

Excerpt from ERAGON
Book One in the Inheritance cycle
by Christopher Paolini

DISCOVERY

Eragon knelt in a bed of trampled reed grass and scanned the tracks with a practiced eye. The prints told him that the deer had been in the meadow only a half-hour before. Soon they would bed down. His target, a small doe with a pronounced limp in her left forefoot, was still with the herd. He was amazed she had made it so far without a wolf or bear catching her.

The sky was clear and dark, and a slight breeze stirred the air. A silvery cloud drifted over the mountains that surrounded him, its edges glowing with ruddy light cast from the harvest moon cradled between two peaks. Streams flowed down the mountains from stolid glaciers and glistening snowpacks. A brooding mist crept along the valley's floor, almost thick enough to obscure his feet.

Eragon was fifteen, less than a year from manhood. Dark eyebrows rested above his intense brown eyes. His clothes were worn from work. A hunting knife with a bone handle was sheathed at his belt, and a buckskin tube protected his yew bow from the mist. He carried a wood-frame pack.

The deer had led him deep into the Spine, a range of untamed mountains that extended up and down the land of Alagaësia. Strange tales and men often came from those mountains, usually boding ill. Despite that, Eragon did not fear the Spine—he was the only hunter near Carvahall who dared track game deep into its craggy recesses.

It was the third night of the hunt, and his food was half gone. If he did not fell the doe, he would be forced to return home empty-

handed. His family needed the meat for the rapidly approaching winter and could not afford to buy it in Carvahall.

Eragon stood with quiet assurance in the dusky moonlight, then strode into the forest toward a glen where he was sure the deer would rest. The trees blocked the sky from view and cast feathery shadows on the ground. He looked at the tracks only occasionally; he knew the way.

At the glen, he strung his bow with a sure touch, then drew three arrows and nocked one, holding the others in his left hand. The moonlight revealed twenty or so motionless lumps where the deer lay in the grass. The doe he wanted was at the edge of the herd, her left foreleg stretched out awkwardly.

Eragon slowly crept closer, keeping the bow ready. All his work of the past three days had led to this moment. He took a last steady-breath and—an explosion shattered the night.

The herd bolted. Eragon lunged forward, racing through the grass as a fiery wind surged past his cheek. He slid to a stop and loosed an arrow at the bounding doe. It missed by a finger's breadth and hissed into darkness. He cursed and spun around, instinctively nocking another arrow.

Behind him, where the deer had been, smoldered a large circle of grass and trees. Many of the pines stood bare of their needles. The grass outside the charring was flattened. A wisp of smoke curled in the air, carrying a burnt smell. In the center of the blast radius lay a polished blue stone. Mist snaked across the scorched area and swirled insubstantial tendrils over the stone.

Eragon watched for danger for several long minutes, but the only thing that moved was the mist. Cautiously, he released the tension from his bow and moved forward. Moonlight cast him in pale shadow as he stopped before the stone. He nudged it with an arrow, then jumped back. Nothing happened, so he warily picked it up.

Nature had never polished a stone as smooth as this one. Its flawless surface was dark blue, except for thin veins of white that spiderwebbed across it. The stone was cool and frictionless under

his fingers, like hardened silk. Oval and about a foot long, it weighed several pounds, though it felt lighter than it should have.

Eragon found the stone both beautiful and frightening. *Where did it come from? Does it have a purpose?* Then a more disturbing thought came to him: *Was it sent here by accident, or am I meant to have it?* If he had learned anything from the old stories, it was to treat magic, and those who used it, with great caution.

But what should I do with the stone? It would be tiresome to carry, and there was a chance it was dangerous. It might be better to leave it behind. A flicker of indecision ran through him, and he almost dropped it, but something stayed his hand. *At the very least, it might pay for some food,* he decided with a shrug, tucking the stone into his pack.

The glen was too exposed to make a safe camp, so he slipped back into the forest and spread his bedroll beneath the upturned roots of a fallen tree. After a cold dinner of bread and cheese, he wrapped himself in blankets and fell asleep, pondering what had occurred.

PALANCAR VALLEY

The sun rose the next morning with a glorious conflagration of pink and yellow. The air was fresh, sweet, and very cold. Ice edged the streams, and small pools were completely frozen over. After a breakfast of porridge, Eragon returned to the glen and examined the charred area. The morning light revealed no new details, so he started for home.

The rough game trail was faintly worn and, in places, non-existent. Because it had been forged by animals, it often backtracked and took long detours. Yet for all its flaws, it was still the fastest way out of the mountains.

The Spine was one of the only places that King Galbatorix could not call his own. Stories were still told about how half his army disappeared after marching into its ancient forest. A cloud of misfortune and bad luck seemed to hang over it. Though the trees grew tall and the sky shone brightly, few people could stay in the Spine for long without suffering an accident. Eragon was one of those few—not through any particular gift, it seemed to him, but because of persistent vigilance and sharp reflexes. He had hiked in the mountains for years, yet he was still wary of them. Every time he thought they had surrendered their secrets, something happened to upset his understanding of them—like the stone's appearance.

He kept up a brisk pace, and the leagues steadily disappeared. In late evening he arrived at the edge of a precipitous ravine. The Anora River rushed by far below, heading to Palancar Valley.

Gorged with hundreds of tiny streams, the river was a brute force, battling against the rocks and boulders that barred its way. A low rumble filled the air.

He camped in a thicket near the ravine and watched the moonrise before going to bed.

It grew colder over the next day and a half. Eragon traveled quickly and saw little of the wary wildlife. A bit past noon, he heard the Iqualda Falls blanketing everything with the dull sound of a thousand splashes. The trail led him onto a moist slate outcropping, which the river sped past, flinging itself into empty air and down mossy cliffs.

