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CHRISTOPHER
PAOLINI



MURTAGH

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI

WORLD OF ERAGON

THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

Eragon

Eldest

Brisingr

Inheritance

*The Fork, the Witch, and the Worm:
Tales from Alagaësia, Volume 1*

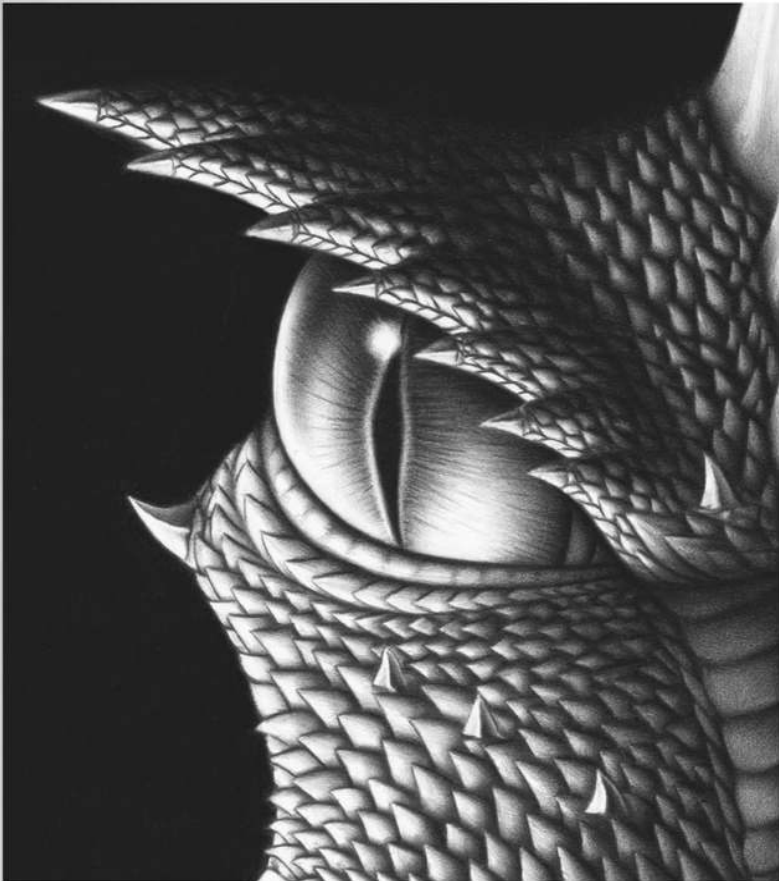
FRACTALVERSE

To Sleep in a Sea of Stars

Unity

Fractal Noise





MURTAGH



WORLD OF ERAGON

CHRISTOPHER
PAOLINI



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As always, this is for my family.

And also for those who stand on the outside, looking in.

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Argument



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—Quandaries 14–20
Atten the Red

