed himself another small smile. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been called *mister*, but you’re very welcome. I take it the party didn’t go well?”

Essie scowled and pushed the kerchief back toward him, though she still seemed to be on the verge of crying. “The party was fine. It was Hjordis. She got mean again, after, and...and”—she took a deep breath, as if searching for the courage to continue—“an’ she said that if I din’t do what she wanted, she would tell her father not t’ use our inn during the solstice celebration.” She peered at Murtagh, as if to check whether he was following. “All the masons come here t’ drink an’—” she hiccupped, “they drink a lot, an’ it means they spend stacks an’ stacks of coppers.”

Her story filled Murtagh with a host of uncomfortable memories of the mistreatment he’d suffered at the hands of the older children while growing up in Galbatorix’s court. Before he’d learned to be careful, before Tornac had taught him how to protect himself.

Serious, he put his plate on the table and leaned toward Essie. “What did she want you to do?”

Essie dropped her gaze and bounced her muddy shoes against the chair. When she spoke again, the words came tripping out in a crowded rush: “She wanted me t’ push Carth into a horse trough.”

“Carth is a friend of yours?”

She nodded, miserable. “He lives on the docks. His father is a fisher.”

Murtagh felt a sudden and intense dislike for Hjordis. He’d known plenty like her at court: horrible, petty people bent on improving their position and making life miserable for everyone beneath them.

“So he wouldn’t get invited to a party like this.”

“No, but Hjordis sent her handmaid t’ bring him t’ the house an’...” Essie stared at him, her expression fierce. “I din’t have no choice! If I hadn’t pushed him, then she would have told her father not t’ come t’ the Fulsome Feast.”

“I understand,” Murtagh said, forcing a soothing tone despite a rising sense of anger and injustice. It was a familiar aggravation. “So you pushed

your friend. Were you able to apologize to him?"

"No," said Essie, and her face crumpled. "I—I ran. But everyone saw. He won't want t' be friends with me anymore. No one will. Hjordis just meant t' trick me, an' I *hate* her." She grabbed the apple and took another quick bite. Her teeth clacked together.

Murtagh started to respond, but Sigling came by on his way to deliver a pair of mugs to a table along the wall. He gave Essie a disapproving look. "My daughter isn't mak'n a nuisance of herself, is she, Master Tornac? She has a bad habit of pester'n guests when they're try'n t' eat."

"Not at all," said Murtagh, smiling. "I've been on the road for far too long, with nothing but the sun and the moon for company. A bit of conversation is exactly what I need. In fact—" He reached into the pouch under his belt and passed two silver pieces to the innkeep. "Perhaps you can see to it that the tables next to us remain clear. I'm expecting an associate of mine, and we have some, ah, business to discuss."

The coins disappeared into Sigling's apron, and he bobbed his head. "Of course, Master Tornac." He glanced at Essie again, his expression concerned, and then continued on his way.

For her part, the girl seemed somewhat abashed.

"Now then," said Murtagh, stretching his legs out toward the fire. "You were telling me your tale of woe, Essie Siglingsdaughter. Was that the full accounting?"

"That was it," she said in a small voice.

He picked up the fork from his plate and began to twirl it between his fingers. The girl watched, entranced. "Things can't be as bad as you think. I'm sure if you explain to your friend—"

"No," she said, firm. "He won't understand. He won't trust me again. They'll hate me fer it."

A cutting edge formed in Murtagh's voice. "Then maybe they aren't really your friends."

She shook her head, braids swinging. "They are! You don't understand!" And she brought her fist down on the arm of the chair in an impatient little gesture. "Carth is...He's really nice. Everyone likes him, an' now they won't like me. You wouldn't know. You're all big an'...an' old."

Murtagh raised his eyebrows. "You might be surprised what I know. So they won't like you. What are you going to do about it?"

“I’m going to run away,” blurted the girl. The moment she realized what she’d said, she gave him a panicked look. “Don’t tell Papa, please!”

Murtagh took another sip of ale and smoothed his beard while his mind raced. The conversation had gone from amusing to deadly serious. If he said the wrong thing, he could send Essie careening down a path she would regret—and he knew *he* would regret it if he didn’t try to talk her back onto the straight and narrow.

Careful now, he thought. “And where would you go?”

“South,” said Essie firmly. She’d obviously already considered the question. “Where it’s warm. There’s a caravan leaving tomorrow. The foreman comes here. He’s nice. I can sneak out, an’ then ride with ’em to Gil’ead.”

Murtagh picked at the tines of his fork. “And then?”

The girl sat up straighter. “I want t’ visit the Beor Mountains an’ see the dwarves! They made our windows. Aren’t they pretty?” She pointed.

“They certainly are.”

“Have you ever visited the Beor Mountains?”

“I have,” said Murtagh. “Once, long ago.”

Essie looked at him with renewed interest. “Really? Are they as tall as everyone says?”

“So tall the peaks aren’t even visible.”

She leaned back in the chair, tilting her head toward the ceiling as if imagining the sight. “How wonderful.”

A snort escaped him. “If you don’t count being shot at with arrows, then yes.... You do realize, Essie Siglingsdaughter, that running away won’t solve your problems here.”

“Of course not.” *Silly*, her expression said. “But if I leave, then Hjordis can’t bother me anymore.”

The utter conviction of her tone nearly made Murtagh laugh. He hid his amusement by taking a long drink from his mug, and by the time he finished, he’d regained his composure. “Or, and this is just a suggestion, you could try to fix the problem instead of running away.”

“It can’t be fixed,” she said, stubborn.

“What about your parents? I’m sure they would miss you terribly. Do you really want to make them suffer like that?”

Essie crossed her arms. “They have my brother and my sister and Olfa. He’s only two.” She pouted. “They wouldn’t miss me.”

“I very much doubt that,” said Murtagh. “Besides, think what you did with Hjordis. You helped protect the Fulsome Feast. If your parents understood the sacrifice you made, I’m sure they would be very proud.”

“Uh-huh,” said Essie. She didn’t seem convinced. “There wouldn’t have been a problem if it wasn’t fer me. *I’m* the problem. If I go away, everything will be aight.” And she picked up the apple core and threw it into the fireplace.

A whirl of sparks flew up the chimney, and the sizzle of water boiling into steam sounded above the crackling of the logs.

The girl’s sleeve had ridden up, and on her left wrist, Murtagh saw a twisted scar, red and raised and thick as a rope. His lips pulled back from his teeth, and in an overly casual tone, he said, “What is that?”

“What?” she said.

“There, on your arm.”

Essie looked down, and a flush darkened her cheeks and ears. “Nothing,” she mumbled, tugging the cuff down.

“May I?” Murtagh asked as kindly as he could, and held out a hand.

The girl hesitated, but at last she nodded, timid, and let him take her arm.

She turned her head away as he gently pulled back the cuff of her sleeve. The scar crawled up her forearm all the way to her elbow, a long, angry testament to pain. The sight of it put cold fire in Murtagh’s veins, and he felt a sympathetic pang from his own furious mark, on his back.

He lowered Essie’s sleeve. “That...is a very impressive scar. You should be proud of it.”

She looked back at him, confusion lurking in her eyes. “Why? It’s ugly, an’ I hate it.”

A faint smile lifted his lips. “Because a scar means you survived. It means you’re tough and hard to kill. It means you *lived*. A scar is something to admire.”

“You’re wrong,” said Essie. She pointed at a pot with painted bluebells on the mantel. A long crack ran from the lip of the pot to the base. “It just means you’re broken.”

“Ah,” said Murtagh in a soft voice. “But sometimes, if you work very hard, you can mend a break so that it’s stronger than before.”

The girl crossed her arms, tucking her left hand into her armpit. “Hjordis an’ the others always make fun of me fer it,” she mumbled. “They

say my arm is as red as a snapper, an' that I'll never get a husband because of it."

"And what do your parents say?"

Essie made a face. "That it din't matter. But that's not true, is it?"

Murtagh inclined his head. "No. I suppose it isn't. Your parents are doing their best to protect you, though."

"Well, they can't," she said, and huffed.

No, they probably can't, he thought, his mood darkening even further.

She glanced at him and seemed to shrink in her seat. "Do you have any scars?" she asked, soft, uncertain.

A humorless laugh escaped him. "Oh yes." He pointed at the small white mark on his chin, a gap in his otherwise full beard. "This one is only a few months old. A friend of mine gave it to me by accident while we were playing around, the big oaf." The tip of a scale on Thorn's left foreleg had caught Murtagh's chin, tearing the skin. It hadn't been a serious injury, but it had hurt badly and bled worse. Then he said, "What happened to your arm?"

Essie picked at the edge of the table. "It was an accident," she mumbled. "A pot with hot water fell on my arm."

Murtagh's eyes narrowed. "It just *fell* on you?"

The girl nodded.

"Mmm." Murtagh stared into the fire, at the jumping sparks and throbbing embers. He didn't believe the girl. Accidents were common enough, but the way she was acting hinted at something worse.

His jaw flexed, teeth clenched. A warning throb sank down the root of his bottom right molar. There were many injustices he was willing to tolerate, but a mother or father hurting their child wasn't one of them.

He glanced toward the bar. Maybe he needed to have a talk with Sigling, to put the fear of a Dragon Rider in the man.

Essie shifted. "Where are you from?"

"A long, long way from here."

"In the south?"

"Yes, in the south."

She kicked her feet against the chair again. "What's it like there?"

Murtagh inhaled slowly and tilted his head back so he was looking at the ceiling. The fire in his blood still burned. "It depends where you go. There are hot places and cold places, and places where the wind never stops

blowing. Forests seemingly without end. Caves that burrow into the deepest parts of the earth, and plains full of vast herds of red deer.”

“Are there monsters?”

“Of course.” He returned his gaze to her. “There are always monsters. Some of them even look like humans.... I ran away from home myself, you know.”

“You did?”