Before him lay Palancar Valley, exposed like an unrolled map. The base of the Iqualda Falls, more than a half-mile below, was the northernmost point of the valley. A little ways from the falls was Carvahall, a cluster of brown buildings. White smoke rose from the chimneys, defiant of the wilderness around it. At this height, farms were small square patches no bigger than the end of his finger. The land around them was tan or sandy, where dead grass swayed in the wind. The Anora River wound from the falls toward Palancar's southern end, reflecting great strips of sunlight. Far in the distance it flowed past the village Therinsford and the lonely mountain Utgard. Beyond that, he knew only that it turned north and ran to the sea.

After a pause, Eragon left the outcropping and started down the trail, grimacing at the descent. When he arrived at the bottom, soft dusk was creeping over everything, blurring colors and shapes into gray masses. Carvahall's lights shimmered nearby in the twilight; the houses cast long shadows. Aside from Therinsford, Carvahall was the only village in Palancar Valley. The settlement was secluded and surrounded by harsh, beautiful land. Few traveled here except merchants and trappers.

The village was composed of stout log buildings with low roofs—some thatched, others shingled. Smoke billowed from the chim-

neys, giving the air a woody smell. The buildings had wide porches where people gathered to talk and conduct business. Occasionally a window brightened as a candle or lamp was lit. Eragon heard men talking loudly in the evening air while wives scurried to fetch their husbands, scolding them for being late.

Eragon wove his way between the houses to the butcher's shop, a broad, thick-beamed building. Overhead, the chimney belched black smoke.

He pushed the door open. The spacious room was warm and well lit by a fire snapping in a stone fireplace. A bare counter stretched across the far side of the room. The floor was strewn with loose straw. Everything was scrupulously clean, as if the owner spent his leisure time digging in obscure crannies for minuscule pieces of filth. Behind the counter stood the butcher Sloan. A small man, he wore a cotton shirt and a long, bloodstained smock. An impressive array of knives swung from his belt. He had a sallow, pockmarked face, and his black eyes were suspicious. He polished the counter with a ragged cloth.

Sloan's mouth twisted as Eragon entered. "Well, the mighty hunter joins the rest of us mortals. How many did you bag this time?"

"None," was Eragon's curt reply. He had never liked Sloan. The butcher always treated him with disdain, as if he were something unclean. A widower, Sloan seemed to care for only one person—his daughter, Katrina, on whom he doted.

"I'm amazed," said Sloan with affected astonishment. He turned his back on Eragon to scrape something off the wall. "And that's your reason for coming here?"

"Yes," admitted Eragon uncomfortably.

"If that's the case, let's see your money." Sloan tapped his fingers when Eragon shifted his feet and remained silent. "Come on—either you have it or you don't. Which is it?"

"I don't really have any money, but I do—"

"What, no money?" the butcher cut him off sharply. "And you expect to buy meat! Are the other merchants giving away their

wares? Should I just hand you the goods without charge? Besides,” he said abruptly, “it’s late. Come back tomorrow with money. I’m closed for the day.”

Eragon glared at him. “I can’t wait until tomorrow, Sloan. It’ll be worth your while, though; I found something to pay you with.” He pulled out the stone with a flourish and set it gently on the scarred counter, where it gleamed with light from the dancing flames.

“Stole it is more likely,” muttered Sloan, leaning forward with an interested expression.

Ignoring the comment, Eragon asked, “Will this be enough?”

Sloan picked up the stone and gauged its weight speculatively. He ran his hands over its smoothness and inspected the white veins. With a calculating look, he set it down. “It’s pretty, but how much is it worth?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Eragon, “but no one would have gone to the trouble of shaping it unless it had some value.”

“Obviously,” said Sloan with exaggerated patience. “But how much value? Since you don’t know, I suggest that you find a trader who does, or take my offer of three crowns.”

“That’s a miser’s bargain! It must be worth at least ten times that,” protested Eragon. Three crowns would not even buy enough meat to last a week.

Sloan shrugged. “If you don’t like my offer, wait until the traders arrive. Either way, I’m tired of this conversation.”

The traders were a nomadic group of merchants and entertainers who visited Carvahall every spring and winter. They bought whatever excess the villagers and local farmers had managed to grow or make, and sold what they needed to live through another year: seeds, animals, fabric, and supplies like salt and sugar.

But Eragon did not want to wait until they arrived; it could be a while, and his family needed the meat now. “Fine, I accept,” he snapped.

“Good, I’ll get you the meat. Not that it matters, but where did you find this?”

“Two nights ago in the Spine—”

“Get out!” demanded Sloan, pushing the stone away. He stomped furiously to the end of the counter and started scrubbing old bloodstains off a knife.

“Why?” asked Eragon. He drew the stone closer, as if to protect it from Sloan’s wrath.

“I won’t deal with anything you bring back from those damned mountains! Take your sorcerer’s stone elsewhere.” Sloan’s hand suddenly slipped and he cut a finger on the knife, but he seemed not to notice. He continued to scrub, staining the blade with fresh blood.

“You refuse to sell to me!”

“Yes! Unless you pay with coins,” Sloan growled, and hefted the knife, sidling away. “Go, before I make you!”

The door behind them slammed open. Eragon whirled around, ready for more trouble. In stomped Horst, a hulking man. Sloan’s daughter, Katrina—a tall girl of sixteen—trailed behind him with a determined expression. Eragon was surprised to see her; she usually absented herself from any arguments involving her father. Sloan glanced at them warily, then started to accuse Eragon. “He won’t—”

“Quiet,” announced Horst in a rumbling voice, cracking his knuckles at the same time. He was Carvahall’s smith, as his thick neck and scarred leather apron attested. His powerful arms were bare to the elbow; a great expanse of hairy muscular chest was visible through the top of his shirt. A black beard, carelessly trimmed, roiled and knotted like his jaw muscles. “Sloan, what have you done now?”

