

INTO THE BREACH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A line of archers on the battlements of the castle keep let fly a volley of arrows at Saphira. The heat above her was so intense that a handful of the arrows burst into fire in midair and crumbled to ash, while the magical wards Eragon had placed around Saphira deflected the rest. One of the stray arrows rebounded off Eragon's shield with a hollow *thud*, denting it.

The plume of flame suddenly enveloped three of the soldiers,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

castle wall overhead. The archers laughed and jeered, making rude gestures.

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

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

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

Arya gazed at him with a faint hint of amusement.

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

Eragon allowed the five men in front of him to run away; he knew they would not get far. After a quick examination of the bodies that lay sprawled around him to confirm that they were indeed dead, he looked back across the courtyard. Some of the Varden had opened the gates in the outer wall and were carrying a battering ram through the street leading to the castle. Others were assembling in ragged lines next to the keep door, ready to enter the castle and confront the soldiers within. Among them stood Eragon's cousin, Roran, gesturing with his ever-present hammer while he issued orders to the detachment under his command. At the far end of the courtyard, Saphira crouched over the corpses of her kills, the area around her a shambles. Beads of blood clung to her gemlike scales, the spots of red in startling contrast to the blue of her body. She threw back her spiky head and roared her triumph, drowning out the clamor of the city with the ferocity of her cry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A pulsing veil of rage descended over Eragon's vision. He drew upon every store of energy available to him—his body; the sapphire set in the pommel of his sword; the twelve diamonds hidden in the belt of Beloth the Wise wrapped round his waist; and the massive store within Aren, the elf ring that graced his right hand—as he prepared to obliterate the rider, heedless of the risk.

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

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

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

"How badly— Is she—" Eragon said, too upset to complete his sentences. He yearned to speak to Saphira with his mind, but as long as enemy spellcasters might be in the area, he dared not expose

his consciousness to her, lest his foes spy on his thoughts or assume command over his body.

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

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

"We shall attend to it, Shadeslayer."

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

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

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

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

"You killed the magician?"

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

Eragon started forward, then checked himself when Saphira uttered a long, low moan as, without anyone touching it, the lance

began to slide out of her chest. Her eyelids fluttered and she took a series of quick, shallow breaths while the last six inches of the lance emerged from her body. The barbed blade, with its faint nimbus of emerald light, fell to the ground and bounced against the paving stones, sounding more like pottery than metal.

When the elves stopped singing and lifted their hands from Saphira, Eragon rushed to her side and touched her neck. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her how frightened he had been, to join his consciousness with hers. Instead, he settled for looking up into one of her brilliant blue eyes and asking, "Are you all right?" The words seemed paltry when compared with the depth of his emotion.

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

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

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

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

Then Eragon joined Arya and Blödhgarm, who were studying the lance, a strange expression on both their faces, as if they were uncertain how they ought to react. Eragon squatted next to them, careful not to allow any part of his body to brush against the weapon. He stared at the delicate lines carved around the base of the blade, lines that seemed familiar to him, although he was not sure why; at the greenish haft, which was made of a material neither wood

nor metal; and again at the smooth glow that reminded him of the flameless lanterns that the elves and the dwarves used to light their halls.

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

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

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“In any event,” said Arya, “this is not Galbatorix’s handiwork; it is ours.”

Eragon frowned. “Ours? This wasn’t made by the Varden.”

“Not by the Varden, but by an elf.”

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

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

“Why?”

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

“And its name is Niernen, the Orchid,” said Arya. She pointed at

the lines carved into the blade, lines that Eragon then realized were actually stylized glyphs from the elves' unique system of writing—curving, intertwined shapes that terminated in long, thornlike points.

“A Dauthdaert?” When both Arya and Blödhgarm looked at him with incredulity, Eragon shrugged, embarrassed by his lack of education. It frustrated him that, while growing up, the elves had enjoyed decades upon decades of study with the finest scholars of their race, and yet his own uncle, Garrow, had not even taught him his letters, deeming it unimportant. “I could only do so much reading in Ellesméra. What is it? Was it forged during the fall of the Riders, to use against Galbatorix and the Forsworn?”

