

## Synopsis of *Eragon* and *Eldest*

Eragon—a fifteen-year-old farm boy—is shocked when a polished blue stone appears before him in the range of mountains known as the Spine. Eragon takes the stone to the farm where he lives with his uncle, Garrow, and his cousin, Roran, outside the small village of Carvahall. Garrow and his late wife, Marian, have raised Eragon. Nothing is known of Eragon's father; his mother, Selena, was Garrow's sister and has not been seen since Eragon's birth.

Later, the stone cracks open and a baby dragon emerges. When Eragon touches her, a silvery mark appears on his palm, and an irrevocable bond is forged between their minds, making Eragon one of the legendary Dragon Riders. He names the dragon Saphira, after a dragon mentioned by the village storyteller, Brom.

The Dragon Riders were created thousands of years earlier in the aftermath of the devastating war between the elves and the dragons, in order to prevent their two races from ever again fighting each other. The Riders became peacekeepers, educators, healers, natural philosophers, and the greatest of all magicians—since being joined with a dragon makes one a spellcaster. Under their guidance and protection, the land enjoyed a golden age.

When humans arrived in Alagaësia, they too were added to this elite order. After many years of peace, the warlike Urgals killed the dragon of a young human Rider named Galbatorix. The loss drove him mad, and when his elders refused to provide him with another dragon, Galbatorix set out to topple the Riders.

He stole another dragon—whom he named Shruikan and forced to serve him through certain black spells—and gathered around himself a group of thirteen traitors: the Forsworn. With the help of those cruel disciples, Galbatorix threw down the Riders; killed their leader, Vrael; and declared himself king over Alagaësia. His actions forced the elves to retreat deep within their pinewood forest and the dwarves to hide in their tunnels and caves, and neither race now ventures forth from its secret places. The stalemate between Galbatorix and the other races has endured for over a hundred years, during which all of the Forsworn have died from various causes. It is into this tense political situation that Eragon finds himself thrust.

Several months after Saphira hatches, two menacing, beetle-like strangers called the Ra'zac arrive in Carvahall, searching for the stone that was Saphira's egg. Eragon and Saphira manage to evade them, but they destroy Eragon's home and murder Garrow.

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Eragon vows to track down and kill the Ra'zac. As he leaves Carvahall, the storyteller Brom, who knows of Saphira's existence, accosts Eragon and asks to accompany him. Brom gives Eragon a red Dragon Rider's sword, Zar'roc, though he refuses to say how he acquired it.

Eragon learns much from Brom during their travels, including how to fight with swords and use magic. When they lose the Ra'zac's trail, they go to the port town of Teirm and visit Brom's old friend Jeod, who Brom thinks may be able to help them locate the Ra'zac's lair. In Teirm, they learn that the Ra'zac live somewhere close to the city of Dras-Leona. Eragon also has his fortune told by the herbalist Angela and receives two strange pieces of advice from her companion, the werecat Solembum.

On the way to Dras-Leona, Brom reveals that he is an agent of the Varden—a rebel group dedicated to overthrowing Galbatorix—and that he had been hiding in Carvahall, waiting for a new Dragon Rider to appear. Twenty years ago, Brom was involved in stealing Saphira's egg from Galbatorix and, in the process, killed Morzan,

first and last of the Forsworn. Only two other dragon eggs still exist, both of which remain in Galbatorix's possession.

In and near Dras-Leona, they encounter the Ra'zac, who mortally wound Brom while he is protecting Eragon. A mysterious young man named Murtagh drives the Ra'zac away. With his dying breath, Brom confesses that he too was once a Rider and that his slain dragon was also named Saphira.

Eragon and Saphira then decide to join the Varden, but Eragon is captured at the city of Gil'ead and brought before Durza, an evil and powerful Shade who serves Galbatorix. With Murtagh's help, Eragon escapes from prison, bringing along with him the elf Arya, another captive of Durza's and an ambassador to the Varden. Arya has been poisoned and requires the Varden's medical help.