“Nothing.” He gave Eragon a murderous gaze, then spat, “This . . . boy came in here and started badgering me. I asked him to leave, but he won’t budge. I even threatened him and he still ignored me!” Sloan seemed to shrink as he looked at Horst.

“Is this true?” demanded the smith.

“No!” replied Eragon. “I offered this stone as payment for some meat, and he accepted it. When I told him that I’d found it in the

Spine, he refused to even touch it. What difference does it make where it came from?"

Horst looked at the stone curiously, then returned his attention to the butcher. "Why won't you trade with him, Sloan? I've no love for the Spine myself, but if it's a question of the stone's worth, I'll back it with my own money."

The question hung in the air for a moment. Then Sloan licked his lips and said, "This is my own store. I can do whatever I want."

Katrina stepped out from behind Horst and tossed back her auburn hair like a spray of molten copper. "Father, Eragon is willing to pay. Give him the meat, and then we can have supper."

Sloan's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Go back to the house; this is none of your business. . . . I said *go!*" Katrina's face hardened, then she marched out of the room with a stiff back.

Eragon watched with disapproval but dared not interfere. Horst tugged at his beard before saying reproachfully, "Fine, you can deal with me. What were you going to get, Eragon?" His voice reverberated through the room.

"As much as I could."

Horst pulled out a purse and counted out a pile of coins. "Give me your best roasts and steaks. Make sure that it's enough to fill Eragon's pack." The butcher hesitated, his gaze darting between Horst and Eragon. "Not selling to me would be a very bad idea," stated Horst.

Glowering venomously, Sloan slipped into the back room. A frenzy of chopping, wrapping, and low cursing reached them. After several uncomfortable minutes, he returned with an armful of wrapped meat. His face was expressionless as he accepted Horst's money, then proceeded to clean his knife, pretending that they were not there.

Horst scooped up the meat and walked outside. Eragon hurried behind him, carrying his pack and the stone. The crisp night air rolled over their faces, refreshing after the stuffy shop.

"Thank you, Horst. Uncle Garrow will be pleased."

Horst laughed quietly. "Don't thank me. I've wanted to do that for a long time. Sloan's a vicious troublemaker; it does him good to be humbled. Katrina heard what was happening and ran to fetch me. Good thing I came—the two of you were almost at blows. Unfortunately, I doubt he'll serve you or any of your family the next time you go in there, even if you do have coins."

"Why did he explode like that? We've never been friendly, but he's always taken our money. And I've never seen him treat Katrina that way," said Eragon, opening the top of the pack.

Horst shrugged. "Ask your uncle. He knows more about it than I do."

Eragon stuffed the meat into his pack. "Well, now I have one more reason to hurry home . . . to solve this mystery. Here, this is rightfully yours." He proffered the stone.

Horst chuckled. "No, you keep your strange rock. As for payment, Albriech plans to leave for Feinster next spring. He wants to become a master smith, and I'm going to need an assistant. You can come and work off the debt on your spare days."

Eragon bowed slightly, delighted. Horst had two sons, Albriech and Baldor, both of whom worked in his forge. Taking one's place was a generous offer. "Again, thank you! I look forward to working with you." He was glad that there was a way for him to pay Horst. His uncle would never accept charity. Then Eragon remembered what his cousin had told him before he had left on the hunt. "Roran wanted me to give Katrina a message, but since I can't, can you get it to her?"

"Of course."

"He wants her to know that he'll come into town as soon as the merchants arrive and that he will see her then."

"That all?"

Eragon was slightly embarrassed. "No, he also wants her to know that she is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen and that he thinks of nothing else."

Horst's face broke into a broad grin, and he winked at Eragon. "Getting serious, isn't he?"

“Yes, sir,” Eragon answered with a quick smile. “Could you also give her my thanks? It was nice of her to stand up to her father for me. I hope that she isn’t punished because of it. Roran would be furious if I got her into trouble.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Sloan doesn’t know that she called me, so I doubt he’ll be too hard on her. Before you go, will you sup with us?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. Garrow is expecting me,” said Eragon, tying off the top of the pack. He hoisted it onto his back and started down the road, raising his hand in farewell.

The meat slowed him down, but he was eager to be home, and renewed vigor filled his steps. The village ended abruptly, and he left its warm lights behind. The pearlescent moon peeked over the mountains, bathing the land in a ghostly reflection of daylight. Everything looked bleached and flat.

Near the end of his journey, he turned off the road, which continued south. A simple path led straight through waist-high grass and up a knoll, almost hidden by the shadows of protective elm trees. He crested the hill and saw a gentle light shining from his home.

The house had a shingled roof and a brick chimney. Eaves hung over the whitewashed walls, shadowing the ground below. One side of the enclosed porch was filled with split wood, ready for the fire. A jumble of farm tools cluttered the other side.

The house had been abandoned for half a century when they moved in after Garrow’s wife, Marian, died. It was ten miles from Carvahall, farther than anyone else’s. People considered the distance dangerous because the family could not rely on help from the village in times of trouble, but Eragon’s uncle would not listen.

A hundred feet from the house, in a dull-colored barn, lived two horses—Birka and Brugh—with chickens and a cow. Sometimes there was also a pig, but they had been unable to afford one this year. A wagon sat wedged between the stalls. On the edge of their fields, a thick line of trees traced along the Anora River.

He saw a light move behind a window as he wearily reached the

porch. "Uncle, it's Eragon. Let me in." A small shutter slid back for a second, then the door swung inward.

Garrow stood with his hand on the door. His worn clothes hung on him like rags on a stick frame. A lean, hungry face with intense eyes gazed out from under graying hair. He looked like a man who had been partly mummified before it was discovered that he was still alive. "Roran's sleeping," was his answer to Eragon's inquiring glance.