He nodded. “I was older than you, but yes. I ran, but I didn’t escape what I was running from.... Listen to me, Essie. I know you think leaving will make everything better, but—”

“There you are, Tornac of the Road,” said a sly, slithering voice that Murtagh recognized at once. *Sarros*.

The trader stepped forward from between the nearby tables. He was thin and stooped, with a patched cloak draped over his shoulders and ragged clothes underneath. Rings glittered on his fingers. He smelled of wet fur, and there was an unsettling, catlike slink to his steps.

Murtagh suppressed a curse. Of all the times for the man to show up...“Sarros. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“The reaches are dangerous these days,” said Sarros. He pulled out the empty chair from the table, shifted it until it was exactly between Essie and Murtagh, and sat facing them both.

The girl edged away in her seat, wary.

Murtagh glanced around the room. He spotted six men who had entered the inn while he wasn’t paying attention. They were rough-looking fellows, but not like the local fishermen; they wore furs and leathers and had cloaks wrapped about them in a way that told Murtagh they were concealing swords strapped to their belts.

Sarros’s guards. Murtagh was annoyed that he had lost track of his surroundings while talking with Essie. He knew better than that. A lapse in focus was a good way to end up dead or in prison.

By the bar, Sigling kept close watch on the newcomers. The innkeep pulled out a leather-wrapped truncheon and laid it next to his washcloth as a silent warning.

Despite Murtagh’s reservations as to Sigling’s character, he approved of his caution. The man was no fool, that was for sure.

His attention returned to Sarros as the trader pointed one long finger at Essie. “We have business to discuss. Send the youngling away.”

No, I don't think so, decided Murtagh. He hadn't finished talking with the girl, and in any case, keeping her around might have a civilizing influence on Sarros. The man was uncultured at best and downright offensive at worst.

"I have nothing to hide," Murtagh said. "She can stay." He glanced at her. "If you're interested. You might learn something useful of the world by it."

Essie shrank back in her chair, but she didn't leave.

A long hiss sounded between Sarros's teeth as he shook his head. "Foolish, Wanderer. Do as you wish, then. I'll not argue, even if you put your foot crosswise."

Murtagh let his gaze harden. "No, you won't. Tell me, then, what have you found? It's been three months, and—"

Sarros waved a hand. "Yes, yes. Three months. I told you; the reaches are dangerous. But I found word of what you seek. Better than word, I found *this*—" From the leather wallet on his belt, he produced a fist-sized chunk of black *something* that he thumped down on the table.

Murtagh leaned forward, as did Essie.

The something was a piece of rock, but there was a deep shine to it, as if a smoldering coal were buried in the center. A strong, sulfurous smell clung to the rock, as pungent as a rotting egg.

Essie sniffed and wrinkled her nose.

A coil of tension formed in Murtagh's chest. He'd hoped he was wrong. He'd hoped the whispers and warnings had meant nothing.... *Beware the deeps, and tread not where the ground grows black and brittle and the air smells of brimstone, for in those places evil lurks.* So the ancient dragon Umaroth had said to him ere he and Thorn had left on their self-imposed exile.

Murtagh had prayed that Umaroth was mistaken, that there wasn't some new danger rising in the unsettled regions of the land.

He should have known better than to question the wisdom of a dragon as old as Umaroth.

Without taking his gaze off the rock, he said, "What exactly is that?"

Sarros lifted his shoulders. "Suspensions of shadows are all I have, but you sought the unusual, the out-of-place, and that there doesn't fit in the normal frame."

"Were there more, or..."

Sarros nodded. "I am told. A whole field scattered with stones."

The coil tightened in Murtagh's chest. "Black and burnt?"

"As if seared by fire, but with no sign of flame or smoke."

Essie said, "Where is it from?"

Sarros smiled, and the girl shied back. As with so many of the horse folk from the central plains of Alagaësia, Sarros's teeth were filed to points.

For Murtagh, the sight was an unpleasant reminder of another, even less pleasant man with similar teeth. *Durza*.

"Well now," said Sarros, "that there is the nub of it, youngling. Yes indeed." Murtagh reached for the rock, and Sarros dropped a hand over the shiny chunk, caging it behind his fingers. "No," he said. "Coin first, Wanderer."

Displeased, Murtagh fished out a small leather pouch from the inner pocket of his cloak. The pouch clinked as he put it on the table.

Sarros's jagged smile widened. He tugged loose the pouch's drawstring to reveal a gleam of gold coins inside. Essie sucked in a sharp breath. Murtagh doubted she'd ever seen a whole crown before.

"Half now," said Murtagh. "And the rest when you tell me where you found that." He poked the rock with the tip of a finger.

A strange choking sound came from Sarros. Laughter. Then he said, "Oh no, Wanderer. No indeed. I think instead you should give us the rest of your coin, and perhaps then we'll let you keep your head."

Across the common room, the fur-clad men slipped hands under their cloaks, and Murtagh saw the hilts of swords, half hidden beneath.

He wasn't surprised, but he *was* disappointed. Was Sarros really breaking their deal for nothing more than greed?

How common.

Essie spotted the swords, and her eyes widened. *Blast*. Before Murtagh could intervene, she leaned forward and was about to say or do something loud when Sarros drew a thin-bladed knife and pressed it against her throat.

"Ah-ah," he said. "Not a peep from you, youngling, or I'll open your throat from stem to stern."

CHAPTER III



Fork and Blade

The loaded spring in Murtagh's chest felt fit to burst. At that moment, he ceased to think of Sarros as a person. Rather, the man became a *thing*, a *problem* to be solved, quickly and without hesitation.

Essie froze at the touch of the trader's knife. It was the smartest action she could have taken.

A spike of distant concern reached Murtagh as Thorn prepared to fly to his aid. Murtagh responded with a fierce *No! Don't!* The last thing he needed was for the dragon to come barging into Ceunon.

Doing his best to keep his emotions hidden, Murtagh said, "Why the turn of face, Sarros? I'm paying you good money."

"Yesss. That's the point." Sarros leaned in closer, lips pulled wide. His breath stank of rotting meat. "If you are willing to pay thiswise-much for hints and rumors, then you must have more coin than sense. *Much* more coin."

Stupid, Murtagh thought. He should have realized that spreading around so much gold might cause a problem. It wasn't a mistake he would make again.

The truth was, he'd already spent nearly all of the coin he'd brought with him when he and Thorn fled into the wilderness. He'd been greedy for information, and now that gluttonous desire was costing him more than money.

He muttered a single, harsh curse and then said, "This isn't a fight you want. Tell me the location, take the gold you're owed, and no one has to get hurt."

"What fight?" Sarros cackled. "You have no sword on you. We are seven, and you are one. The coin is ours whether you wish it or not." The steel bit a tiny amount into Essie's neck, and she tensed. "See? I make the choice easy for you, Wanderer. Hand over the rest of your gold, or the youngling here will pay with blood."

The girl kept her eyes fixed on Murtagh. He could feel her desperate fear, and he knew she was waiting—hoping—for him to help her. She seemed so terribly young, so terribly vulnerable, and an overpowering affinity welled up within him.

Resolve girded him.

He smiled faintly. Had he really expected to visit Ceunon without getting wound up in some form of trouble? *Oh well*. So it was.

Then Murtagh gathered his mental reserves, focused his will, and poured his fierce intent into a single line of words drawn from the ancient language—the language of truth and power and magic.

“Thrífa sem knífr un huídr sem konr.”

The air between them seemed to shiver. That and nothing more.

Murtagh blinked, caught by surprise. The spell had failed. The trader had wards protecting him? And strong ones too, for the strength of the spell would have cut through any lesser charm. It was an unexpected and entirely unwelcome development.

Sarros chuckled again. “Foolish. Very foolish.” With his free hand, he pulled a bird-skull amulet from under his jerkin. “Do you see this, Wanderer? The witch-woman Bachel charmed a necklace for each of us. Your weirding ways won’t help you now. We’re protected against all evilness.”

“Is that so?” said Murtagh, deadly quiet. The trader had just gone from a nuisance to a genuine danger. Moderation was no longer a desirable option. Not if one wanted to win, and Murtagh had long since decided that he was willing to go to the furthest extremes in order to avoid—again—losing.

Then he spoke the Word, and such a word it was. It rang like a bell, and in the sound were contained all possible meanings, for it was the most powerful word of all: the name of the ancient language. The Name of Names. The most secret of all spells, known only to him, Eragon, and Arya. With it he could break or alter any spell. With it he could change the very meaning of the language itself.

In the Name of Names, he imbued three intents: a desire to remove Sarros’s wards, a wish to seize and hold the man’s knife, and, last of all, a command to prohibit the people who heard the Word from remembering it.

A dull silence followed. Everyone in the common room looked at him, many of the guests with a dazed expression, as if they’d just woken from a dream.

Essie stared wide-eyed, fear seemingly forgotten.

To Murtagh’s astonishment, Sarros appeared entirely unaffected. Concern chilled his core. The only way to defy the Name of Names was with wordless magic—magic cast without the guiding safety of the ancient language. It was the riskiest and wildest form of spellcasting. Even the most skilled of enchanters would shy from attempting it.

Murtagh had underestimated Sarros and whomever the man had dealings with. The situation had become dangerously unpredictable. And Murtagh didn’t like unpredictable.

“Essie!” cried Sigling, finally noticing her plight. He grabbed his truncheon and sprang over the bar with more alacrity than Murtagh would have given the balding innkeep credit for. “You let her go now!”

Before Sigling could take more than a step, two of the fur-clad ruffians charged and knocked him to the floor. A *thunk* sounded as one of them struck Sigling on the head with the pommel of a sword.

He moaned and dropped the truncheon.

No one else dared move.

That's enough of that, thought Murtagh.

"Papa!" Essie cried, and she squirmed beneath Sarros's knife.

The trader chuckled again, louder than before. "Your tricks will not help you, Wanderer. No enchantments are as strong as Bachel's. No magic is as deep."