Pursued by a contingent of Urgals, the four of them flee across the land to the Varden's headquarters in the giant Beor Mountains, which stand over ten miles high. Circumstances force Murtagh—who does not want to go to the Varden—to reveal that he is the son of Morzan. Murtagh, however, has denounced his dead father's villainy and fled Galbatorix's court to seek his own destiny. And he tells Eragon that the sword Zar'roc once belonged to Murtagh's father.

Just before they are overwhelmed by the Urgals, Eragon and his friends are rescued by the Varden, who live in Farthen Dûr, a hollow mountain that is also home to the dwarves' capital, Tronjheim. Once inside, Eragon is taken to Ajihad, leader of the Varden, while Murtagh is imprisoned because of his relation to Morzan.

Eragon meets with the dwarf king, Hrothgar, and Ajihad's daughter, Nasuada, and is tested by the Twins, two rather nasty magicians who serve Ajihad. Eragon and Saphira also bless one of the Varden's orphan babies while the Varden heal Arya of her poisoning.

Eragon's stay is disrupted by news of an Urgal army approaching underground, through the dwarves' tunnels. In the battle that follows, Eragon is separated from Saphira and forced to fight Durza alone. Far stronger than any human, Durza easily defeats Eragon, slashing open his back from shoulder to hip. At that moment,

Saphira and Arya break the roof of a chamber—a sixty-foot-wide star sapphire—distracting Durza long enough for Eragon to stab him through the heart. Freed from Durza's spells, which were controlling them, the Urgals are driven back.

While Eragon lies unconscious after the battle, he is telepathically contacted by a being who identifies himself as Togira Ikonoka—the Cripple Who Is Whole. He urges Eragon to seek him for instruction in Ellesméra, the elves' capital.

When Eragon wakes, he has a huge scar across his back. Dismayed, he also realizes he only slew Durza through sheer luck and that he desperately needs more training. And at the end of Book One, he decides that, yes, he will find this Togira Ikonoka and learn from him.

*Eldest* begins three days after Eragon slays Durza. The Varden are recovering from the Battle of Farthen Dûr, and Ajihad, Murtagh, and the Twins have been hunting down the Urgals who escaped into the tunnels underneath Farthen Dûr after the battle. When a group of Urgals takes them by surprise, Ajihad is killed and Murtagh and the Twins disappear in the fray. The Varden's Council of Elders appoints Nasuada to succeed her father as new leader of the Varden, and Eragon swears fealty to her as her vassal.

Eragon and Saphira decide they must leave for Ellesméra to begin their training with the Cripple Who Is Whole. Before they go, the dwarf king, Hrothgar, offers to adopt Eragon into his clan, the Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, and Eragon accepts, which gives him full legal rights as a dwarf and entitles him to participate in dwarvish councils.

Both Arya and Orik, Hrothgar's foster son, accompany Eragon and Saphira on their journey to the land of the elves. En route, they stop in Tarnag, a dwarf city. Some of the dwarves are friendly, but Eragon learns that one clan in particular does not welcome him and Saphira—the Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, who hate Riders and dragons because the Forsworn slaughtered so many of their clan.

The party finally arrives in Du Weldenvarden, the forest of the

elves. At Ellesméra, Eragon and Saphira meet Islanzadí, queen of the elves, who, they learn, is Arya's mother. They also meet with the Cripple Who Is Whole: an ancient elf named Oromis. He too is a Rider. Oromis and his dragon, Glaedr, have kept their existence hidden from Galbatorix for the past hundred years while they searched for a way to overthrow the king.

Both Oromis and Glaedr are afflicted with old wounds that prevent them from fighting—Glaedr is missing a leg and Oromis, who was captured and broken by the Forsworn, is unable to control large amounts of magic and is prone to debilitating seizures.