A lantern flickered on a wood table so old that the grain stood up in tiny ridges like a giant fingerprint. Near a woodstove were rows of cooking utensils tacked onto the wall with homemade nails. A second door opened to the rest of the house. The floor was made of boards polished smooth by years of tramping feet.

Eragon pulled off his pack and took out the meat. "What's this? Did you buy meat? Where did you get the money?" asked his uncle harshly as he saw the wrapped packages.

Eragon took a breath before answering. "No, Horst bought it for us."

"You let him pay for it? I told you before, I won't beg for our food. If we can't feed ourselves, we might as well move into town. Before you can turn around twice, they'll be sending us used clothes and asking if we'll be able to get through the winter." Garrow's face paled with anger.

"I didn't accept charity," snapped Eragon. "Horst agreed to let me work off the debt this spring. He needs someone to help him because Albriech is going away."

"And where will you get the time to work for him? Are you going to ignore all the things that need to be done here?" asked Garrow, forcing his voice down.

Eragon hung his bow and quiver on hooks beside the front door. "I don't know how I'll do it," he said irritably. "Besides, I found something that could be worth some money." He set the stone on the table.

Garrow bowed over it: the hungry look on his face became ravenous, and his fingers moved with a strange twitch. "You found this in the Spine?"

“Yes,” said Eragon. He explained what had happened. “And to make matters worse, I lost my best arrow. I’ll have to make more before long.” They stared at the stone in the near darkness.

“How was the weather?” asked his uncle, lifting the stone. His hands tightened around it like he was afraid it would suddenly disappear.

“Cold,” was Eragon’s reply. “It didn’t snow, but it froze each night.”

Garrow looked worried by the news. “Tomorrow you’ll have to help Roran finish harvesting the barley. If we can get the squash picked, too, the frost won’t bother us.” He passed the stone to Eragon. “Here, keep it. When the traders come, we’ll find out what it’s worth. Selling it is probably the best thing to do. The less we’re involved with magic, the better. . . . Why did Horst pay for the meat?”

It took only a moment for Eragon to explain his argument with Sloan. “I just don’t understand what angered him so.”

Garrow shrugged. “Sloan’s wife, Ismira, went over the Iqualda Falls a year before you were brought here. He hasn’t been near the Spine since, nor had anything to do with it. But that’s no reason to refuse payment. I think he wanted to give you trouble.”

Eragon swayed blearily and said, “It’s good to be back.” Garrow’s eyes softened, and he nodded. Eragon stumbled to his room, pushed the stone under his bed, then fell onto the mattress. *Home*. For the first time since before the hunt, he relaxed completely as sleep overtook him.

DRAGON TALES

At dawn the sun's rays streamed through the window, warming Eragon's face. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up on the edge of the bed. The pine floor was cold under his feet. He stretched his sore legs and rubbed his back, yawning.

Beside the bed was a row of shelves covered with objects he had collected. There were twisted pieces of wood, odd bits of shells, rocks that had broken to reveal shiny interiors, and strips of dry grass tied into knots. His favorite item was a root so convoluted he never tired of looking at it. The rest of the room was bare, except for a small dresser and nightstand.

He pulled on his boots and stared at the floor, thinking. This was a special day. It was near this very hour, sixteen years ago, that his mother, Selena, had come home to Carvahall alone and pregnant. She had been gone for six years, living in the cities. When she returned, she wore expensive clothes, and her hair was bound by a net of pearls. She had sought out her brother, Garrow, and asked to stay with him until the baby arrived. Within five months her son was born. Everyone was shocked when Selena tearfully begged Garrow and Marian to raise him. When they asked why, she only wept and said, "I must." Her pleas had grown increasingly desperate until they finally agreed. She named him Eragon, then departed early the next morning and never returned.

Eragon still remembered how he had felt when Marian told him the story before she died. The realization that Garrow and Marian were

not his real parents had disturbed him greatly. Things that had been permanent and unquestionable were suddenly thrown into doubt. Eventually he had learned to live with it, but he always had a nagging suspicion that he had not been good enough for his mother. *I'm sure there was a good reason for what she did; I only wish I knew what it was.*

One other thing bothered him: Who was his father? Selena had told no one, and whoever it might be had never come looking for Eragon. He wished that he knew who it was, if only to have a name. It would be nice to know his heritage.

He sighed and went to the nightstand, where he splashed his face, shivering as the water ran down his neck. Refreshed, he retrieved the stone from under the bed and set it on a shelf. The morning light caressed it, throwing a warm shadow on the wall. He touched it one more time, then hurried to the kitchen, eager to see his family. Garrow and Roran were already there, eating chicken. As Eragon greeted them, Roran stood with a grin.

Roran was two years older than Eragon, muscular, sturdy, and careful with his movements. They could not have been closer even if they had been real brothers.

Roran smiled. "I'm glad you're back. How was the trip?"

"Hard," replied Eragon. "Did Uncle tell you what happened?" He helped himself to a piece of chicken, which he devoured hungrily.

"No," said Roran, and the story was quickly told. At Roran's insistence, Eragon left his food to show him the stone. This elicited a satisfactory amount of awe, but Roran soon asked nervously, "Were you able to talk with Katrina?"

"No, there wasn't an opportunity after the argument with Sloan. But she'll expect you when the traders come. I gave the message to Horst; he will get it to her."

"You told Horst?" said Roran incredulously. "That was private. If I wanted everyone to know about it, I could have built a bonfire and used smoke signals to communicate. If Sloan finds out, he won't let me see her again."

"Horst will be discreet," assured Eragon. "He won't let anyone

fall prey to Sloan, least of all you.” Roran seemed unconvinced, but argued no more. They returned to their meals in the taciturn presence of Garrow. When the last bites were finished, all three went to work in the fields.