"Perhaps you're right." Murtagh's voice was calm as a windless pond. He picked up the fork and turned it between his fingers. "Well then. It appears I have no choice in the matter."

"None whatsoever," said Sarros, smug.

A stout, red-cheeked woman with her hair tied in a bun appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, wiping her hands on her skirt. "What is all this—" she started to say, and then saw Sarros holding the knife and Sigling lying on the floor, and her face went pale.

"Don't cause no trouble, or your man gets stuck," said one of the fur-clad men, pointing his blade at Sigling.

While everyone was distracted by Sigling's wife, Murtagh spoke without voice, and he said, "Halfa utan thornessa fra jierda." A glassy, flame-like ripple ran the length of the fork.

Essie's eyes widened, but she didn't otherwise react.

Sarros slapped the table. "Enough with the yapping. Your coin, now."

Murtagh tipped his head and, with his left hand, again reached under his cloak. He kept himself relaxed until the last possible instant.

In a single motion, he swept the cloak through the air while striking with the fork. He caught Sarros's knife between the tines and used the fork to toss the knife across the room.

Ting! The knife bounced against the wall.

Sarros blinked and froze as Murtagh pressed the points of the fork against the fleshy underside of the man's chin. The shark-toothed man swallowed, and a sheen of sweat broke out on his face, but his hand remained next to the girl's neck, fingers spread wide as if to tear out her throat.

"Then again," said Murtagh, savoring the reversal, "there's nothing in your charm to stop me from using magic on something else. Like this fork, for example." He pressed the tines deeper into Sarros's flesh. "Do you really think I need a sword to defeat you, you tumorous sack of filth?"

Sarros hissed. Then he shoved Essie into Murtagh's lap and sprang backward, knocking his chair over.

Murtagh jumped to his feet, and Essie fell to the floor. She scrambled away on all fours beneath the tables.

The six fur-clad men drew their blades, and the great room became a sea of thrashing bodies as the fishermen, laborers, and other guests rushed to escape through the front door. The lute player stumbled and fell, and there were shouts and crashes and breaking mugs.

Murtagh threw off his cloak so he could move freely. He risked a glance at the floor, looking for Sarros's knife. It was nowhere to be seen. A snarl curled his lips. He wished he had Zar'roc or even a camp knife to defend himself. But no, he'd been too confident, too clever. All he had was the fork.

The cutthroats tried to box him in by the fireplace, but he was having none of that. He slipped between the tables, circling to get a good angle.

Sarros had retreated to a corner and was shouting, "Slice him crosswise! Kill him! Cut open his belly and spill his guts."

I'll deal with you directly, Murtagh thought.

By the back of the great room, the girl reached her mother. The woman pulled Essie behind her skirts and grabbed a chair, which she held in front of them as a shield.

The nearest ruffian charged Murtagh, swinging his blade. *Clumsy fool.* Murtagh parried with the fork and then stepped inside the man's guard and buried the fork in the man's chest.

The tines punctured bone and muscle as well as Murtagh could have wanted. The man convulsed against him and collapsed with a wet, blood-choked gasp as his heart gave out.

A tidal surge of fearful rage emanated from Thorn, and Murtagh felt the dragon's sudden resolve to join him. *STAY!* he bellowed in his mind before armoring his thoughts against possible intrusion. Thorn held, but barely.

Three more of Sarros's hired swords moved in. All three jabbed and slashed with their blades, not waiting for the others to take their turn.

Murtagh grabbed a chair and, one-handed, smashed it over the man to his left. At the same time, he used the fork to deflect the attacks from the other two brutes. He matched each of their blows, fencing with effortless ease as they tried to break his guard. None of them were well trained; he could tell that much.

The men had the advantage of reach with their swords, but Murtagh sidestepped their blades and slipped into striking range. Faster than the eye could see, he stabbed with the fork: one, two, three, four hard impacts that dropped the men to the floor, where they lay silent or groaning.

His blood ran hot, and a slick of sweat coated his forehead, and crimson crept in around the edges of his vision. But his breathing remained measured. He was still in control, even as the thrill of violent triumph coursed through him.

Across the room, Sigling pulled himself up the bar into a standing position. He had regained the truncheon, not that Murtagh thought the leather-wrapped stick would do much good against the ruffians' swords.

The innkeep's wife said, "Essie, Olfa is in the kitchen. I want you to go—"

Before she could finish, one of Sarros's guards ran up to them. In his off hand, he held a mace, which he swung at the chair the woman held.

The impact knocked the chair out of her hands, breaking it.

The girl screamed as the fur-clad man drew back the sword in his other hand

—
Murtagh knew he couldn't cross the great room in time to save them. So he gambled on fate's goodwill and threw the fork—

Thud.

The fork embedded itself in the back of the man's skull. He collapsed, boneless as a sack of flour.

Relief washed through Murtagh, but only for a second. Sarros and his last remaining companion attempted to flank him. Murtagh kicked a table into the swordsman's stomach and, when he stumbled, jumped on him and knocked his head against the floor.

Sarros cursed and fled toward the door. As he turned, he threw a handful of glittering crystals at Murtagh.

"Sving!" cried Murtagh.

The crystals swerved in midair and flew into the flames of the fire. A series of loud *pops!* sounded, and a fountain of crimson embers sprayed the stone hearth.

Before Sarros could reach the door, Murtagh overtook him. He grabbed the back of Sarros's jerkin and—with a grunt and heave—lifted Sarros off the floor and overhead and then slammed him back down onto the wooden boards.

Sarros's left elbow bent at an unnatural angle. The man bellowed with pain.

"Essie," said the innkeep's wife. "Stay behind me."

Murtagh planted a foot on Sarros's chest and, with a growl, said, "Now then, you bastard. Where did you find that stone?"

Sigling left the bar and staggered across the room to his wife and daughter. They didn't say anything, but his wife put an arm around him, and he did the same to her.

A burbling laugh escaped Sarros. There was a wild note to his voice that reminded Murtagh of Galbatorix's more demented moments. Sarros licked his sharpened teeth and said, "You do not know what you seek, Wanderer. You're moon-addled and nose-blind. The sleeper stirs, and you and me—we're all ants waiting to be crushed."

"The *stone*," said Murtagh from between clenched teeth. "Where?"

Sarros's voice grew even higher, a mad shriek that pierced the night air. "You don't understand. The Dreamers! The Dreamers! They get inside your head, and they twist your thoughts. Ahh! They twist them all out of joint." He started to thrash, drumming his heels against the floor. Yellow foam bubbled at the corners of his mouth. "They'll come for you, Wanderer, and then you'll see. They'll..." His voice trailed off into a hoarse croak, and, with one final jerk, he fell still.

Disquiet wormed in Murtagh's gut. The man shouldn't have died. Magic or poison was at work here, and neither explanation was particularly appealing. In fact, the whole situation left a bad taste in his mouth. He felt as if he'd been caught in an invisible snare, and he didn't know who—or what—had set it.

For a moment, no one in the great room stirred.

Murtagh could feel eyes on him as he yanked the bird-skull amulet off Sarros's neck, retrieved his cloak, and walked back to the table by the fire. He pocketed the stone with the inner shine, picked up his pouch of coins, and then paused, considering.

Bouncing the pouch in his hand, he went over to where Sigling and his wife stood shielding Essie. The girl looked terrified. Murtagh couldn't blame her.

"Please..." said Sigling.

"My apologies for the trouble," said Murtagh. He could smell the stink of sweat on himself, and the front of his linen shirt was splattered with blood. "Here, this should make up for the mess." He held out the pouch, and after a moment's hesitation, Sigling accepted it.

The innkeep licked his lips. "The watch will be here any minute. If'n you leave out the back...you can make it t' the gate before they see you."

Murtagh nodded. *Thoughtful of him.*

Then he knelt and yanked the fork out of the head of the ruffian lying on the nearby boards. The girl shrank back as Murtagh looked at her. "Sometimes," he said, "you have to stand and fight. Sometimes running away isn't an option. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," Essie whispered.

Murtagh shifted his attention to her parents. "One last question: Do you need the patronage of the masons' guild to keep this inn open?"

Confusion furrowed Sigling's brow. "No, not if it came to such. Why?"

"That's what I thought," said Murtagh. Then he presented Essie with the fork. It looked perfectly clean, without so much as a drop of blood on it. "I'm giving this to you. It has a spell on it to keep it from breaking. If Hjordis bothers you again, give her a good poke, and she'll leave you alone."

"Essie," her mother said in a low, warning voice.

But Murtagh could see that the girl had already made her decision. She nodded in a firm manner and took the fork. "Thank you," she said, solemn.

“All good weapons deserve a name,” said Murtagh. “Especially magical ones. What would you call this one?”

Essie thought for a second and then said, “Mister Stabby!”

Murtagh couldn't help it; a broad smile split his face, and he laughed, a loud, hearty laugh. “Mister Stabby. I like it. Very apt. May Mister Stabby always bring you good fortune.”

And Essie smiled as well, if somewhat uncertainly.

Then the girl's mother said, “Who...who are you, really?”

“Just another person looking for answers,” said Murtagh.

He was about to leave when, on a sudden impulse, he reached out and put a hand on the girl's arm. He spoke the words of a healing spell, and the girl stiffened as the magic took effect, reshaping the scarred tissue on her arm.

Cold crept into Murtagh's limbs, the spell extracting its price in energy, drawing off the strength of his body to make the change he willed.

“Leave her be!” said Sigling, and pulled Essie away, but the spell had already done its work, and Murtagh swept past them, cloak winged out behind him.

As he moved through the kitchen at the back of the inn, he heard Sigling and his wife utter sounds of astonishment, and then they and Essie started crying, but with joy, not grief.