Eragon and Saphira begin their training, both together and separately. Eragon learns more about the history of Alagaësia's races, swordsmanship, and the ancient language, which all magicians use. In his studies of the ancient language, he discovers he made a terrible mistake when he and Saphira blessed the orphaned baby in Farthen Dûr: he intended to say "May you be shielded from misfortune," but what he actually said was "May you be *a shield* from misfortune." He has cursed the baby to shield others from any and all pain and misfortune.

Saphira makes quick progress learning from Glaedr, but the scar Eragon bears as a result of his battle with Durza slows his training. Not only is the mark on his back disfiguring, but at unexpected times it incapacitates him with painful spasms. He does not know how he will improve as a magician and swordsman if his convulsions continue.

Eragon begins to realize he has feelings for Arya. He confesses them to her, but she rebuffs him and soon leaves to return to the Varden.

Then the elves hold a ritual known as the Agaetí Blödhren, or the Blood-oath Celebration, during which Eragon goes through a magical transformation: he is turned into an elf-human hybrid—not quite one, not quite the other. As a result, his scar is healed and he now has the same superhuman strength the elves have. His features are also altered, so he appears slightly elvish.

At this point, Eragon learns that the Varden are on the brink of battle with the Empire and are in dire need of him and Saphira. While Eragon has been away, Nasuada has moved the Varden from Farthen Dûr to Surda, a country south of the Empire that still maintains its independence from Galbatorix.

Eragon and Saphira leave Ellesméra, along with Orik, after promising Oromis and Glaedr that they will return to complete their training as soon as they can.

Meanwhile, Eragon's cousin, Roran, has been having his own adventures. Galbatorix has sent the Ra'zac and a legion of imperial soldiers to Carvahall, looking to capture Roran, so as to use him against Eragon. Roran manages to escape into the nearby mountains. He and the other villagers attempt to drive the soldiers away. Numerous villagers die in the process. When Sloan, the village butcher—who hates Roran and opposes Roran's engagement to his daughter, Katrina—betrays Roran to the Ra'zac, the beetle-like creatures find and attack Roran in the middle of the night in his bedroom. Roran fights his way free, but the Ra'zac capture Katrina.

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Roran convinces the people of Carvahall to leave their village and seek refuge with the Varden in Surda. They set out westward for the coast, in the hope that they can sail from there to Surda. Roran proves himself as a leader, bringing them safely through the Spine to the coast. In the port town of Teirm, they meet Jeod, who tells Roran that Eragon is a Rider and explains what the Ra'zac were looking for in Carvahall in the first place—Saphira. Jeod offers to help Roran and the villagers reach Surda, pointing out that once Roran and the villagers are safely with the Varden, Roran can enlist Eragon's help in rescuing Katrina. Jeod and the villagers pirate a ship and sail toward Surda.

Eragon and Saphira reach the Varden, who are readying for battle. Eragon learns what has become of the baby upon whom he bestowed the ill-phrased blessing: her name is Elva, and though, chronologically, she is still a baby, she has the appearance of a four-year-old child and the voice and demeanor of a world-weary adult.

Eragon's spell forces her to sense the pain of all the people she sees, and compels her to protect them; if she resists this urge, she herself suffers.

Eragon, Saphira, and the Varden ride out to meet the Empire's troops on the Burning Plains, a large swath of land that smokes and smolders from underground peat fires. They are astonished when another Rider appears astride a red dragon. The new Rider slays Hrothgar, the dwarf king, and then begins to fight with Eragon and Saphira. When Eragon manages to wrench the Rider's helm off, he is shocked to see Murtagh.

Murtagh did not die in the Urgal ambush under Farthen Dûr. The Twins arranged it all; they are traitors who planned the ambush so Ajjihad would be killed and they could capture Murtagh and take him to Galbatorix. The king forced Murtagh to swear loyalty to him in the ancient language. Now Murtagh and his newly hatched dragon, Thorn, are Galbatorix's slaves, and Murtagh asserts that his oaths will never allow him to disobey the king, though Eragon pleads with him to abandon Galbatorix and join the Varden.