The sun was cold and pale, providing little comfort. Under its watchful eye, the last of the barley was stored in the barn. Next, they gathered prickly vined squash, then the rutabagas, beets, peas, turnips, and beans, which they packed into the root cellar. After hours of labor, they stretched their cramped muscles, pleased that the harvest was finished.

The following days were spent pickling, salting, shelling, and preparing the food for winter.

Nine days after Eragon’s return, a vicious blizzard blew out of the mountains and settled over the valley. The snow came down in great sheets, blanketing the countryside in white. They only dared leave the house for firewood and to feed the animals, for they feared getting lost in the howling wind and featureless landscape. They spent their time huddled over the stove as gusts rattled the heavy window shutters. Days later the storm finally passed, revealing an alien world of soft white drifts.

“I’m afraid the traders may not come this year, with conditions this bad,” said Garrow. “They’re late as it is. We’ll give them a chance and wait before going to Carvahall. But if they don’t show soon, we’ll have to buy any spare supplies from the townspeople.” His countenance was resigned.

They grew anxious as the days crept by without sign of the traders. Talk was sparse, and depression hung over the house.

On the eighth morning, Roran walked to the road and confirmed that the traders had not yet passed. The day was spent readying for the trip into Carvahall, scrounging with grim expressions for saleable items. That evening, out of desperation, Eragon checked the road again. He found deep ruts cut into the snow, with numerous hoofprints between them. Elated, he ran back to the house whooping, bringing new life to their preparations.



They packed their surplus produce into the wagon before sunrise. Garrow put the year's money in a leather pouch that he carefully fastened to his belt. Eragon set the wrapped stone between bags of grain so it would not roll when the wagon hit bumps.

After a hasty breakfast, they harnessed the horses and cleared a path to the road. The traders' wagons had already broken the drifts, which sped their progress. By noon they could see Carvahall.

In daylight, it was a small earthy village filled with shouts and laughter. The traders had made camp in an empty field on the outskirts of town. Groups of wagons, tents, and fires were randomly spread across it, spots of color against the snow. The troubadours' four tents were garishly decorated. A steady stream of people linked the camp to the village.

Crowds churned around a line of bright tents and booths clogging the main street. Horses whinnied at the noise. The snow had been pounded flat, giving it a glassy surface; elsewhere, bonfires had melted it. Roasted hazelnuts added a rich aroma to the smells wafting around them.

Garrow parked the wagon and picketed the horses, then drew coins from his pouch. "Get yourselves some treats. Roran, do what you want, only be at Horst's in time for supper. Eragon, bring that stone and come with me." Eragon grinned at Roran and pocketed the money, already planning how to spend it.

Roran departed immediately with a determined expression on his face. Garrow led Eragon into the throng, shouldering his way through the bustle. Women were buying cloth, while nearby their husbands examined a new latch, hook, or tool. Children ran up and down the road, shrieking with excitement. Knives were displayed here, spices there, and pots were laid out in shiny rows next to leather harnesses.

Eragon stared at the traders curiously. They seemed less prosperous than last year. Their children had a frightened, wary look, and their clothes were patched. The gaunt men carried swords and

daggers with a new familiarity, and even the women had poniards belted at their waists.

What could have happened to make them like this? And why are they so late? wondered Eragon. He remembered the traders as being full of good cheer, but there was none of that now. Garrow pushed down the street, searching for Merlock, a trader who specialized in odd trinkets and pieces of jewelry.

They found him behind a booth, displaying brooches to a group of women. As each new piece was revealed, exclamations of admiration followed. Eragon guessed that more than a few purses would soon be depleted. Merlock seemed to flourish and grow every time his wares were complimented. He wore a goatee, held himself with ease, and seemed to regard the rest of the world with slight contempt.

The excited group prevented Garrow and Eragon from getting near the trader, so they settled on a step and waited. As soon as Merlock was unoccupied, they hurried over.

“And what might you sirs want to look at?” asked Merlock. “An amulet or trinket for a lady?” With a twirl he pulled out a delicately carved silver rose of excellent workmanship. The polished metal caught Eragon’s attention, and he eyed it appreciatively. The trader continued, “Not even three crowns, though it has come all the way from the famed craftsmen of Belatona.”

Garrow spoke in a quiet voice. “We aren’t looking to buy, but to sell.” Merlock immediately covered the rose and looked at them with new interest.

“I see. Maybe, if this item is of any value, you would like to trade it for one or two of these exquisite pieces.” He paused for a moment while Eragon and his uncle stood uncomfortably, then continued, “You did *bring* the object of consideration?”

“We have it, but we would rather show it to you elsewhere,” said Garrow in a firm voice.

Merlock raised an eyebrow, but spoke smoothly. “In that case, let me invite you to my tent.” He gathered up his wares and gently laid them in an iron-bound chest, which he locked. Then he ushered

them up the street and into the temporary camp. They wound between the wagons to a tent removed from the rest of the traders'. It was crimson at the top and sable at the bottom, with thin triangles of colors stabbing into each other. Merlock untied the opening and swung the flap to one side.

Small trinkets and strange pieces of furniture, such as a round bed and three seats carved from tree stumps, filled the tent. A gnarled dagger with a ruby in the pommel rested on a white cushion.

Merlock closed the flap and turned to them. "Please, seat yourselves." When they had, he said, "Now show me why we are meeting in private." Eragon unwrapped the stone and set it between the two men. Merlock reached for it with a gleam in his eye, then stopped and asked, "May I?" When Garrow indicated his approval, Merlock picked it up.