Murtagh wasn't done. While Essie's parents were so distracted, he reached out with his mind and slipped unnoticed into their stream of thoughts. He was subtle, and no probing was needed. The very thing he sought was forefront in each consciousness: the moment, three years ago, when Essie had bumped into her father in the kitchen while he was carrying the dented iron stewpot with the crooked handle that had been full of water boiled for washing. Essie had been running about, not looking, not paying attention, and she had been where she wasn't expected. From Sigling now, guilt and relief intermixed. From his wife, relief and sorrow and a relaxation of close-held resentment over how her husband had caused, though unintentionally, the accident.

Murtagh withdrew. His fears had been unfounded, and for that, he was glad. Essie and her siblings were safe with their family. There was nothing more he needed to do here.

He felt tears in his own eyes. At least he'd been able to accomplish some good today. No child should have to grow up with a scar like Essie's...or his own. For an instant, he imagined smoothing his back with magic as he'd smoothed Essie's arm, but he shook off the thought. Some hurts went too deep to heal.

He was his father's son, and he could never pretend otherwise.



In the alley outside the Fulsome Feast, Murtagh lifted his head and took a deep breath of the night air. It was still snowing, soft flakes drifting down in a tumbling veil, and the whole city felt calm and quiet.

His pulse began to slow.

How long had it been since he'd last killed a man? Over a year. A pair of bandits had jumped him as he was returning to camp one evening—foolish, uneducated louts who hadn't the slightest chance of taking him down. He'd fought back out of reflex, and by the time he knew what was happening, the two unfortunates were already lying on the ground. He could still hear the whimpers the younger one had made as he died....

Murtagh grimaced. Some people went their whole lives without killing. He wondered what that was like.

A drop of blood—not his own—trickled down the back of his hand. Disgusted, he scraped it off against the side of the building. The splinters bothered him less than the gore.

Even though he hadn't gotten a specific location from Sarros, at least he now knew that the place Umaroth had warned him of existed. He would have far preferred disappointment. Whatever truth lay hidden beneath the field of blackened earth, he doubted it would herald anything good. Life was never so simple.

A questioning thought reached him from outside Ceunon: Thorn fearful for his safety.

I'm fine, Murtagh told him. Just a bit of trouble.

Do I need to come?

I don't think so, but stand by in any case.

Always.

Thorn subsided with cautious watchfulness, but Murtagh still felt the thread of connection that joined them: a comforting closeness that had become the one unchanging reality in their lives.

He started down the alley. Time to go. The city watch would soon arrive to investigate the disturbance, and he'd lingered long enough.

A flicker of motion high above caught his attention.

At first Murtagh wasn't sure what he was seeing.

Sailing down from the underside of the firelit clouds was a small ship of grass, no more than a hand or two in length. The hull and sail were made of woven blades, and the mast and spars built from lengths of stem.

No crew—however diminutive—was to be seen; the ship moved of its own accord, driven and sustained by an invisible force. It circled him twice, and he saw a tiny pennant fluttering above the equally tiny crow's nest.

Then the ship turned westward and vanished within the veil of descending snow, leaving behind no trace of its existence.

Murtagh smiled and shook his head. He didn't know who had made the ship or what it signified, but the fact that something so whimsical, so singular, could exist filled him with an unaccustomed joy.

He thought back to what he'd told the girl, Essie. Perhaps he should take his own advice. Perhaps it was time to stop running and return to old friends.

His smile faded. Wherever he'd gone in the year since Galbatorix's death, he had heard the poison in people's voices when they spoke his name. Few there were, aside from Nasuada, who would trust him after his actions in service to the king. It was a bitter, unfair truth—one that circumstances had long since forced him to accept.

Because of it, he had hidden his face, changed his name, and kept to the fringes of settled land, never walking where others might know him. And while the time alone had done both him and Thorn good, it was no way to live the rest of their lives.

So again he wondered. Had the time come to turn and face their past?

No. The thought arrived with decisive immediacy. He wasn't sure if the conviction was his own or Thorn's or a combination thereof. Even if they attempted to rejoin polite society, Murtagh couldn't imagine how they would ever be seen as anything more than murderers and traitors.

Besides...Murtagh looked down at the object he was holding: the bird-skull amulet he'd taken off Sarros's neck. A crow's skull, by the look of it.

Who was the witch-woman Bachel? Murtagh had never heard of her. Casting spells without words was a wild, dangerous thing, and rare was the magician brave, foolish, or talented enough to risk it. Even with the proper training, he wouldn't have dared do so in the Fulsome Feast, not with so many innocent bystanders nearby. And what of the Dreamers that Sarros had mentioned? Were they associates of Bachel? Always more mysteries.

No, before anything else, Murtagh wanted to know where the gleaming stone had come from, and he wanted to find the witch-woman Bachel and ask her a few questions.

The answers, he suspected, would be most interesting.

A brassy alarm bell sounded elsewhere in Ceunon, jarring him from his reverie. He tucked the amulet into his cloak and set off at a quick pace for the southern gates, determined to escape the city before the watch found him and he had to kill someone he would regret.

CHAPTER IV



Conclave

Fugitives again, thought Murtagh as he ran through Ceunon's open gatehouse. It seemed like he and Thorn were always having to flee one place or another. *Unwanted. That's what we are.*

A horn rang out within the city, and he ducked his head, half expecting a flight of angry arrows to land about him. He heard such horns in his dreams: dread-inducing clarions that heralded the approach of faceless hunters, relentless in their pursuit.

He ran faster.

Past the stables outside the city walls, he swung off the road and into rows of snow-dusted barley, heading east toward where Thorn waited for him.

The night was descending into total blackness. Even once his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could barely see where to put his feet. Nevertheless, he maintained his pace as best he could, determined to put distance between him and Ceunon.

Several molehills caused him to stumble, and he nearly twisted his ankle in a badger hole.

"Son of an Urgal," he muttered.

At the far end of the fields, he paused to look back. The city gate had been closed, and lamps bobbed along the outer walls as soldiers patrolled the battlements, but he saw no sign that anyone had left Ceunon to give chase.

He started to relax. But only slightly.

As he continued on his way, he risked summoning a small werelight with a whispered "Brisingr."

The werelight was a drop of bloody flame wavering in the night, just bright enough for him to see the ground. It hung several feet in front of him and held its distance no matter how fast he ran.

Brisingr. Eragon had taught him that word of power, as he had many of the words in the ancient language during their travels together, in the brief period when they had been friends and allies. For all the stresses of that time—they had been evading the Empire the whole while—it had been one of the most enjoyable chapters of Murtagh's life. He remembered it with a curious mixture of gratitude, regret, and resentment: a short, shining span of freedom, bracketed by his initial escape from Galbatorix's tyranny in Urû'baen and his subsequent recapture at the

hands of the king's minions outside of Tronjheim. Following which, Galbatorix had bound him with the ancient language and forced brother to fight brother.

Murtagh found himself clenching his teeth. *Brother*. It was still strange to think of Eragon as such. Half brother, in truth, for while they shared a mother, Murtagh was the son of Morzan, first and foremost among the Forsworn—the thirteen Dragon Riders who had betrayed their order to aid Galbatorix in his campaign against the Riders over a century ago. *I am the traitor son of a traitor*, thought Murtagh, and the knowledge burned like acid dripped upon his heart.

Eragon was also the son of a Rider, but in contrast, his father, Brom, had bitterly opposed Galbatorix and all his servants. A fact that had a deeply personal outcome, for it was Brom who had slain Morzan and his dragon when Murtagh was still a young child.

His lip curled. Their family history was as tangled as a briar patch and just as painful to wade through. He wished their mother were still alive that he might question her about it, but she had died shortly after giving birth to Eragon. And while Murtagh knew it was irrational, he could not help but blame Eragon for the loss: one more reason for resentment among so many others.

With an extra-deep breath, Murtagh cleared his lungs and lengthened his strides. It was true that stepping outside the main current of events in Alagaësia had helped calm his mind, but he still felt twisted up inside, him and Thorn both.

It might take years for either of them to unknot, if ever they did.

An owl hooted from a nearby tree, and somewhere in the brush, an animal darted away. Maybe a rabbit. Maybe something worse. A Svartling perhaps. The small, dark-skinned creatures were said to help with household chores if given gifts of bread and milk, but they were also said to treat travelers with cruel and often dangerous tricks.

Whatever the sound, Murtagh didn't want to meet its author in the middle of a night-bound field.

He slowed as he climbed the hill where they'd landed earlier, weaving between the crags of rock and the thickets of hordebrush.

At the crest, he found Thorn crouched, ready to spring into the air. The dragon's eyes outshone the werelight, and his scales flashed and flared with renewed brilliance. Great furrows scarred the earth around him: the tufts of grass torn, hordebrush uprooted, rocks split.

Thorn's tail twitched when he saw Murtagh, and he shivered with an excess of unburnt energy. A snarl wrinkled his muzzle.

Murtagh eyed the furrows but made no comment.

"I'm fine," he said. "Seriously." He turned in a circle, arms outstretched. "The blood isn't mine."

Thorn sniffed him and growled slightly before settling back on his haunches. His muzzle smoothed, but Murtagh could still feel his fear, frustration, and anger. *I should have come to help you.*

“It’s all right. Really.” He stroked Thorn’s neck before continuing to the saddlebags, where he removed Zar’roc, unwrapped the crimson sword, and—with a sense of relief—strapped the weapon to his waist.

“We’d best find somewhere else for the night,” he said, climbing up Thorn’s back to the saddle strapped between the large spikes on the dragon’s shoulders. Once in place, he snuffed the werelight.

Always you stir up the ant-nest cities, said Thorn.

“I know. It’s a bad habit. Let’s go.”

Another growl, and with a great gust of wind and surge of steely muscles, Thorn leaped into the night air, the *thud* of his wings an invisible hammer blow.

Three more beats carried them into the clouds. The mist was cold against Murtagh’s cheeks, but not unpleasantly so after his run. It tasted of moss and fresh-cut grass and new beginnings.



