



CHAPTER I

Mount Arngor

The day had not gone well.

Eragon leaned back in his chair and took a long drink of blackberry mead from the mug by his hand. Sweet warmth blossomed in his throat, and with it memories of summer afternoons spent picking berries in Palancar Valley.

A pang of homesickness struck him.

The mead had been the best thing to come out of his meeting with Hruthmund, the dwarven representative. A gift to strengthen the bonds



of friendly association between dwarves and Riders—or so Hruthmund had claimed.

Eragon snorted. *Some friendship.* He'd spent the whole meeting arguing with Hruthmund over when the dwarves would deliver the supplies they'd promised. Hruthmund seemed to believe once every three to four months was more than sufficient, which was absurd considering the dwarves lived closer to the Academy than any of the other races. Even Nasuada had managed to send monthly shipments from the other side of the Hadarac Desert, far to the west.

I'll have to arrange a talk with Orik and sort it out with him directly. Just one more thing to do amid a seemingly endless sea of tasks.

Eragon eyed the mounds of scrolls, books, maps, and loose pieces of parchment that covered the desk in front of him, all of which required his attention. He sighed, finding the sight depressing.



He shifted his gaze out the large, rough-hewn windows that fronted the eyrie. Rays of evening light streamed across the windswept plains that lay below, surrounding Mount Arngor. To the north and west, the Edda River gleamed like a ribbon of beaten silver draped across the landscape. A pair of ships lay docked along the nearest bend, and from that docking, a trail led south to the foothills piled about the base of Arngor.

The mountain had been Eragon's choice—in consultation with Saphira and their traveling companions—for the Dragon Riders' new home. It was more than that too: a safeguard for the Eldunarí and, hopefully, a nesting ground for the next generation of dragons.

The high, slab-sided peak was a trailing remnant of the Beor Mountains, shorter than those towering giants but still many times bigger than the mountains of the Spine Eragon had grown up with. It stood alone in the green expanse of the



eastern reaches, two weeks of slow sailing beyond the bounds of Alagaësia proper.

South of Arngor the land was rumped like a blanket and ruffled with trees whose leaves shone silver in the wind, bright as the scales of a fish. Farther to the east stood scarps and cliffs and huge, flat-topped pillars of stone crested with piles of vegetation. Among them lived groups of wandering tribes: strange, half-wild humans the likes of which Eragon had never encountered before. So far they had proven no trouble, but he remained wary.

Such was his responsibility now.

The mountain bore many names. Arngor was Dwarvish for *White Mountain*, and indeed, the upper thirds were clad in snow and ice and—from a distance—the peak glowed with a startling brilliance amid the verdant plains. But it also had an older, secret name in Dwarvish. For as the expedition Eragon led had begun to settle among the



foothills of the mountain, they had discovered tunnels burrowed into the stone beneath, and there in runes inscribed *Gor Narrveln*, which meant *Mountain of Gems*. Some ancient clan or tribe of dwarves had sunk mines deep into the roots of the peak.

The dwarves who had joined Eragon's group had been excited by the discovery, and they spent much time debating who had made the mines and what gems might still be found.

In the ancient language, the mountain was known as *Fell Thindarë*, which meant *Mountain of Night*. The elves could not tell Eragon where the name came from—nor the reason for it—so he rarely used it. But he also heard them refer to the peak as *Vaeta*, or *Hope*. He found this fitting, as the Dragon Riders were a hope for all the races of *Alagaësia*.

The Urgals had their own name for the peak: *Ungvek*. When Eragon asked them what it meant,



they claimed it was *Strong-Headed*. But he wasn't so sure.

Then too there were the humans. Eragon had heard them use all of the names interchangeably, as well as refer to the mountain as Hoarspike, a term he suspected the traders often used in jest.

Personally, Eragon preferred the sound of *Arn-gor*, but he gave each of the names the respect they were due. The confusion surrounding them embodied the situation at the Academy: the place was a mix of races and cultures and conflicting agendas, and all of them still unsettled. . . .