He put the stone in his lap and reached to one side for a thin box. Opened, it revealed a large set of copper scales, which he set on the ground. After weighing the stone, he scrutinized its surface under a jeweler's glass, tapped it gently with a wooden mallet, and drew the point of a tiny clear stone over it. He measured its length and diameter, then recorded the figures on a slate. He considered the results for a while. "Do you know what this is worth?"

"No," admitted Garrow. His cheek twitched, and he shifted uncomfortably on the seat.

Merlock grimaced. "Unfortunately, neither do I. But I can tell you this much: the white veins are the same material as the blue that surrounds them, only a different color. What that material might be, though, I haven't a clue. It's harder than any rock I have seen, harder even than diamond. Whoever shaped it used tools I have never seen—or magic. Also, it's hollow."

"What?" exclaimed Garrow.

An irritated edge crept into Merlock's voice. "Did you ever hear a rock sound like this?" He grabbed the dagger from the cushion and slapped the stone with the flat of the blade. A pure note filled the air, then faded away smoothly. Eragon was alarmed, afraid that

the stone had been damaged. Merlock tilted the stone toward them. “You will find no scratches or blemishes where the dagger struck. I doubt I could do anything to harm this stone, even if I took a hammer to it.”

Garrow crossed his arms with a reserved expression. A wall of silence surrounded him. Eragon was puzzled. *I knew that the stone appeared in the Spine through magic, but made by magic? What for and why?* He blurted, “But what is it worth?”

“I can’t tell you that,” said Merlock in a pained voice. “I am sure there are people who would pay dearly to have it, but none of them are in Carvahall. You would have to go to the southern cities to find a buyer. This is a curiosity for most people—not an item to spend money on when practical things are needed.”

Garrow stared at the tent ceiling like a gambler calculating the odds. “Will you buy it?”

The trader answered instantly, “It’s not worth the risk. I might be able to find a wealthy buyer during my spring travels, but I can’t be certain. Even if I did, you wouldn’t be paid until I returned next year. No, you will have to find someone else to trade with. I am curious, however . . . Why did you insist on talking to me in private?”

Eragon put the stone away before answering. “Because,” he glanced at the man, wondering if he would explode like Sloan, “I found this in the Spine, and folks around here don’t like that.”

Merlock gave him a startled look. “Do you know why my fellow merchants and I were late this year?”

Eragon shook his head.

“Our wanderings have been dogged with misfortune. Chaos seems to rule Alagaësia. We could not avoid illness, attacks, and the most cursed black luck. Because the Varden’s attacks have increased, Galbatorix has forced cities to send more soldiers to the borders, men who are needed to combat the Urgals. The brutes have been migrating southeast, toward the Hadarac Desert. No one knows why and it wouldn’t concern us, except that they’re passing

through populated areas. They've been spotted on roads and near cities. Worst of all are reports of a Shade, though the stories are unconfirmed. Not many people survive such an encounter."

"Why haven't we heard of this?" cried Eragon.

"Because," said Merlock grimly, "it only began a few months ago. Whole villages have been forced to move because Urgals destroyed their fields and starvation threatens."

"Nonsense," growled Garrow. "We haven't seen any Urgals; the only one around here has his horns mounted in Morn's tavern."

Merlock arched an eyebrow. "Maybe so, but this is a small village hidden by mountains. It's not surprising that you've escaped notice. However, I wouldn't expect that to last. I only mentioned this because strange things are happening here as well if you found such a stone in the Spine." With that sobering statement, he bid them farewell with a bow and slight smile.

Garrow headed back to Carvahall with Eragon trailing behind. "What do you think?" asked Eragon.

"I'm going to get more information before I make up my mind. Take the stone back to the wagon, then do what you want. I'll meet you for dinner at Horst's."

Eragon dodged through the crowd and happily dashed back to the wagon. Trading would take his uncle hours, time that he planned to enjoy fully. He hid the stone under the bags, then set out into town with a cocky stride.

He walked from one booth to another, evaluating the goods with a buyer's eye, despite his meager supply of coins. When he talked with the merchants, they confirmed what Merlock had said about the instability in Alagaësia. Over and over the message was repeated: last year's security has deserted us; new dangers have appeared, and nothing is safe.

Later in the day he bought three sticks of malt candy and a small piping-hot cherry pie. The hot food felt good after hours of standing in the snow. He licked the sticky syrup from his fingers regretfully, wishing for more, then sat on the edge of a porch and nibbled

a piece of candy. Two boys from Carvahall wrestled nearby, but he felt no inclination to join them.

As the day descended into late afternoon, the traders took their business into people's homes. Eragon was impatient for evening, when the troubadours would come out to tell stories and perform tricks. He loved hearing about magic, gods, and, if they were especially lucky, the Dragon Riders. Carvahall had its own storyteller, Brom—a friend of Eragon's—but his tales grew old over the years, whereas the troubadours always had new ones that he listened to eagerly.

Eragon had just broken off an icicle from the underside of the porch when he spotted Sloan nearby. The butcher had not seen him, so Eragon ducked his head and bolted around a corner toward Morn's tavern.

The inside was hot and filled with greasy smoke from sputtering tallow candles. The shiny-black Urgal horns, their twisted span as great as his outstretched arms, were mounted over the door. The bar was long and low, with a stack of staves on one end for customers to carve. Morn tended the bar, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The bottom half of his face was short and mashed, as if he had rested his chin on a grinding wheel. People crowded solid oak tables and listened to two traders who had finished their business early and had come in for beer.

Morn looked up from a mug he was cleaning. "Eragon! Good to see you. Where's your uncle?"

"Buying," said Eragon with a shrug. "He's going to be a while."

"And Roran, is he here?" asked Morn as he swiped the cloth through another mug.

"Yes, no sick animals to keep him back this year."

"Good, good."

Eragon gestured at the two traders. "Who are they?"