Thorn flew east for a seemingly endless while. At last, they descended to settle on a flat-topped knoll with a commanding view over the landscape. Dark though it was, Murtagh could just make out the forest of Du Weldenvarden farther to the south—a long black smear that extended across the land, like a great arm pointing back toward Ceunon.

The cold stung his skin as he dropped his cloak and pulled off his bloodstained shirt, trying to avoid touching the spots of gore. “Hvittra,” he murmured as he imposed his will on the garment.

The cloth shimmered slightly, and the blotches of red faded.

Murtagh stroked the linen. It looked clean enough, but he still intended to wash the shirt before he wore it again.

He stored the shirt in a saddlebag and removed his one other garment: a thick woolen top—knitted, not woven—dyed a dark brown with interlaced patterns of red along the wrists and neck. The wool was itchy, but it was his preferred wear for flying, as it was far warmer than the linen.

Eager to cover his skin, he donned the top and again wrapped himself in his cloak.

Since a fire might draw attention, Thorn curled into a tight ball, nose to tail, and Murtagh crawled under his right wing and laid out his bedroll next to the smooth scales of Thorn’s underbelly.

Was it worth it? Thorn asked.

“I think so,” said Murtagh. Opening his mind more than felt safe around strangers, he shared his full memories of Ceunon.

They were not very good, said Thorn, fixing on an image of Sarros’s guards.

“No, they weren’t. Lucky for me.”

A faint growl, and the dragon drew his wing tighter around Murtagh. *I see now there is a storm set before us.*

“But how big, how bad? We still don’t know.”

But it exists.

“Yes.”

Thorn’s plated eyelid closed and opened with a slight *nack*. *You wish to fly into the storm.*

“Maybe not into it, but toward it, yes. What say you?”

The dragon coughed with his peculiar laugh. *That we should take the stone to Tronjheim and have the dwarves carve it into something pretty for us.*

Murtagh snorted. “With our heads on pikes to watch?”

A faint scent of dragon smoke filled the space around them as a thread of crimson flame flickered in Thorn’s nostrils. *No? Then I say we should sleep and speak of it in the morning.*

“I suppose you’re right.”

Behind him, Thorn’s belly vibrated with a low hum, and Murtagh crossed his arms and let his chin sink to his chest. Underneath the wing, all was still, and it felt as if he and Thorn were the only two creatures in existence.

Before sleep took him, Murtagh did as was his nightly habit and, in a silent voice, spoke the words in the ancient language that were his true name. Hearing them was never easy; to know your true name was to know your faults as surely as your virtues. Yet he said the name every day so as to be assured that he still understood his own nature and that no one besides Thorn held claim over him. For a true name granted power to those who heard it, and even as a magician might command an object with the proper words, so too might they command a person.

As Murtagh and Thorn had learned to their sorrow and despair during their subjugation in Urû’baen.

Thorn too spoke his true name, a deep singing sound that made Murtagh’s skin feel as if laved with warm water. Then the day’s tensions ebbed from their limbs, and they fell into close slumber.



Morning brought freezing fog from the ocean and a thick layer of feathered frost. Ice crystals cracked loose as Murtagh crawled out from under Thorn’s wing

and squinted toward the pale disk of the rising sun, thin and rose pink above the edge of Du Weldenvarden. Streamers of mist ribboned upward from the treetops, the entire forest steaming with stored warmth from the previous day.

Murtagh shivered and pulled his cloak closer. The morning cold never got any easier.

He checked their surroundings and was pleased to see no sign of search or pursuit.

Confident that they'd escaped detection, he allowed himself the luxury of a small fire, built with scraps of dry hordebrush he foraged from the top and sides of the knoll.

Thorn lit the fire for him, igniting the woody stems with a single, tiny puff of flame from his nostrils.

"Thank you," said Murtagh, and he meant it. Fiddling with flint and tinder when your fingers were half numb wasn't fun, and he preferred to avoid using magic for everyday tasks. Magic made its own sort of noise for those with the ears to hear it, and it was impossible to know who might be listening.

Breakfast was flatbread and bacon and two dried apples, with a cup of elderberry tea to warm his insides. Thorn watched as he ate but had no food of his own; the dragon had devoured several deer not three days earlier and wouldn't need to feed again for the better part of a week.

By the time Murtagh finished, the morning had warmed enough to melt the frost and dissipate the morning haze.

He took out the bird-skull amulet and the coal-like stone and laid them on a scrap of cloth between himself and Thorn.

Thorn sniffed the two objects, and the tip of his tongue flicked out between his teeth. As he scented the stone, the scales along the back of his head and neck flared, like those of a pinecone opening in a fire.

"What?" said Murtagh, leaning forward. "What is it?"

A shiver ran Thorn's sinuous length, and he cowered in a way that Murtagh had only ever seen him do before Shruikan. *The stone smells wrong.*

"How so?"

Like...blood and hate and anger.

Murtagh scratched his cheek. His beard was prickling again. "Could it be magic?"

Another flicker of Thorn's tongue. *Maybe. But then it should affect you as well.*

"Unless it's meant only for dragons." Murtagh picked up the rock, bounced it in his hand. On a whim, he extended his mind toward the piece of stone, thinking perhaps it held some secret spark of consciousness bound within. But he felt

nothing. He frowned and returned it to the cloth. “We need to find out where it came from.”

Thorn hissed like a snake. *No. You want to find out where it came from. There is a difference. We should destroy the rock or else bury it where none will find it. There is evil here. Leave it, forget it, do not pursue it.*

“You know I can’t.”

A growl rumbled in Thorn’s throat, and his scales rippled. *You can! Listen to Umaroth. He warned us for good reason.*

“And what reason is that?”

It matters not!

Thorn released a huff of black smoke and reached with one taloned paw toward the rock and amulet, as if to sweep them aside.

“No!” Murtagh cried, and sprang to his feet so he blocked Thorn’s way. They stared at each other, neither backing down. The air between them seemed to vibrate with the force of the dragon’s glittering glare.

Move aside.

“No.”

This hunt will bring nothing but sorrow.

“I don’t believe that.”

Fingerling flames danced along Thorn’s tongue, and the inside of his mouth glowed like a bellowed forge. *When has fate ever gone as we wish? Let this go.*

“I can’t,” said Murtagh. A familiar grimness descended upon him. “I can’t sleep easy knowing there’s a wolf stalking around in the dark. Something so dangerous Umaroth won’t even give us its name.”

Some secrets are better left buried.

“No! No, no, no. Do you want to wake up one morning to find out that we’ve been outmatched, outmaneuvered, and outsmarted? Not me. Not *ever again.*” Murtagh stopped, hands clenched, and his nostrils flared as he steadied his breathing. He fixed Thorn with an iron gaze. “*Never.*”

The dragon released a long, snaking *hiss* and said, *Isn’t what we have enough? All the earth and sky is ours to travel. We sleep when we want, eat as we will. We paid our price, we shed our blood.*

“And we’re still not safe!” With a conscious effort, Murtagh lowered his voice, though his words remained as intense as before. “We never will be, but perhaps we can catch our enemies unaware. Umaroth is hiding something from us, and I won’t rest until I know what it is.”

Thorn breathed out a stream of black smoke that enveloped the stone and the bird-skull amulet. *Were you to take those to Eragon or Arya—*

“This has nothing to do with them!” Murtagh ran a hand through his hair. It was getting long again. “I want answers. And I want to be useful.”

Being yourself is use enough. We do not need to prove ourselves to anyone.

He laughed bitterly. “Maybe if you’re a dragon. But I’ve always had to prove myself, and I always will. There’s no easy path through life when you’re born as Morzan’s son.”

He went to Thorn and put his hands on either side of the dragon’s scaled snout. “Besides, you and I, we are Dragon and Rider. We swore no oaths to the Riders—”

Thorn arched his neck in a proud curve, though he left his head in Murtagh’s hands. *And I will swear no more oaths of fealty. No words will bind me, nor shackles or fetters.*

“No,” Murtagh agreed. “Nor me. But we owe a debt to those who came before. We wear their mantle, whether we wish it or not, and I find myself reluctant to dishonor their memory by ignoring this.”

Thorn snuffed. *No one would know if we chose another path.*

“We would know, and that is enough.” He gestured toward the rock and bird-skull amulet. “That there is work for a Rider and Dragon, as it was of old.”

The dragon turned his head then, to better see Murtagh. *So shall we fly about fighting evil and righting wrongs wherever we find them? Is that how you wish to spend your days?*

Murtagh’s lips quirked. “Not entirely, but perhaps we can do some good here and there while we attend to our own interests.”

As you did with the girl.

“As I did with the girl.” He put a hand on Thorn’s cheek then, and opened his mind as much as he could to the dragon’s inner eye. *Look*, he said, and let Thorn feel the fullness of his heart.

Finally, Thorn uttered a soft growl and pulled his head away. *I understand.*

“But you don’t agree.”

The last few feet of Thorn’s tail slapped the ground. Once. Twice. Three times. *What you want isn’t what I want.* A wave of his hot breath rolled over Murtagh. *But where you go, I will go.*

He nodded, grateful. Their relationship wasn’t as smooth as Eragon and Saphira’s, and Murtagh didn’t think it ever would be. But that was all right. A dull thorn was no thorn at all.

Besides, Murtagh knew that he wasn’t the easiest person to get along with, even for a dragon.

Thorn must have sensed his mood, because a faint hum of amusement came from the dragon, and he curled his neck and tail around Murtagh’s legs.

What then?

Kneeling, Murtagh touched the bird skull. “We need to find someone who can tell us about the witch-woman Bachel, and about this stone.”

Umaroth?

He shook his head. “Too far away, and he would just warn us off the stone again.”

Thorn snapped his jaws together, quick and sharp as a steel trap. *Would he? I still think you should speak with Umaroth. He is wiser than most.*

It was a fair point. Not only was Umaroth old and learned, but he and his dead Rider, Vrael, had been the last leaders of their order. That alone was reason enough to give weight to the dragon’s words. Yet Murtagh remained wary. “I respect Umaroth,” he said. “But I’m not sure if I trust him.”

