

Chapter IV Rhymes and Riddles

Eragon stared across his desk at Angela the herbalist, studying her.

She was sitting in the dark pinewood chair the elves had sung for him, still clad in her furs and travel cloak. Flakes of melted snow beaded the tips of the rabbit-hair trim, bright and shiny by the light of the lanterns.

On the floor next to the herbalist lay the werecat, Solembum, in his feline form, licking himself dry. His tongue rasped loudly against his shaggy coat.

Billows of snow swirled past the open windows of the eyrie, blocking the view. Some slipped in and dusted the sills, but for the most part, the wards Eragon had set kept out the snow and cold.

The storm had settled on Mount Arngor two days past, and it still showed no signs of letting up. Nor was it the first. Winter on the eastern plains had been far harsher than Eragon expected. Something to do with the effects of the Beor Mountains on the weather, he suspected.

Angela and Solembum had arrived with the latest batch of traders: a group of bedraggled humans, travel-worn and half frozen to death. Accompanying the herbalist had also been the dragon-marked child Elva—she who carried the curse of self-sacrifice Eragon had inadvertently laid upon her. A curse instead of a blessing, and every time he saw her, he still felt a sense of responsibility.

They'd left the girl on the lower levels, eating with the dwarves. She'd grown since Eragon had last seen her, and now she looked to be nearly ten, which was at least six years in advance of her actual age.

"Now then, where's the clutch of bouncing baby dragons I was expecting?" said Angela. She pulled off her mittens and then folded her hands over her knee and matched his gaze. "Or have they still not hatched?"

Eragon resisted the urge to grimace. "No. The main part of the hold is far from finished— as you've seen—and stores are tight. To quote Glaedr, the eggs have already waited for a hundred years; they can wait one more winter."

"Mmm, he might be right. Be careful of waiting too long, though, Argetlam. The future belongs to those who seize it. What about Saphira, then?"

"What about her?"

"Has she laid any eggs?"

Eragon shifted, uncomfortable. The truth was Saphira hadn't, not yet, but he didn't want to admit as much. The information felt too personal to share. "If you're so interested, you should ask her yourself."