"Grain buyers. They bought everyone's seed at ridiculously low prices, and now they're telling wild stories, expecting us to believe them."

Eragon understood why Morn was so upset. *People need that money. We can't get by without it.* "What kind of stories?"

Morn snorted. "They say the Varden have formed a pact with the Urgals and are massing an army to attack us. *Supposedly*, it's only through the grace of our king that we've been protected for so long—as if Galbatorix would care if we burned to the ground. . . . Go listen to them. I have enough on my hands without explaining their lies."

The first trader filled a chair with his enormous girth; his every movement caused it to protest loudly. There was no hint of hair on his face, his pudgy hands were baby smooth, and he had pouting lips that curled petulantly as he sipped from a flagon. The second man had a florid face. The skin around his jaw was dry and corpulent, filled with lumps of hard fat, like cold butter gone rancid. Contrasted with his neck and jowls, the rest of his body was unnaturally thin.

The first trader vainly tried to pull back his expanding borders to fit within the chair. He said, "No, no, you don't understand. It is only through the king's unceasing efforts on your behalf that you are able to argue with us in safety. If he, in all his wisdom, were to withdraw that support, woe unto you!"

Someone hollered, "Right, why don't you also tell us the Riders have returned and you've each killed a hundred elves. Do you think we're children to believe in your tales? We can take care of ourselves." The group chuckled.

The trader started to reply when his thin companion intervened with a wave of his hand. Gaudy jewels flashed on his fingers. "You misunderstand. We know the Empire cannot care for each of us personally, as you may want, but it can keep Urgals and other abominations from overrunning this," he searched vaguely for the right term, "place."

The trader continued, "You're angry with the Empire for treating people unfairly, a legitimate concern, but a government cannot please everyone. There will inevitably be arguments and conflicts."

However, the majority of us have nothing to complain about. Every country has some small group of malcontents who aren't satisfied with the balance of power."

"Yeah," called a woman, "if you're willing to call the Varden small!"

The fat man sighed. "We already explained that the Varden have no interest in helping you. That's only a falsehood perpetuated by the traitors in an attempt to disrupt the Empire and convince us that the real threat is inside—not outside—our borders. All they want to do is overthrow the king and take possession of our land. They have spies everywhere as they prepare to invade. You never know who might be working for them."

Eragon did not agree, but the traders' words were smooth, and people were nodding. He stepped forward and said, "How do you know this? I can say that clouds are green, but that doesn't mean it's true. Prove you aren't lying." The two men glared at him while the villagers waited silently for the answer.

The thin trader spoke first. He avoided Eragon's eyes. "Aren't your children taught respect? Or do you let boys challenge men whenever they want to?"

The listeners fidgeted and stared at Eragon. Then a man said, "Answer the question."

"It's only common sense," said the fat one, sweat beading on his upper lip. His reply riled the villagers, and the dispute resumed.

Eragon returned to the bar with a sour taste in his mouth. He had never before met anyone who favored the Empire and tore down its enemies. There was a deep-seated hatred of the Empire in Carvahall, almost hereditary in nature. The Empire never helped them during harsh years when they nearly starved, and its tax collectors were heartless. He felt justified in disagreeing with the traders regarding the king's mercy, but he did speculate about the Varden.

The Varden were a rebel group that constantly raided and attacked the Empire. It was a mystery who their leader was or who had formed them in the years following Galbatorix's rise to power over a century ago. The group had garnered much sympathy as they

eluded Galbatorix's efforts to destroy them. Little was known about the Varden except that if you were a fugitive and had to hide, or if you hated the Empire, they would accept you. The only problem was finding them.

Morn leaned over the bar and said, "Incredible, isn't it? They're worse than vultures circling a dying animal. There's going to be trouble if they stay much longer."

"For us or for them?"

"Them," said Morn as angry voices filled the tavern. Eragon left when the argument threatened to become violent. The door thudded shut behind him, cutting off the voices. It was early evening, and the sun was sinking rapidly; the houses cast long shadows on the ground. As Eragon headed down the street, he noticed Roran and Katrina standing in an alley.

Roran said something Eragon could not hear. Katrina looked down at her hands and answered in an undertone, then leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed him before darting away. Eragon trotted to Roran and teased, "Having a good time?" Roran grunted non-committally as he paced away.

"Have you heard the traders' news?" asked Eragon, following. Most of the villagers were indoors, talking to traders or waiting until it was dark enough for the troubadours to perform.

"Yes." Roran seemed distracted. "What do you think of Sloan?"

"I thought it was obvious."

"There'll be blood between us when he finds out about Katrina and me," stated Roran. A snowflake landed on Eragon's nose, and he looked up. The sky had turned gray. He could think of nothing appropriate to say; Roran was right. He clasped his cousin on the shoulder as they continued down the byway.

Dinner at Horst's was hearty. The room was full of conversation and laughter. Sweet cordials and heavy ales were consumed in copious amounts, adding to the boisterous atmosphere. When the plates were empty, Horst's guests left the house and strolled to the field where the traders were camped. A ring of poles topped with

candles had been stuck into the ground around a large clearing. Bonfires blazed in the background, painting the ground with dancing shadows. The villagers slowly gathered around the circle and waited expectantly in the cold.

The troubadours came tumbling out of their tents, dressed in tasseled clothing, followed by older and more stately minstrels. The minstrels provided music and narration as their younger counterparts acted out the stories. The first plays were pure entertainment: bawdy and full of jokes, pratfalls, and ridiculous characters. Later, however, when the candles sputtered in their sockets and everyone was drawn together into a tight circle, the old storyteller Brom stepped forward. A knotted white beard rippled over his chest, and a long black cape was wrapped around his bent shoulders, obscuring his body. He spread his arms with hands that reached out like talons and recited thus:

“The sands of time cannot be stopped. Years pass whether we will them or not . . . but we can remember. What has been lost may yet live on in memories. That which you will hear is imperfect and fragmented, yet treasure it, for without you it does not exist. I give you now a memory that has been forgotten, hidden in the dreamy haze that lies behind us.”