You think he lies?

“No. I think his goals and aims may not be our own. We don’t know. How long did we speak with him outside Urû’baen? Barely a few minutes, if that.” Murtagh picked a breadcrumb out of his beard. Annoyed, he flicked it at the ground.

So you wish to find the truth of this yourself.

“I do.”

Thorn nodded toward the amulet. *Then whom shall we seek out instead?*

“I’m not sure. We need someone here in Alagaësia, someone who is familiar with the secret doings of the land.”

Thorn’s eyes narrowed to knife-thin slits. *What of Yarek?*

The back of Murtagh’s neck prickled, and a fist seemed to close around his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Yarek Lackhand, tight-mouthed, hard-eyed, clever as an elf and cruel as a torturer—Murtagh could see him still, standing in the stone hallways of Galbatorix’s citadel, a drably dressed man with an iron cap strapped over the stump of his right wrist. Yarek had been Galbatorix’s spymaster, and from what Murtagh had seen, he’d excelled in the position. It was he who had arranged for the Twins to kidnap Murtagh from the Varden so the king could break him, bend him to his will.

Thorn touched his snout to Murtagh’s elbow.

He patted the dragon. If not for Yarek, he wouldn’t have ended up bonded with Thorn, and Murtagh had to count that as a good thing. However, the spymaster had been the very definition of ruthless. And he kicked dogs, which Murtagh disapproved of. “Even if he’s still alive—”

You know he is.

Murtagh inclined his head. “Probably. But I’m sure he’s disappeared down some hole, and if I start poking around, asking questions, it’ll attract attention.”

Thorn made a deep, coughing sound.

“What?”

If not Yarek, why not the female, Ilenna?

“Ilenna—” Murtagh gave Thorn a quizzical look. Of all the folk who had passed through Galbatorix’s court, Ilenna had been one of the more unusual. She was a younger daughter of a merchant family based out of the city of Gil’ead. Her father’s cargo trains had helped supply the king’s army during the war, and the family had made a fortune because of it. Despite her lowborn station, the girl had pursued him most *assiduously* whenever she was at court, so much so that Murtagh had taken to actively avoiding her. That alone was hardly unique, but what had caught his attention was how particularly well informed she was. As he’d later learned, her family had done more than just shift supplies for Galbatorix. They had also served as gleaners and sifters of information on Yarek’s behalf, and Ilenna no less than her father or brothers.

“There’s no telling if she knows anything about Bachel or the stone.”

Thorn coughed again and tapped the ground with the tip of one razor-sharp claw. *She is more likely to than most. And if not, no doubt she would be eager to ask questions on behalf of the great Dragon Rider Murtagh.*

He grunted, unamused. “Even if that’s true— No. We’re not going there. We’ll find someone else, somewhere else.”

Who? Where? If you want to track down Bachel and the source of this rock, then Gil’ead is the answer. If not, how long will it be before you catch their trail?

“You never know,” Murtagh mumbled. “It could happen. Maybe one of the tinkers or—”

A puff of acrid smoke blew over him as Thorn snorted.

Murtagh stopped. The dragon was right; he was being ridiculous. Grim, he crossed his arms and stared out over hill and dale toward the horizon.

The weight of unspoken memories hung between them.

“Gil’ead is dangerous.”

More dangerous than Ceunon? More closely guarded than Ilirea?

Murtagh shifted his shoulders, as if he had an itch in the middle of his back. He still wasn’t used to Urû’baen’s new name. Every time he heard it said—*Ilirea*—he felt as if he’d missed a step on a flight of stairs.

Finally, he answered, with his mind, not his mouth, *I don’t want to*. There was no dissembling when it came to mental communication, no barriers to understanding. It was the most vulnerable form of connection two beings could share, and he shared it with Thorn.

The dragon hummed a soothing note and lowered his head until it rested on the ground by Murtagh’s feet.

Then leave it, said Thorn. Or hold the course. What is this hunt worth to you?

Murtagh let out his breath and uncrossed his arms, forcing himself to stand straight. He put a hand in the middle of Thorn’s forehead. The scales were hot against his palm.

“All right. We’ll go to Gil’ead and find Ilenna.”



Before they departed the knoll, Murtagh sharpened his dagger on the bit of dwarven whetstone he carried with him. He stropped it on his sword belt and then made a mirror from water poured in a plate and stilled with the word *entha*.

Peering into the silvery grey surface, he was struck by how gaunt he looked. He hadn’t been eating enough. They were always moving, walking, flying, often in inclement weather. Meals were intermittent at best, and more than once he’d gone a full day without so much as a bite.

Not good, he thought. The thinner he was, the less reserves he had for spells when the need arose. The magicians with the most raw power were always the heaviest.

He pulled the skin on his jaw flat and tight, lifted the dagger, and started to shave.

The dagger wasn’t as sharp as a barber’s razor, but it did the job. Even after the first pass, his face felt colder, and Murtagh half regretted his decision. Still, he persisted, and soon enough, he was finished.

He only cut himself three times, which he counted a success.

Afterward, he studied himself in the makeshift mirror. Without the beard, he appeared younger but also leaner, harsher, like a starveling wolf.

He dashed the water aside with the flat of his hand.

You are yourself again, said Thorn.

Murtagh grunted. Maybe he should have waited until after Gil’ead to shave, but he couldn’t bear to have crumbs on his chin. Not to mention the constant itching.

He dried off the plate and tucked it into the saddlebags. Then he bounded up into Thorn’s saddle and strapped down his legs so he wouldn’t fall. “Let’s fly!”

Thorn growled in a fierce, pleased tone and sprang into the sky, wings sweeping overhead.

The world lurched around Murtagh, and he gripped the neck spike in front of him, squinting against the rush of cold wind. For better or worse, they were going to Gil’ead.

CHAPTER V



Dragonflight

The map Murtagh had—which he had bought off a fur merchant near Teirm—wasn't detailed enough to tell him where exactly in Alagaësia he and Thorn were. Like most maps intended for use by traders, it was mainly concerned with land and sea routes and not, for example, the exact shape, location, and scale of Du Weldenvarden.

He knew that the forest extended westward in a great tongue of trees. South of it lay Isenstar Lake, and south of Isenstar lay the city of Gil'ead. The shortest path to Gil'ead would have been straight across the wooded expanse, but that would entail entering the elves' territory, which they protected with fierce devotion. Moreover, there was a range of high-topped mountains somewhere in that section of the forest, and mountains always made flying difficult.

So, instead, he and Thorn decided to skirt the forest as they worked their way westward and south, until they caught sight of Isenstar. Then they would know their location and could turn toward Gil'ead.

As had become habit, Murtagh used a simple spell to hide Thorn from the eyes of those on the ground, human or otherwise. Simple though it was, the spell took energy, and by the end of every day, Murtagh felt a dull fatigue, which was exacerbated by the effort needed to ride Thorn. The dragon flapped slowly compared with a bird, but each beat of his wings was still a jarring experience. Murtagh wasn't able to doze as he might have on a horse during a long march.

To pass the time, he thought. Mostly about magic. He had long since realized that magic was the key to mastering the world, to controlling circumstances and protecting himself and those he cared for, few as they were. Galbatorix had not trained him in enchanting as Murtagh was growing up at court, for the king had guarded such knowledge most jealously. And while Eragon had taught Murtagh his first words of power, he had not been able to make use of them at the time, no matter how hard he tried. It was only months later, after Thorn hatched for him while imprisoned beneath Urû'baen, that he succeeded in breaking the glass-like barrier in his mind and, through force of will, enacting his first piece of magic.

It had been a simple spell—*lyftha*—with which he had raised a single gold crown from Galbatorix's seamless palm.

The king had been miserly with his instruction thereafter, teaching Murtagh the bare minimum of the art. A slave armed was a man freed, and Galbatorix had made it clear that he had every intention of maintaining a close hold over Murtagh and Thorn, even as he had chained his dread servants the Forsworn.

Including my father.

Murtagh scowled and wrenched his thoughts into a different track.

He'd grown increasingly obsessed with understanding what was and wasn't possible with gramarye. As a result, he spent a great deal of time thinking about the intricacies of the ancient language, and how the ancient language *wasn't* magic itself, but rather a means of guiding and constraining one's intent. Without it, a random thought whilst casting a spell might result in an entirely different—and potentially devastating—outcome. Which was exactly why wordless magic was so dangerous.

The study of the ancient language was the work of a lifetime. And yet...the language itself was insufficient to explain the true nature of magic, for at its heart, magic was the act of manipulating energy. And it was energy that really interested Murtagh. What *was* it? Where did it come from? How could it be gathered and used?

It was a perplexing question.

He sighed and looked at the dark apex of the sky. The elves might know the truth of the matter; they'd spent centuries studying the mysteries of magic. Magic ran in their blood, even as it did with the dragons.

If only he could ask them.

At times, he wished he and Thorn had kept the Eldunarí whom Galbatorix had given them. Then they would never have to worry about a lack of energy, for the Eldunarí's crystalline structure contained more motive force than a dragon contained in their normal flesh-and-blood body.

Murtagh still found it strange to think that dragons grew the large, gemlike stones within their chests. Up until Galbatorix showed him one, he had not even suspected their existence, much less that it was possible for dragons to transfer their minds into the Eldunarí and thus live on even after their flesh perished.

Just one more mystery among many relating to dragons.

The king had often lent them the Eldunarí of an old male dragon by the name of Yngmar. Like most of the Eldunarí whom Galbatorix had acquired, Yngmar was quite mad, tortured into incoherency by the king. Murtagh had barely been able to make sense of the dragon's thoughts; trying usually left him with a throbbing headache.