Blödhgarm shook his head. “Niernen is far, far older than that.”

“The Dauthdaertya,” said Arya, “were born out of the fear and the hate that marked the final years of our war with the dragons. Our most skilled smiths and spellcasters crafted them out of materials we no longer understand, imbued them with enchantments whose wordings we no longer remember, and named them, all twelve of them, after the most beautiful of flowers—as ugly a mismatch as ever there was—for we made them with but one purpose in mind: we made them to kill dragons.”

Revulsion overtook Eragon as he gazed at the glowing lance. “And did they?”

“Those who were present say that the dragons' blood rained from the sky like a summer downpour.”

Saphira hissed, loud and sharp.

Eragon glanced back at her for a moment and saw out of the corner of his eye that the Varden were still holding their position before the keep, waiting for him and Saphira to retake the lead in the offensive.

“All of the Dauthdaertya were thought to have been destroyed or lost beyond recovery,” said Blödhgarm. “Obviously, we were mistaken. Niernen must have passed into the hands of the Waldgrave family, and they must have kept it hidden here in Belatona. I would

guess that when we breached the city walls, Lord Bradburn's courage failed him and he ordered Niernen brought from his armory in an attempt to stop you and Saphira. No doubt Galbatorix would be angry beyond reason if he knew that Bradburn had tried to kill you."

Although he was aware of the need for haste, Eragon's curiosity would not let him leave just yet. "Dauthdaert or not, you still haven't explained why Galbatorix wouldn't want us to have this." He motioned toward the lance. "What makes Niernen any more dangerous than that spear over there, or even Bris—" he caught himself before he uttered the entire name, "or my own sword?"

It was Arya who answered. "It cannot be broken by any normal means, cannot be harmed by fire, and is almost completely impervious to magic, as you yourself saw. The Dauthdaertya were designed to be unaffected by whatever spells the dragons might work and to protect their wielder from the same—a daunting prospect, given the strength, complexity, and unexpected nature of dragons' magic. Galbatorix may have wrapped Shruikan and himself in more wards than anyone else in Alagaësia, but it is possible that Niernen could pass through their defenses as if they don't even exist."

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Eragon understood, and elation filled him. "We have to—"

A squeal interrupted him.

The sound was stabbing, slicing, shivering, like metal scraping against stone. Eragon's teeth vibrated in sympathy and he covered his ears with his hands, grimacing as he twisted around, trying to locate the source of the noise. Saphira tossed her head, and even through the din, he heard her whine in distress.

Eragon swept his gaze over the courtyard two separate times before he noticed a faint puff of dust rising up the wall of the keep from a foot-wide crack that had appeared beneath the blackened, partially destroyed window where Blödhgarm had killed the magician. As the squeal increased in intensity, Eragon risked lifting one of his hands off his ears to point at the crack.

"Look!" he shouted to Arya, who nodded in acknowledgment. He replaced his hand over his ear.

Without warning or preamble, the sound stopped.

Eragon waited for a moment, then slowly lowered his hands, for once wishing that his hearing were not quite so sensitive.

Just as he did, the crack jerked open wider—spreading until it was several feet across—and raced down the wall of the keep. Like a bolt of lightning, the crack struck and shattered the keystone above the doors to the building, showering the floor below with pebbles. The whole castle groaned, and from the damaged window to the broken keystone, the front of the keep began to lean outward.

“Run!” Eragon shouted at the Varden, though the men were already scattering to either side of the courtyard, desperate to get out from under the precarious wall. Eragon took a single step forward, every muscle in his body tense as he searched for a glimpse of Roran somewhere in the throng of warriors.

At last Eragon spotted him, trapped behind the last group of men by the doorway, bellowing madly at them, his words lost in the commotion. Then the wall shifted and dropped several inches—leaning even farther away from the rest of the building—pelting Roran with rocks, knocking him off balance, and forcing him to stumble backward under the overhang of the doorway.

As Roran straightened from a crouch, his eyes met Eragon’s, and in his gaze Eragon saw a flash of fear and helplessness, quickly followed by resignation, as if Roran knew that, no matter how fast he ran, he could not possibly reach safety in time.

A wry smile touched Roran’s lips.

And the wall fell.