He took another sip of the *Mûnnvlorss* mead; that was how Hruthmund had named the bottle. *Mûnnvlorss*. Eragon turned the name over on his tongue, feeling the shape of it as he attempted to pick out the meaning.

There had been other problems throughout the day, not just the meeting with Hruthmund. The Urgals had been belligerent as always. The



humans fractious. The dragons in their Eldunari enigmatic. And the elves . . . the elves were elegant and efficient and polite to a fault, but once they made a decision, they would not or *could not* change their minds. Dealing with them had proven far more frustrating than Eragon had anticipated, and the more time he spent around them, the more he'd begun to agree with Orik's opinion of elves. They were best admired from a distance.

In addition to the interpersonal difficulties, there were also ongoing concerns regarding the construction of the stronghold, the acquisition of food and other provisions for the upcoming winter, and the myriad of other details that attended the governance of a large town.

Which was, in essence, what their expedition had become. A settlement, soon to be a permanent one.

Eragon drained the last of the mead. He could



feel a faint tilt to the floor underneath him as it took effect. Half the morning he'd spent devoting himself to assisting in the actual construction of the hold, and it had consumed far more of his strength and Saphira's than he'd anticipated. No matter how much he ate, it never seemed enough to replace the energy expended. In the last two weeks, he'd lost a matching two notches on his belt, and that was on top of the notch he'd taken in over the prior weeks.

He scowled as he eyed the parchment on the desk.

Restoring the race of dragons, leading the Riders, and protecting the Eldunarí were all responsibilities he wanted, welcomed, and took seriously. And yet . . . Eragon had never expected that he would spend so much of his life doing *this*. Sitting at a desk laboring over facts and figures until his vision blurred from the strain. As ridiculously stressful as fighting the Empire and facing Galbatorix had



been—and Eragon never, *ever* wanted to experience anything similar—it had been exciting too.

At times he dreamed of strapping on his sword, Brisingr, getting on Saphira, and setting out to see what adventure they could find. It was just that, though: a dream. They couldn't leave the dragons or the Riders to fend for themselves, not for a long while yet.

"Barzûl," Eragon muttered. His scowl deepened as he considered a whole host of curses he could cast on the scraps of parchment: fire, frost, lightning, wind, obliteration by disintegration, and more besides.

He let out his breath, straightened up, and again reached for a quill.

Stop, said Saphira. Across the chamber, she stirred in the padded hollow that was sunk into the floor: a nest big enough for a dragon. The same nest where, each night, he slept curled up beneath one of her wings.



As she rose, flecks of blue refracted from her gemlike scales and spun across the walls in a dazzling display.

“I can’t,” Eragon said. “I wish I could, but I can’t. These manifests have to be checked by morning, and—”

Always there will be work, she said, walking over to the desk. The tips of her gleaming claws tapped against the stone. *Always there will be those who need something of us, but you have to take care of yourself, little one. You’ve done enough for the day. Put aside your pen and let go of your worries. There is still light in the sky. Go spar with Blödhgarm or butt heads with Skarghaz or do something other than sit and smolder.*

“No,” said Eragon, fixing his gaze on the rows of runes covering the parchment. “It has to be done, and there isn’t anyone else who can do it but me. If I don’t—”

He jumped as Saphira’s left foreclaw stabbed



through the pile of parchment, pinning it to the desk and spilling the bottle of ink across the floor.

Enough, she said. She whuffed, blowing her hot breath over him. Then she extended her neck and peered at him with one of her glittering, bottomless eyes. *No more for today. You are not yourself at the moment. Go.*

“You can’t—”

Go! Her lip curled, and a deep rumble emanated from within her chest.

Eragon bit back his words, frustrated. Then he tossed the quill next to her claw. “Fine.” He pushed the chair away from the desk, stood, and held up his hands. “Fine. You win. I’m going.”