Yet, on occasion, he missed Yngmar and the other Eldunarí. He knew Thorn felt the same. The flesh-dead dragons had given Murtagh strength and speed beyond that of a normal human, enough to match that of an elf. (A not-always-

welcome gift, as the resulting soreness had often been crippling.) More importantly, having the Eldunarí nearby had provided a certain companionship during the time he and Thorn spent enslaved to Galbatorix. And he'd learned from them too. The Eldunarí had often ranted in the ancient language, and he'd managed to pick up a word here, a word there, although the exact meaning often eluded him.

He had left the Eldunarí with Nasuada outside the citadel in Urû'baen following Galbatorix's explosive demise. It had been the right choice; the dragons needed care, and Murtagh had felt inadequate to it, as had Thorn. So far as Murtagh knew, all of the existing Eldunarí—including Yngmar and Umaroth—were now with Eragon in the far east, beyond the borders of Alagaësia, where he'd gone to establish a hold for the next generation of dragons and Riders.

Which was as it should be. And yet, in his darker moments, Murtagh found himself chewing on discontent that Eragon should have so much, even though life had been far harder for him and Thorn. It wasn't fair. Not that Murtagh believed life had anything to do with fairness. Nevertheless, the discontent remained, although he tried not to feed it, tried to focus on more helpful thoughts.

No remembering!

Murtagh dug his nails into his palms and spent a few long minutes watching the slow parade of the land below. Rows of long, thin clouds straked diagonally beneath Thorn, breaking up the ground into discrete stripes of green-brown spectacle.

What do you think magic is? he asked Thorn.

Potential.

When he tired of thinking about magic, Murtagh occupied himself by composing poems in the fashion of Galbatorix's court, in a form known as Attenwrack, after its originator, Atten the Red—a minor earl from the far south, near the city of Aroughs.

Murtagh had never been one for scholarly pursuits. Growing up, he had played the obedient student, but he'd had little interest in math, logic, or astronomy. History had been a carefully metered account approved by Galbatorix, a repetitive cycle of self-praise that bored him even in the first telling. He learned his letters and practiced his reading, but the books that might have interested him were locked in Galbatorix's great vault, forbidden to everyone but the king himself.

Always Murtagh had found himself drawn more to physical activities: sparring, dancing, climbing, hunting. They cleared his mind, gave him a sense of well-being and accomplishment and, most importantly, control.

And yet now, in the empty wilderness, with nothing but the sky and the earth to behold, and a vast and dangerous silence constantly tempting him to

retrospection, he had found a new enjoyment in arranging words according to the patterns of the Attenwrack. It was a strange experience, but he persisted, confused and intrigued by the satisfaction that the process gave him.

As it was too difficult to put pen to parchment while riding Thorn, he spoke the words out loud and did his best to hold them in his mind.

It wasn't easy. Sometimes he forgot what he'd composed, and that was frustrating. Other times he couldn't think of the right word—even when he knew it existed—and that was frustrating too. The hardest part was fitting the words into a pleasing shape while still saying what he wanted to say.

Speaking slowly so as to avoid mistakes, he recited his latest stanza:

*Eagle soars, eagle hunts, a king of air.
Sparrows dart, sparrows flock, no crown to wear.
Ever at odds, the many against the one.
In equal combat, the eagle prevails.
Unequal and harried, the sovereign fails.
Fly as you are told or fly alone, the
End of each is still the same. The chilled
Embrace of death will calm your final care.*

And dragons eat them all, said Thorn.

Murtagh scratched his neck and stared at the horizon, somber. He wished Thorn *could* eat every living thing, should the need arise. But it still would not save either of them from their fated end, for the doom of all things was to die and be forgotten. Even dragons.



That evening, they made camp in a field by a grove of alder trees. Murtagh would have preferred the cover of the trees—he hated sleeping out in the open—but as he always did when it came to where they stopped, he deferred to Thorn.

The alders stood along the banks of a small stream that poured out of Du Weldenvarden some leagues distant. While he waited for the campfire to build to full heat, Murtagh went to fill their waterskins.

The white bark of the alders almost seemed to glow in the fading light, and it felt cool and still and sacred beneath the arching branches. The leaves were starting to turn red and gold, and the smell of dewy moss freshened the air.

Murtagh knelt by the trilling stream. The water ran cold across his wrists as he submerged the skins, one after another. Once filled, the skins were heavy, awkward, and slippery. Murtagh had only packed two originally, but he found that flying made him unaccountably thirsty, and so he'd bought another three off a trapper in the Spine.

As he lifted the skins, the carrying strap on one broke, and the skin fell to the ground.

“Barzûl,” he swore in Dwarvish.

He tried to pick up the skin, but it kept slipping out of his hand, and the four other skins kept pulling him off-balance.

Without thinking, he called out, “Thorn! Can you help? I can’t carry them all!”

A snuffling sound came from the edge of the grove. He looked back to see Thorn crouched in front of the trees, sniffing and swinging his head back and forth.

Murtagh realized the problem at once. There was enough room between the alders for the dragon to fit—a game trail led down to the stream—but only barely. The space was too confined for Thorn to spread his wings, lift his head, or easily turn around.

“You don’t have to—”

The words died in his mouth as Thorn took a step forward. Then another. Hope began to form within Murtagh.

A gust of wind ransacked the branches over Thorn’s head. The wood creaked and groaned with uncanny complaints, the grove seeming come alive with hostile intent. Thorn cowered, and his lip curled to bare his fangs. Still snarling, he retreated to the edge of the alders and shrank against his haunches.

A curious mixture of sadness and anger displaced Murtagh’s hope. He set his jaw and adjusted his grip on the skins.

Thorn extended his left foreleg beneath the trees, reaching out with extended claws. *Give them thisways. I will carry them back.*

“It’s all right,” he said, and kept his gaze on the skins. “I’ll manage. Go. I’ll be there directly.”

Thorn growled, but there was a plaintive quality to the sound. After a moment, he turned and, with heavy steps, crawled back to their camp.

Murtagh’s breath hitched in his chest. He ignored it and contorted his right hand until he was able to grip the mouth of the fallen skin.

Then he trudged out of the grove.



The fire had died down, leaving a bed of smoldering coals.

Murtagh stared at the glowing rubies and compared them in his mind to the stone Sarros had found.

He scratched his forearm where it ached. He was more tired than usual. The excitement at Ceunon and the flight thence had taken their toll.

From his bags, he fetched the leather packet that held his quills and parchment and a bottle of oak-gall ink. He took the piece of parchment half covered with his upright script and carefully lettered the lines he'd composed earlier.

The result left him unsatisfied, feeling as if he could have done better.

While he waited for the strokes of ink to dry, he used his finger to draw a narrow furrow in the ground. Then, from one end, a fork branching left and right.

He cocked his head, studying the sight.

During the hours he'd spent contemplating magic, he had begun to consider the possibilities of *if* spells. They held more potential than most realized, he believed.

He touched the point where the furrows forked and whispered, "Ílf adurna fithren, sving raehta." Or, in rough translation, *If water touches, turn right*. Then he unstopped the skin by his side and poured a measure of water into the opposite end of the furrow.

The water ran along the course until the way divided. Then, as if guided by an invisible hand, it flowed into the rightward branch of the shallow ditch he'd dug. And Murtagh felt a slight—but proportional—expenditure of energy. He brought the enchantment to an end.

He frowned as he stoppered the skin.

How many *ifs* could he stack in a spell? And how close did he need to be to the point of action? Could he bind a conditioned spell to an object, like a gem, and leave it to do his bidding? As a trap for a foe or to signal him in the event of a certain happening? The possibilities were myriad. Could he build an edifice of *ifs* that would protect Thorn and himself from every conceivable threat?

All things to experiment with.

Across the bedded fire, Thorn stirred and uttered a whimpering sound. He was sleeping, but it was an uneasy slumber. Always it was so.

Murtagh watched him, troubled, and rubbed his left forearm, rubbed the old hurt away. He sighed and looked at the great arc of stars splattered across the night sky, and he wished for the wisdom to calm and comfort, to heal wounded minds.

If the thought were a prayer, he knew not to whom he prayed. The dwarf gods weren't his own, and the superstitions of the common folk held no appeal to him. But he hoped that perhaps someone or something might hear his plea. And if not—if, as he suspected, no one was there to respond—then the task of improving was his and his alone. The prospect was daunting in the extreme, but there was solace in it too. Whatever he accomplished—good or evil—he might rightfully claim without apportioned dues. If chance dictated the events of his life, *he* was the master of his responses, and no king or god could infringe upon that right.

He packed away the parchment, quills, and ink, and then laid himself down on his blanket. He looked to Thorn and decided to let the dragon sleep rather than wake him for their nightly ritual. Thorn needed the rest after a long day of flying, and Murtagh was well familiar with Thorn's true name. It was as dear to him as his own, and as the incident at the alders had shown, another telling of it would teach him nothing new.

Tomorrow will serve, Murtagh thought.

Too soft to hear, he spoke his true name, and the back of his neck prickled, and his heart quickened at the flood of self-knowledge, harsh and uncompromising.

Then he pulled the blanket closer around his shoulders and watched the pulsing of the coals while he waited for his heart to slow and sleep to take him.



Murtagh dreamt, and they were difficult dreams.

He found himself reliving his ambush and capture in Tronjheim. Being bound hand and foot, the Twins forcing him to ride through countless miles of dark tunnels and then across the better part of Alagaësia to Urû'baen and Galbatorix. Never had he felt so helpless....

Then he was fighting Eragon upon the Burning Plains. The hosts of men and dwarves clashed about them while the dwarven king lay dead in his golden armor amid the field of eternal flame. And regret mixed with rage.

When the battle receded from mind, his vision shifted:

Nasuada standing before him. Nasuada, as he had first seen her in Tronjheim. Young and untested by the rigors of command, not yet risen to the leadership of the Varden nor yet to her queenship, but tall and regal nonetheless.