His keen eyes inspected their interested faces. His gaze lingered on Eragon last of all.

“Before your grandfathers’ fathers were born, and yea, even before their fathers, the Dragon Riders were formed. To protect and guard was their mission, and for thousands of years they succeeded. Their prowess in battle was unmatched, for each had the strength of ten men. They were immortal unless blade or poison took them. For good only were their powers used, and under their tutelage tall cities and towers were built out of the living stone. While they kept peace, the land flourished. It was a golden time. The elves were our allies, the dwarves our friends. Wealth flowed into our cities, and men prospered. But weep . . . for it could not last.”

Brom looked down silently. Infinite sadness resonated in his voice.

“Though no enemy could destroy them, they could not guard against themselves. And it came to pass at the height of their power that a boy, Galbatorix by name, was born in the province of Inzilbêth, which is no more. At ten he was tested, as was the custom, and it was found that great power resided in him. The Riders accepted him as their own.

“Through their training he passed, exceeding all others in skill. Gifted with a sharp mind and strong body, he quickly took his place among the Riders’ ranks. Some saw his abrupt rise as dangerous and warned the others, but the Riders had grown arrogant in their power and ignored caution. Alas, sorrow was conceived that day.

“So it was that soon after his training was finished, Galbatorix took a reckless trip with two friends. Far north they flew, night and day, and passed into the Urgals’ remaining territory, foolishly thinking their new powers would protect them. There on a thick sheet of ice, unmelted even in summer, they were ambushed in their sleep. Though his friends and their dragons were butchered and he suffered great wounds, Galbatorix slew his attackers. Tragically, during the fight a stray arrow pierced his dragon’s heart. Without the arts to save her, she died in his arms. Then were the seeds of madness planted.”

The storyteller clasped his hands and looked around slowly, shadows flickering across his worn face. The next words came like the mournful toll of a requiem.

“Alone, bereft of much of his strength and half mad with loss, Galbatorix wandered without hope in that desolate land, seeking death. It did not come to him, though he threw himself without fear against any living thing. Urgals and other monsters soon fled from his haunted form. During this time he came to realize that the Riders might grant him another dragon. Driven by this thought, he began the arduous journey, on foot, back through the Spine. Territory he had soared over effortlessly on a dragon’s back now took him months to traverse. He could hunt with magic, but often-

times he walked in places where animals did not travel. Thus when his feet finally left the mountains, he was close to death. A farmer found him collapsed in the mud and summoned the Riders.

“Unconscious, he was taken to their holdings, and his body healed. He slept for four days. Upon awakening he gave no sign of his fevered mind. When he was brought before a council convened to judge him, Galbatorix demanded another dragon. The desperation of the request revealed his dementia, and the council saw him for what he truly was. Denied his hope, Galbatorix, through the twisted mirror of his madness, came to believe it was the Riders’ fault his dragon had died. Night after night he brooded on that and formulated a plan to exact revenge.”

Brom’s words dropped to a mesmerizing whisper.

“He found a sympathetic Rider, and there his insidious words took root. By persistent reasoning and the use of dark secrets learned from a Shade, he inflamed the Rider against their elders. Together they treacherously lured and killed an elder. When the foul deed was done, Galbatorix turned on his ally and slaughtered him without warning. The Riders found him, then, with blood dripping from his hands. A scream tore from his lips, and he fled into the night. As he was cunning in his madness, they could not find him.

“For years he hid in wastelands like a hunted animal, always watching for pursuers. His atrocity was not forgotten, but over time searches ceased. Then through some ill fortune he met a young Rider, Morzan—strong of body, but weak of mind. Galbatorix convinced Morzan to leave a gate unbolted in the citadel Ilirea, which is now called Urú’baen. Through this gate Galbatorix entered and stole a dragon hatchling.

“He and his new disciple hid themselves in an evil place where the Riders dared not venture. There Morzan entered into a dark apprenticeship, learning secrets and forbidden magic that should never have been revealed. When his instruction was finished and Galbatorix’s black dragon, Shruikan, was fully grown, Galbatorix

revealed himself to the world, with Morzan at his side. Together they fought any Rider they met. With each kill their strength grew. Twelve of the Riders joined Galbatorix out of desire for power and revenge against perceived wrongs. Those twelve, with Morzan, became the Thirteen Forsworn. The Riders were unprepared and fell beneath the onslaught. The elves, too, fought bitterly against Galbatorix, but they were overthrown and forced to flee to their secret places, from whence they come no more.

“Only Vrael, leader of the Riders, could resist Galbatorix and the Forsworn. Ancient and wise, he struggled to save what he could and keep the remaining dragons from falling to his enemies. In the last battle, before the gates of Dorú Areaba, Vrael defeated Galbatorix, but hesitated with the final blow. Galbatorix seized the moment and smote him in the side. Grievously wounded, Vrael fled to Utgard Mountain, where he hoped to gather strength. But it was not to be, for Galbatorix found him. As they fought, Galbatorix kicked Vrael in the fork of his legs. With that underhanded blow, he gained dominance over Vrael and removed his head with a blazing sword.

“Then as power rushed through his veins, Galbatorix anointed himself king over all Alagaësia.

“And from that day, he has ruled us.”

With the completion of the story, Brom shuffled away with the troubadours. Eragon thought he saw a tear shining on his cheek. People murmured quietly to each other as they departed. Garrow said to Eragon and Roran, “Consider yourselves fortunate. I have heard this tale only twice in my life. If the Empire knew that Brom had recited it, he would not live to see a new month.”

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