Good. A hint of amusement appeared in her eyes, and she pushed him toward the archway with her snout. *Go. And don’t come back until you’re in a better mood.*

“Hmph.”



But he smiled as he walked through the arch and started down the wide, curved ramp of stairs outside. Despite his protestations, Eragon wasn't sorry to be away from his desk. Somewhat to his annoyance, he knew Saphira was well aware of that, but it wasn't worth grouching about something so small.

Sometimes it was easier to fight a battle than to figure out how to deal with the more mundane details of life.

That was a lesson he was still learning.

The steps were shallow, but the walls between them were wide enough for Saphira to pass between with ease. Except for personal quarters, everything in the hold was being built for use by all but the very largest dragons, same as the structures on Vroengard Island—the old home of the Dragon Riders. It was a necessary feature of the hold, but it meant that building even a single room was a monumental exercise, and most of the



chambers were huge and forbidding, even more so than in the great dwarf city of Tronjheim.

The hold would feel more friendly, Eragon thought, once they had the time and energy to decorate it. Some banners and tapestries hung on the walls and a few rugs before the fireplaces would go a long way toward dampening the echoes, adding color, and generally improving the overall impression of the place. So far, the only real addition had been scores of the dwarves' flameless lanterns, which had been mounted in brackets at regular intervals along the walls.

Not that there was much to the hold at the moment. A handful of storerooms; a few walls; the eyrie where he and Saphira slept, high upon a finger of rock overlooking the rest of the planned citadel. Far more needed to be built and excavated before the complex would begin to resemble anything close to what Eragon envisioned.

He wandered down to the main courtyard,



which was nothing more than a square of rough stone littered with tools, ropes, and tents. The Urgals were wrestling around their fire, as they often did, and though Eragon watched for a while, he felt no inclination to join in.

Two of the elves—Ästrith and Rîlven—who were standing guard along the battlements overlooking the foothills below, nodded as he approached. Eragon returned the gesture and stood some distance away from them, his hands clasped behind his back while he scented the evening air.

Then he went to inspect the construction of the main hall. The dwarves had designed it according to his general plan, and then the elves had refined the details. *That* had occasioned more than a little argument between the two groups.

From the hall, Eragon went to the storerooms and began to catalog the crates and barrels of supplies that had arrived the previous day. Despite



Saphira's admonishments, he couldn't bring himself to let go of his work.

So *much* yet needed doing, and he never had enough time or energy to accomplish even a fraction of his goals.

In the back of his head, he could feel Saphira's faint disapproval that he wasn't out carousing with the dwarves or sparring with the elves or doing something, *anything*, other than work. Yet none of those things appealed to Eragon. He didn't feel like fighting. Didn't feel like reading. Didn't feel like devoting energy to activities that wouldn't help him resolve the problems facing them.

For it was all resting on him. Him and Saphira. Every choice they made affected not only the future of the Riders but the very survival of the dragons, and if they chose badly, both might end.

Thoughts like that made it difficult to relax.

Driven by his discontent, Eragon climbed back



up the stairs toward the eyrie. Only he turned aside before reaching the top and, through a small side tunnel, entered the chamber they'd dug out—with spells and pickaxes—directly below.

It was a large, disk-shaped chamber. In the center, upon several tiered daises, sat an assortment of glittering Eldunarí. Mostly those he and Saphira had fetched from the Vault of Souls on Vroengard, but also a few of the hearts of hearts that Galbatorix had kept slaved to his will.

The rest of the Eldunarí—those Galbatorix had driven mad with his spells and mental tortures—were kept stored in a cave deep within the side of Mount Arngor. There they could not hurt anyone with the lashings of their unhinged thoughts, and Eragon hoped, in time, he might be able to heal them with help from the other dragons. But it would be the work of years, if not decades.

Had it been up to him, he would have placed



all the Eldunari in such caves, along with the many dragon eggs. It was the best way to protect them, the safest sort of strongbox. Eragon was acutely aware of the risk of theft, despite the many wards he'd set on the chamber.