And he, by contrast, a prisoner in a cell, sequestered there by the Varden as they attempted to determine where his true loyalties lay.

Even from that moment, he admired her, for he could see that her resolve was a match for his own. And she showed him kindness when no kindness was warranted; she spoke with him without prejudice, out of a sincere desire to understand what had brought him and Eragon to the Varden. She spoke with him as the person he was, not the person others believed him to be.

She shifted then: her dress changed to that which she had been wearing when, much later and at Galbatorix's orders, Murtagh had seized her from the Varden's encampment. Her expression of defiance tore at his heart. He could see her fear beneath, and the monstrous unfairness of the situation broke him.

He saw her chained to the ashen altar within the Hall of the Soothsayer, in the ancient chamber beneath Urû'baen, where Galbatorix had kept her prisoner.

Stains and tears appeared on her dress, and her hair grew frazzled, her eyes haunted. Livid marks disfigured her arms. But never did her defiance vanish throughout the tortures Galbatorix had him inflict on her. And still, she showed him understanding.

Then they were together in the rubble-strewn courtyard outside the citadel in Urû'baen. Smoke darkened the sky, and ash fell like snow. The king was dead. The war was won. Nasuada was looking up at him, all defiance gone, her dark eyes round and vulnerable. And the only words he could manage were "I'm sorry."

They weren't enough. How could they be?



Starlings and magpies were arguing in the alder tops as Murtagh woke. His forehead was sweaty, and under his arms too, and his pulse was racing like a frightened horse.

He sat up and wiped his forehead.

The sun hadn't risen yet, and Thorn was still asleep.

His heart felt hollow. There had been a brief time, after the battle for Tronjheim, where he had been a free man, and Nasuada as yet unburdened by the responsibilities of command. The possibility of a courtship had just begun to form between them when fate had intervened. Had they continued uninterrupted...

He shook his head. It was bootless to consider *what ifs* and *might have beens*. What was, was, and it was the lot of the living to deal with it as best they could.

But knowing that did nothing to ease his pain.

Careful to be quiet, Murtagh stood, picked up Zar'roc from by his blanket, and walked a ways from their camp.

The frost-laden grass crunched under his boots, a crisp, dry sound.

He stood in an expanse of empty sward. Chest up, shoulders back, staring forward into the future.

An intake of frozen air, and he swept Zar'roc from its crimson sheath. In dawn's grey light, the sword's blade was a sharpened shard of iridescent red—a shimmering thorn of frozen blood, eager to cut and stab and kill. The blade of a Rider, forged out of brightsteel by an elven smith over a century past and imbued with spells of strength and keenness and resistance. The finest weapon a warrior could hope to wield, and yet he regarded it with as much aversion as appreciation. A Rider's blade, yes, but that Rider had been Morzan. His father. And Morzan had used Zar'roc for many a black and bloody deed...as had Murtagh after him.

Not for nothing had Morzan named the blade *Misery* in the ancient language, and true to its name, the sword had brought pain to many throughout the land,

including Murtagh himself.

Sometimes he wondered if he should have ever taken Zar'roc from Eragon.

He shook off the thought. Whether he wanted it or not, Morzan's shadow would always lie upon him, and aside from his name and the scar on his back, Zar'roc was all he had from his father. It was a meager and hateful inheritance, but it was his alone, and for that he clung to it.

He held the sheath in his off hand as he flowed through the familiar forms. Step, cut, parry, turn. Block, swing, lunge. He moved without thinking, his mind as still and empty as a windless lake on a cloudless day.

Attack, defend, escape. Beat and break, search the opening, make the cut, risk the stab. He used the sheath as a dagger, blocking, deflecting, rapping the wrist, creating opportunities for a lethal blow.

His skin warmed, and his pulse steadied. He moved faster, pushing himself to maintain the pace of battle, every movement a whip-snap of life-preserving, life-ending action.

His lungs gave out before his arms. Unable to continue, he fell to his knees and braced the sheath against the ground. Zar'roc he placed across his thighs.

As the first rays of light crept across the frozen grass, the egg-shaped ruby in Zar'roc'sommel refracted the beams, splitting them into glowing darts of red.

Once his breath steadied, he stood, sheathed the blade, and staggered back to camp.

Across the dead fire, Thorn watched. He sniffed as Murtagh came close. *You stink of fear.*

Murtagh grunted. "I know. I'll wash." He flinched as Thorn licked his elbow. Then he forced himself to relax and patted the dragon's head.



The days followed the same pattern. They flew, being careful to avoid detection. Murtagh thought and wrote and thought some more. At camp, he recorded whatever was worth saving and sometimes cast a few spells. And every evening, he and Thorn spoke their true names together in silent confession.

Nights he dreamt, and neither he nor Thorn spoke of what they saw in the small hours.

Throughout, Du Weldenvarden remained a seemingly endless sea of trees to their left. The forest's dark depths filled Murtagh with foreboding; he disliked the idea of losing himself among the trackless ranks of pines. Still, he wondered what it would be like to walk the ancient forest. He and Thorn had never had an opportunity to visit the ancestral home of the first Riders.

The thought reminded him of Vroengard Island, and he shivered. *That* had been one place he and Thorn had been glad to leave. The whole island had felt wrong, tainted by the deaths of dragons, poisoned by the magics loosed in the Riders' fall.

Sometimes it felt to Murtagh as if the whole of Alagaësia were a graveyard, laden with history's sorrows.

During the third evening, Thorn was in a playful mood, so they sparred together, or as well as a man and dragon could. Murtagh ran and darted and jumped around Thorn, trying to touch him with the tip of Zar'roc (dulled for the moment with magic). And Thorn in turn did his best to keep Murtagh at bay and to catch him and pin him to the ground.

It was great fun, even if Murtagh ended up bruised and cut. He left a few bruises of his own, but Thorn didn't mind; the dragon's eyes sparkled with fierce enjoyment every time Murtagh landed a hit or made him dodge.

Afterward, Murtagh lay against Thorn's heaving belly as they both caught their breath. "You were as slow as a turtle," he said in a playful tone.

Thorn nudged his bruised arm. *And you were as obvious as an ox.*

Murtagh smirked. "Maybe, but I still managed to mark you."

A small, good-humored growl was his answer.



On the morning of the fourth day, a sheet of silver appeared stretched along the southern horizon. "Isenstar!" said Murtagh, and Thorn banked into a gentle turn.

The lake was one of the largest in Alagaësia. Under normal circumstances, they would have stuck to the shore, keeping land beneath them in case they needed to alight. However, there were sure to be folk along the water's edge, and the spell Murtagh used to hide Thorn from prying eyes did nothing to conceal the sound of his wings or the feel of their minds. So Thorn struck out straight over the rippling expanse.

There were herons at Isenstar, and gulls and terns, flown inland to feast on the lake fish. A V-formation of herons joined Thorn in the sky; the birds showed no fear of the larger, slower dragon.

Murtagh amused himself by shouting at the herons, and they responded with an appalling barking scream that made him think of a donkey crossed with a pig.

All day Thorn flew, maintaining a steady pace with slow, powerful flaps. At noontime the reflected light from below was so bright, Murtagh had to avert his eyes to keep from being blinded. Later, the water acquired a startling clarity; even from far above, he could see great fishes and swaths of swaying weeds.

There were boats too, fishermen competing with the birds for the bounty of the lake. Also trappers and merchants transporting goods north or south between Gil'ead and Ceunon.

But what caught Murtagh's attention the most was a slim, two-person rowboat that had a white hull and an unmistakably elegant shape. "Elves," he said, and pointed with his mind.

Thorn swerved west, away from the rowboat.

"Guard your thoughts," said Murtagh. "If they haven't noticed us, we might sneak by."

Thorn hummed in response.

The rowboat shrank behind them more slowly than Murtagh would have liked. He watched until it was a tiny, undistinguished speck, and only then did he relax.

Of all the races, elves were the most skilled with magic and mental communication. If the elves had decided to reach out with their thoughts and test the sky, well...Murtagh allowed himself a wry smile. The day would have become unpleasantly interesting.

He scratched around the spikes on Thorn's neck. "Well done."

Sharp eyes, was all the dragon said in return.

The sky had darkened to purple, and a scrim of golden clouds hung above the lake when Gil'ead entered into view, past the shoreline ahead of them.

The city was much as Murtagh remembered. Low and rough, with log-walled structures and—near the center—a sprawling fortress. It was there Lord Relgin, the city's current governor, would reside, and there Murtagh suspected he would find Ilenna, currying favor and gathering secrets. Assuming, that was, her family hadn't been exiled from favor for their association with the Empire. But Murtagh doubted it. Her father's shipping concern was too useful for whoever held power, whether that was Galbatorix, Nasuada, or Lord Relgin.

Murtagh was glad to have arrived, but the sight of Gil'ead brought him little pleasure. The last time he and Thorn had been at the city, they had been fighting at Galbatorix's behest, in a desperate and failed attempt to defend the place from the elves. It had been a bloody, miserable battle. And the time before *that* had been little better: an ambush and then him having to sneak into the fortress to rescue Eragon from the clutches of the Shade Durza.

He looked for it and saw: the roof above the fortress banquet hall, rebuilt and newly shingled. The people of Gil'ead had been busy since the end of the war.

In his mind, Murtagh heard the mighty *crack* that had sounded when Saphira ripped off the banquet hall's original roof during their escape. He made a face. That had been a dire night. Nor had it been the first such night in Gil'ead for his family.

*We've had an unhappy history here, he thought. Best not to add to the tally.
Then don't get into any more fights, said Thorn.
You know I can't promise that.*

Murtagh turned his gaze westward. In that direction, tucked somewhere among the hills surrounding Gil'ead, was the hollow where he'd hidden with Saphira while they plotted to rescue Eragon....

"That way," he said, pointing.

The horizon tilted as Thorn angled westward, and Murtagh returned to studying the layout of the city while he considered how best to approach Ilenna.

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