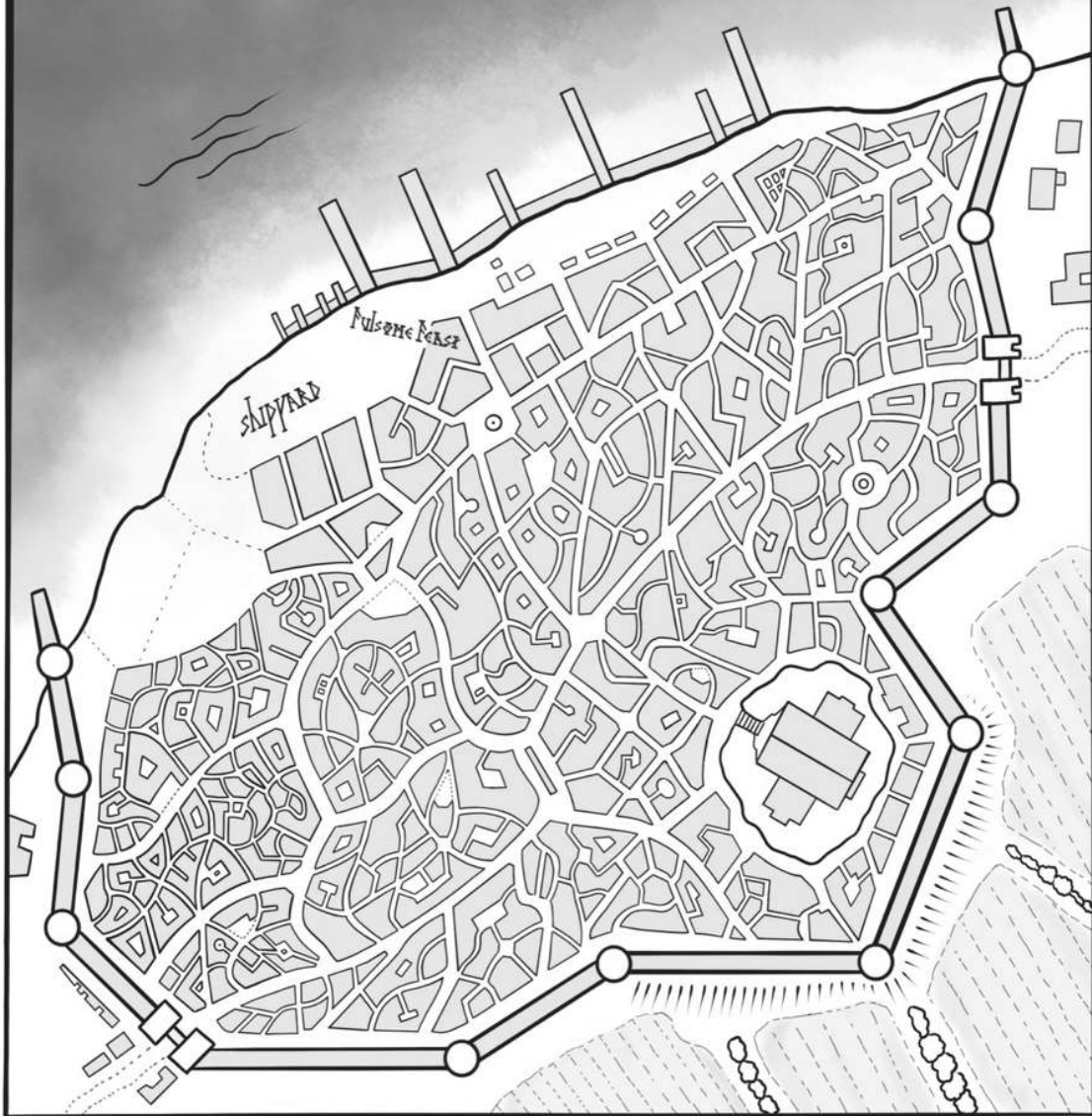
CEUNON





STORMCLOUD ISLE

BAY OF MUNDOR



CHAPTER I



Maddentide

W*ill you go alone?*

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

“What? You'd go with me?”

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

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

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

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

“I think you'd best wait here.”

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

Murtagh snorted as he laid Zar'roc across a patch of dry grass. He'd been surprised to discover that Thorn had a trenchant sense of humor. It

hadn't been readily apparent when they'd been bonded, partly because of Thorn's youth and partly because of...attending circumstances.

For a moment, Murtagh's mood darkened.

No? Well then, if you change your mind—

“You'll be the first to know.”

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

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

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

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

And her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It may not be obvious. The wind can lie.

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

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

“One hopes.”

Thorn's near eye—a deep-set ruby that gleamed with a fierce inner light—remained fixed on Murtagh as he cut the twine and used it to tie Zar'roc's crossguard to belt and scabbard so the crimson sword couldn't

slide free. Then he placed Zar'roc in the saddlebag, where it would be safe and hidden, and returned to stand before Thorn.

"I'll be back before dawn."

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

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

"I'll be fine."

If you need me—

"You'll be there. I know."

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

They understood each other.

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

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

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

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



A man with a dragon was never truly alone.

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

Yet magic was not their only bond. The experiences he and Thorn had shared—the hardships, the mental attacks, the torture—had been so intense,

so singular in nature, Murtagh didn't think that anyone else could truly understand what they had endured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a lesson in that, he felt.

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

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

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

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

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

And the same to you, Murtagh thought.

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

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

Murtagh rolled his neck. Being on his feet—lungs full of clean, crisp air, pulse pounding at a quick, sustainable beat—felt good after spending most of the day on dragonback. His knees and hips ached slightly; he wasn't bowlegged like so many of the cavalymen of Galbatorix's army, but if he continued to spend most of his time on Thorn, it could yet happen. Was that an inevitable part of being a Dragon Rider?

A crooked smile lifted his lips.

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

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

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

“We’re free,” he whispered.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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