Murtagh is able to overwhelm Eragon and Saphira with an inexplicable display of strength. However, he decides to free them because of their previous friendship. Before Murtagh leaves, he takes Zar'roc from Eragon, claiming it is his inheritance as Morzan's elder son. Then he reveals that he is not Morzan's only son—Eragon and Murtagh are brothers, both sons of Selena, Morzan's consort. The Twins discovered the truth when they examined Eragon's memories the day he arrived at Farthen Dûr.

Still reeling from Murtagh's revelation about their parentage, Eragon retreats with Saphira, and he is finally reunited with Roran and the villagers of Carvahall, who have arrived at the Burning Plains just in time to aid the Varden in the battle. Roran fought heroically and succeeded in killing the Twins.

Eragon and Roran make peace over Eragon's role in Garrow's death, and Eragon vows to help Roran rescue Katrina from the Ra'zac.



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# THE GATES OF DEATH

**E**ragon stared at the dark tower of stone wherein hid the monsters who had murdered his uncle, Garrow.

He was lying on his belly behind the edge of a sandy hill dotted with sparse blades of grass, thornbushes, and small, rosebud-like cactuses. The brittle stems of last year's foliage pricked his palms as he inched forward to gain a better view of Helgrind, which loomed over the surrounding land like a black dagger thrust out from the bowels of the earth.

The evening sun streaked the low hills with shadows long and narrow and—far in the west—illuminated the surface of Leona Lake so that the horizon became a rippling bar of gold.

To his left, Eragon heard the steady breathing of his cousin, Roran, who was stretched out beside him. The normally inaudible flow of air seemed preternaturally loud to Eragon with his heightened sense of hearing, one of many such changes wrought by his experience during the *Agatí Blödhren*, the elves' Blood-oath Celebration.

He paid little attention to that now as he watched a column of people inch toward the base of Helgrind, apparently having walked from the city of Dras-Leona, some miles away. A contingent of twenty-four men and women, garbed in thick leather robes, occupied the head of the column. This group moved with many strange and varied gaits—they limped and shuffled and humped and wriggled; they swung on crutches or used arms to propel themselves forward on curiously short legs—contortions that were necessary because, as Eragon realized, every one of the twenty-four lacked an arm or a leg or some combination thereof. Their leader sat upright upon a litter borne by six oiled slaves, a pose Eragon regarded as a

rather amazing accomplishment, considering that the man or woman—he could not tell which—consisted of nothing more than a torso and head, upon whose brow balanced an ornate leather crest three feet high.

“The priests of Helgrind,” he murmured to Roran.

“Can they use magic?”

“Possibly. I dare not explore Helgrind with my mind until they leave, for if any *are* magicians, they will sense my touch, however light, and our presence will be revealed.”

Behind the priests trudged a double line of young men swathed in gold cloth. Each carried a rectangular metal frame subdivided by twelve horizontal crossbars from which hung iron bells the size of winter rutabagas. Half of the young men gave their frames a vigorous shake when they stepped forward with their right foot, producing a dolorous cacophony of notes, while the other half shook their frames when they advanced upon the left foot, causing iron tongues to crash against iron throats and emit a mournful clamor that echoed over the hills. The acolytes accompanied the throbbing of the bells with their own cries, groaning and shouting in an ecstasy of passion.

At the rear of the grotesque procession trudged a comet’s tail of inhabitants from Dras-Leona: nobles, merchants, tradesmen, several high-ranking military commanders, and a motley collection of those less fortunate, such as laborers, beggars, and common foot soldiers.

Eragon wondered if Dras-Leona’s governor, Marcus Tábor, was somewhere in their midst.

Drawing to a stop at the edge of the precipitous mound of scree that ringed Helgrind, the priests gathered on either side of a rust-colored boulder with a polished top. When the entire column stood motionless before the crude altar, the creature upon the litter stirred and began to chant in a voice as discordant as the moaning of the bells. The shaman’s declamations were repeatedly truncated by gusts of wind, but Eragon caught snatches of the ancient language—strangely twisted and mispronounced—interspersed with dwarf and Urgal words, all of which were united by an archaic dialect of

Eragon's own tongue. What he understood caused him to shudder, for the sermon spoke of things best left unknown, of a malevolent hate that had festered for centuries in the dark caverns of people's hearts before being allowed to flourish in the Riders' absence, of blood and madness, and of foul rituals performed underneath a black moon.