However, Glaedr, Umaroth, and the other dragons still in full possession of their minds had refused to live underground. As Umaroth said, *We spent over a hundred years locked in the Vault of Souls. Perhaps someday we shall spend another hundred years waiting in darkness. In the meantime, we would feel the light upon our facets.*

So it was.

The larger Eldunari rested upon the central dais, while the smaller ones had been arranged in rings about them. Piercing the circular wall of the chamber were dozens of narrow lancet windows, which the elves had fitted with pieces of crystal that split the incoming light into flecks of rainbow. No matter the time of day, the north-facing



room was always bright and strewn with multi-hued shards, both from the windows and the Eldunarí themselves.

The dwarves and the elves had taken to calling the room the Hall of Colors, and Eragon was inclined to agree with the choice. It was a fitting description indeed.

He made his way to the center and knelt in front of the sparkling, gold-hued gem that was Glaedr's heart of hearts. The dragon's mind touched his own, and Eragon felt a vast vista of thought and feeling open up before him. As always, it was a humbling experience.

What troubles you, Eragon-finiarel?

Still restless, Eragon pursed his lips and looked past the Eldunarí at the semi-transparent crystal filling the windows. *Too much work. I can't get ahead of it, and because of that, I can't bring myself to do anything else. It's wearing on me.*



You must learn to center yourself, said Glaedr. Then these lesser concerns will not bother you.

I know. . . . And I know there are many, many things I can't control. Eragon allowed himself a brief, grim smile. But knowing and doing are two different things.

Then another mind joined theirs, that of Umaroth, one of the oldest Eldunari. Out of reflex, Eragon glanced toward the white heart of hearts that contained the dragon's consciousness.

Umaroth said, *What you need is a distraction, that your mind might rest and reset.*

That I do, said Eragon.

Then perhaps we can help, Argetlam. Remember you how my wingmates and I kept watch upon Alagaësia from within the Vault of Souls?

. . . Yes, said Eragon, already having an inkling of what the dragon was hinting at.

He was right. *We have continued the practice,*



Argetlam, as a means of whiling away the days, but also that we might stay abreast of events and not be surprised by the rise of some new enemy.

More minds joined Umaroth's: the rest of the Eldunarí, pressing in around Eragon's consciousness like a sea of growling voices. As always, it took a concentrated effort to ward them off and keep hold of his own thoughts. *Why am I not surprised?*

If you wish, said Glaedr, we can show you some of what we see. A vision of elsewhere that might provide you with a new perspective.

Eragon hesitated as he considered the offer. *How long will it take?*

As long as is required, youngling, said Umaroth. Worrying about the time is exactly what you need curing of. Does the eagle worry about the length of the day? Does the bear or the deer or the fish in the sea? No. So why should you? Chew what you can and leave the rest for tomorrow.



All right, said Eragon. He lifted his chest and took a deep breath as he prepared himself. *Show me, then.*

Inexorable as the onrushing tide, the dragons' minds washed over his own. They swept Eragon out of his body, out of the Hall of Colors and away from snow-clad Mount Arngor and all his cares and worries, carrying him toward the familiar yet distant lands of Alagaësia.

Images blossomed before him, and within them Eragon saw and felt far more than he'd expected. . . .





CHAPTER II

A Fork in the Road

It was two days past Maddentide, and the first flakes of snow were drifting from the starry sky onto the city of Ceunon.

Essie didn't notice. She stomped down the cobblestone alley behind the Yarstead house, her mouth set in a hard line and her cheeks burning as she struggled not to cry. She hated stupid, mean Hjordis, with her fake smile and her pretty bows and all her nasty little insults. *Hated* her.

And then there was poor Carth. Essie couldn't stop thinking about his reaction. He had looked so



betrayed when she'd pushed him into the trough. He hadn't even said anything, just sat where he had fallen and gaped at her while his eyes went big and round.

Her dress sleeve was still wet from where the muddy water had splashed her.