At the end of that depraved oration, two of the lesser priests rushed forward and lifted their master—or mistress, as the case might be—off the litter and onto the face of the altar. Then the High Priest issued a brief order. Twin blades of steel winked like stars as they rose and fell. A rivulet of blood sprang from each of the High Priest's shoulders, flowed down the leather-encased torso, and then pooled across the boulder until it overflowed onto the gravel below.

Two more priests jumped forward to catch the crimson flow in goblets that, when filled to the rim, were distributed among the members of the congregation, who eagerly drank.

"Gar!" said Roran in an undertone. "You failed to mention that those errant flesh-mongers, those gore-bellied, boggle-minded idiot-worshippers were *cannibals*."

"Not quite. They do not partake of the meat."

When all the attendees had wet their throats, the servile novitiates returned the High Priest to the litter and bound the creature's shoulders with strips of white linen. Wet blotches quickly sullied the virgin cloth.

The wounds seemed to have no effect upon the High Priest, for the limbless figure rotated back toward the devotees with their lips of cranberry red and pronounced, "Now are you truly my Brothers and Sisters, having tasted the sap of my veins here in the shadow of almighty Helgrind. Blood calls to blood, and if ever your Family should need help, do then what you can for the Church and for others who acknowledge the power of our Dread Lord. . . . To affirm and reaffirm our fealty to the Triumvirate, recite with me the Nine Oaths. . . . By Gorm, Ilda, and Fell Angvara, we vow to perform homage at least thrice a month, in the hour before dusk, and then

to make an offering of ourselves to appease the eternal hunger of our Great and Terrible Lord. . . . We vow to observe the strictures as they are presented in the book of Tosk. . . . We vow to always carry our Bregnir on our bodies and to forever abstain from the twelve of twelves and the touch of a many-knotted rope, lest it corrupt . . .”

A sudden rise in the wind obscured the rest of the High Priest’s list. Then Eragon saw those who listened take out a small, curved knife and, one by one, cut themselves in the crook of their elbows and anoint the altar with a stream of their blood.

Some minutes later, the angry breeze subsided and Eragon again heard the priest: “. . . and such things as you long and lust for will be granted to you as a reward for your obedience. . . . Our worship is complete. However, if any now stand among you who are brave enough to demonstrate the true depth of their faith, let them show themselves!”

The audience stiffened and leaned forward, their faces rapt; this, apparently, was what they had been waiting for.

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For a long, silent pause, it seemed as if they would be disappointed, but then one of the acolytes broke ranks and shouted, “I will!” With a roar of delight, his brethren began to brandish their bells in a quick and savage beat, whipping the congregation into such a frenzy, they jumped and yelled as if they had taken leave of their senses. The rough music kindled a spark of excitement in Eragon’s heart—despite his revulsion at the proceedings—waking some primal and brutish part of him.

Shedding his gold robes so that he wore nothing but a leather breechcloth, the dark-haired youth sprang on top of the altar. Gouts of ruby spray erupted on either side of his feet. He faced Helgrind and began to shiver and quake as if stricken with palsy, keeping time with the tolling of the cruel iron bells. His head rolled loosely upon his neck, foam gathered at the corners of his mouth, his arms thrashed like snakes. Sweat oiled his muscles until he gleamed like a bronze statue in the dying light.

The bells soon reached a manic tempo where one note clashed

against another, at which point the young man thrust a hand out behind himself. Into it, a priest deposited the hilt of a bizarre implement: a single-edged weapon, two and a half feet long, with a full tang, scale grips, a vestigial crossguard, and a broad, flat blade that widened and was scalloped near the end, a shape reminiscent of a dragon wing. It was a tool designed for but one purpose: to hack through armor and bones and sinew as easily as through a bulging waterskin.

The young man lifted the weapon so that it slanted toward the highest peak of Helgrind. Then he dropped to one knee and, with an incoherent cry, brought the blade down across his right wrist.

Blood sprayed the rocks behind the altar.

Eragon winced and averted his eyes, although he could not escape the youth's piercing screams. It was nothing Eragon had not seen in battle, but it seemed wrong to deliberately mutilate yourself when it was so easy to become disfigured in everyday life.

Blades of grass rasped against one another as Roran shifted his weight. He muttered some curse, which was lost in his beard, and then fell silent again.

While a priest tended to the young man's wound—stanching the bleeding with a spell—an acolyte let loose two slaves from the High Priest's litter, only to chain them by the ankles to an iron loop embedded in the altar. Then the acolytes divested themselves of numerous packages from underneath their robes and piled them on the ground, out of reach of the slaves.

Their ceremonies at an end, the priests and their retinue departed Helgrind for Dras-Leona, wailing and ringing the entire way. The now one-handed zealot stumbled along just behind the High Priest.

A beatific smile graced his face.

"Well," said Eragon, and released his pent-up breath as the column vanished behind a distant hill.

"Well what?"

"I've traveled among both dwarves and elves, and nothing they did was ever as strange as what those people, those *humans*, do."

"They're as monstrous as the Ra'zac." Roran jerked his chin toward Helgrind. "Can you find out now if Katrina is in there?"

"I'll try. But be ready to run."

Closing his eyes, Eragon slowly extended his consciousness outward, moving from the mind of one living thing to another, like tendrils of water seeping through sand. He touched teeming cities of insects frantically scurrying about their business, lizards and snakes hidden among warm rocks, diverse species of songbirds, and numerous small mammals. Insects and animals alike bustled with activity as they prepared for the fast-approaching night, whether by retreating to their various dens or, in the case of those of a nocturnal bent, by yawning, stretching, and otherwise readying themselves to hunt and forage.

6 Just as with his other senses, Eragon's ability to touch another being's thoughts diminished with distance. By the time his psychic probe arrived at the base of Helgrind, he could perceive only the largest of animals, and even those but faintly.

He proceeded with caution, ready to withdraw at a second's notice if he happened to brush against the minds of their prey: the Ra'zac and the Ra'zac's parents and steeds, the gigantic Lethrblaka. Eragon was willing to expose himself in this manner only because none of the Ra'zac's breed could use magic, and he did not believe that they were mindbreakers—nonmagicians trained to fight with telepathy. The Ra'zac and Lethrblaka had no need for such tricks when their breath alone could induce a stupor in the largest of men.

And though Eragon risked discovery by his ghostly investigation, he, Roran, and Saphira *had* to know if the Ra'zac had imprisoned Katrina—Roran's betrothed—in Helgrind, for the answer would determine whether their mission was one of rescue or one of capture and interrogation.

Eragon searched long and hard. When he returned to himself,

Roran was watching him with the expression of a starving wolf. His gray eyes burned with a mixture of anger, hope, and despair that was so great, it seemed as if his emotions might burst forth and incinerate everything in sight in a blaze of unimaginable intensity, melting the very rocks themselves.

This Eragon understood.

Katrina's father, the butcher Sloan, had betrayed Roran to the Ra'zac. When they failed to capture him, the Ra'zac had instead seized Katrina from Roran's bedroom and spirited her away from Palancar Valley, leaving the inhabitants of Carvahall to be killed and enslaved by King Galbatorix's soldiers. Unable to pursue Katrina, Roran had—just in time—convinced the villagers to abandon their homes and to follow him across the Spine and then south along the coast of Alagaësia, where they joined forces with the rebel Varden. The hardships they endured as a result had been many and terrible. But circuitous as it was, that course had reunited Roran with Eragon, who knew the location of the Ra'zac's den and had promised to help save Katrina.