The familiar sound of waves slapping against the underside of the wharves grew louder as she approached the docks. She kept to the alleys—kept to the narrow ways that the adults rarely used. Overhead, a rook with fluffed-out feathers sat perched on the eaves of the Sorting House. It cocked its head and opened its beak to utter a mournful cry.

Essie shivered, though not from the cold, and pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. A dog had howled during the night, the candle on the little shelf where they left offerings of milk and bread for the Svartlings had gone out, and now a lone rook had called. Bad omens all. Was



there more ill fortune coming her way? She didn't think she could bear anything worse. . . .

She slipped between the smelly drying racks by the edge of the fish market and came into the street. Ahead of her, music and conversation sounded, and warm light spilled out of the front of the Fulsome Feast. The windows of the inn were crystal, specially made by the dwarves, and they gleamed like diamond in the flickering light. It was a point of pride for Essie every time she saw the windows, even now. No other building on the street had anything so pretty.

Inside, the common room was as loud and busy as ever. Essie ignored the guests and went to the bar. Papa was there pouring beer, washing out mugs, and serving dishes of smoked herring. He glanced at her as she ducked under the half door at the end of the bar.

"You're late," he said.

"Sorry, Papa." Essie got a plate and loaded it with

a heel of bread, a wedge of hard Sartos cheese, and a half-dried apple—all taken from the shelf under the bar. She was still too small to help with the serving, but she would help with the cleaning up later.

And then later still, once everyone had gone to bed, she would sneak down to the cellar, gather the supplies she needed. . . .

She carried the plate to an empty chair in front of the great stone fireplace. Next to the chair was a small table, and on the other side of it, a second chair—this one with a man sitting in it. He was lean and dark-eyed, with a neat beard and a long black travel cloak bunched around him. A plate balanced on his knee, and he was slowly eating a serving of Mama’s roasted turnips and mutton, stabbing at the pieces with one of the inn’s iron forks.

Essie didn’t care. He was just another traveler, like so many who came to the Fulsome Feast.

She plopped down in the free chair and tore off part of the heel of bread, imagining that it was





Hjordis's head she was tearing off. . . . She continued to rip at the food with her fingers and teeth, and she chewed with a ferocity that was oddly satisfying.

She still felt as if she was about to cry, which just made her more angry. Crying was for little children. Crying was for weaklings who got pushed around and told what to do. That wasn't her!

She made a noise of frustration as she bit into the apple and the stem got stuck in the gap between her front teeth.

"You seem upset," the man next to her said in a mild tone.

Essie scowled. She plucked the stem from between her teeth and flung it into the fireplace. "It's all Hjordis's fault!" Papa didn't like her talking to the guests too much, but she had never minded him. The visitors always had interesting stories, and many of them would ruffle her hair and comment on how adorable she was and give her candied nuts or syrup twists (in the winter, at least).



“Oh?” said the man. 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 Essie, sullen.

“I see. Does that make her important?”

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

“What did she do to upset you, then?”

“Everything!” Essie took a savage bite out of the apple and chewed so hard and quick she bit the inside of her mouth. She winced and swallowed, trying to ignore the pain.

The man drank from the mug by his hand. “Most interesting,” he said, and used a napkin to dab 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.”

Essie looked at him, slightly suspicious. He had an open face, but there was an intensity to his dark



eyes, and a slight hardness too, that she wasn't sure about. "Papa wouldn't want me to bother you."

"I have some time," said the man easily. "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."

He used a lot of big words, and his accent wasn't one Essie was familiar with. It seemed overly careful, as if he were sculpting the air with his tongue. Despite that, and despite the hardness of his eyes, she decided he seemed like a nice person.

She bounced her feet off the legs of the chair. "Well . . . I'd like to tell you, but I can't possibly unless we're friends."

"Is that so? And how do we become friends?"

"You have to tell me your name! Silly."

The man smiled. He had pretty teeth. "Of course. How foolish of me. In that case, my name is Tornac." And he held out his hand. His