Roran had only succeeded, as he later explained, because the strength of his passion drove him to extremes that others feared and avoided, and thus allowed him to confound his enemies.

A similar fervor now gripped Eragon.

He would leap into harm's way without the slightest regard for his own safety if someone he cared for was in danger. He loved Roran as a brother, and since Roran was to marry Katrina, Eragon had extended his definition of family to include her as well. This concept seemed even more important because Eragon and Roran were the last heirs of their line. Eragon had renounced all affiliation with his birth brother, Murtagh, and the only relatives he and Roran had left were each other, and now Katrina.

Noble sentiments of kinship were not the only force that drove the pair. Another goal obsessed them as well: *revenge!* Even as they plotted to snatch Katrina from the grasp of the Ra'zac, so the two

warriors—mortal man and Dragon Rider alike—sought to slay King Galbatorix’s unnatural servants for torturing and murdering Garrow, who was Roran’s father and had been as a father to Eragon.

The intelligence, then, that Eragon had gleaned was as important to him as to Roran.

“I think I felt her,” he said. “It’s hard to be certain, because we’re so far from Helgrind and I’ve never touched her mind before, but I *think* she’s in that forsaken peak, concealed somewhere near the very top.”

“Is she sick? Is she injured? Blast it, Eragon, don’t hide it from me: have they hurt her?”

“She’s in no pain at the moment. More than that, I cannot say, for it required all my strength just to make out the glow of her consciousness; I could not communicate with her.” Eragon refrained from mentioning, however, that he had detected a second person as well, one whose identity he suspected and the presence of whom, if confirmed, troubled him greatly. “What I *didn’t* find were the Ra’zac or the Lethrblaka. Even if I somehow overlooked the Ra’zac, their parents are so large, their life force should blaze like a thousand lanterns, even as Saphira’s does. Aside from Katrina and a few other dim specks of light, Helgrind is black, black, black.”

Roran scowled, clenched his left fist, and glared at the mountain of rock, which was fading into the dusk as purple shadows enveloped it. In a low, flat voice, as if talking with himself, he said, “It doesn’t matter whether you are right or wrong.”

“How so?”

“We dare not attack tonight; night is when the Ra’zac are strongest, and if they *are* nearby, it would be stupid to fight them when we’re at a disadvantage. Agreed?”

“Yes.”

“So, we wait for the dawn.” Roran gestured toward the slaves chained to the gory altar. “If those poor wretches are gone by then, we know the Ra’zac are here, and we proceed as planned. If not, we curse our bad luck that they escaped us, free the slaves, rescue

Katrina, and fly back to the Varden with her before Murtagh hunts us down. Either way, I doubt the Ra'zac will leave Katrina unattended for long, not if Galbatorix wants her to survive so he can use her as a tool against me.”

Eragon nodded. He wanted to release the slaves now, but doing so could warn their foes that something was amiss. Nor, if the Ra'zac came to collect their dinner, could he and Saphira intercede before the slaves were ferried away. A battle in the open between a dragon and creatures such as the Lethrblaka would attract the attention of every man, woman, and child for leagues around. And Eragon did not think he, Saphira, or Roran could survive if Galbatorix learned they were alone in his empire.

He looked away from the shackled men. *For their sake, I hope the Ra'zac are on the other side of Alagaësia or, at least, that the Ra'zac aren't hungry tonight.*

By unspoken consent, Eragon and Roran crawled backward down from the crest of the low hill they were hiding behind. At the bottom, they rose into a half crouch, then turned and, still doubled over, ran between two rows of hills. The shallow depression gradually deepened into a narrow, flood-carved gully lined with crumbling slabs of shale.

Dodging the gnarled juniper trees that dotted the gully, Eragon glanced up and, through clumps of needles, saw the first constellations to adorn the velvet sky. They seemed cold and sharp, like bright shards of ice. Then he concentrated on maintaining his footing as he and Roran trotted south toward their camp.