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Opening extract from

The Eye of the Falcon

Written by

Michelle Paver

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I

'What *happened* here?' said Hylas. 'Where are all the people?'

'There's one over there,' said Periphas, 'but he's not going to tell us.' He pointed at a ship which the Sea had flung halfway up a hill. Snagged in its rigging was the skeleton of a man. Shreds of rotten tunic flapped in the wind, and one bony arm swung in a grisly wave.

'Looks like the gods punished Keftiu worst of all,' said Glaukos. 'Smells like it, too,' said Medon. The others muttered and gripped their amulets.

Hylas was stunned. Over the winter he'd seen many horrors, but nothing like this. The Sea had smashed huts, boats, trees, animals, people. The shore was eerily silent, and wherever he turned, he saw mounds

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of rotting wreckage. Dirty grey surf clawed at his boots, and he breathed the throat-catching stink of death. How could Pirra and Havoc have survived this?

With his knife, Periphas turned over the skull of an ox. 'This happened months ago. Everything's covered in ash.'

'But someone must've survived,' said Hylas. 'Why didn't they come back and rebuild?'

No one answered.

'This *can't* be Keftiu,' said Hylas. 'It's a huge rich island with thousands of people, Pirra told me!'

'I'm sorry, lad,' said Periphas. 'You won't find your friends now. We'll see if there's anything worth taking, then we're off.'

While the others spread out to forage, Hylas spotted a hut further down the shore and picked his way towards it, desperate to find someone alive.

The icy wind tugged at his sheepskins, and he startled a vulture which flew off, raising a haze of ash. He hardly noticed. All through the winter the Great Cloud had hidden the Sun, plunging the world into perpetual twilight and shrouding it in ash. He'd grown used to the gloom, and the black grit that got into hair, clothes, food. But *this* . . .

He thought of his friends as he'd last seen them, seven moons ago on Thalakrea. The Mountain had

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been spewing fire and there'd been chaos on the shore, people fleeing in whatever boats they could find. Somehow, he'd got Havoc and Pirra on a ship: Havoc scrabbling in her cage and yowling at him, *Why are you abandoning me*, and Pirra white with fury – for the ship was Keftian. 'I *told* you I couldn't go back!' she'd screamed. 'I'll never forgive you, Hylas! I'll hate you for ever!'

He'd done it to *save* her. But he'd sent her to this.

The hut was mudbrick and thatch, and someone had crudely repaired it after the Sea's attack. They'd also marked the wall with a stark white hand-print. Hylas didn't know what that meant, but it felt like a warning. He halted some distance away.

The wind flung more ash in his face. As he brushed it off, he felt an ache in his temple, and from the corner of his eye, he glimpsed two ragged children. They vanished inside, but he saw that they were girls, one about ten, the other younger. Both had bizarrely shaven heads, except for one long lock hanging from the temple; and angry boils on their necks the size of pigeons' eggs.

'I'm not going to hurt you!' he called.

No answer, but he knew they were listening. And he caught a sense of anger, and hopeless searching.

To reassure them, he turned his back.

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Again they appeared at the corner of his vision.

'Are you looking for your parents?' he said without moving his head. 'I'm looking for someone, too. My friends. Is anyone else alive?'

Still no answer. The anger and loss came at him in waves.

Belatedly, he remembered that he was a foreigner here, so they wouldn't understand him. 'I'm Akean,' he explained, 'I can't speak Keftian!'

Once again when he looked, they vanished inside. After a moment's hesitation, he followed.

The hut was empty.

Yes, empty – and no way out except for this door. The back of his neck began to prickle, and his hand went to the lion-claw amulet at his throat.

Dim grey light filtered through the thatch, and the air was thick with the stench of death. Then on a cot against the opposite wall, he saw the bodies of two girls.

His heart hammered against his ribs.

One girl looked about ten, the other younger. Both had shaven heads with a single lock of hair at the temple, and terrible boils on their necks. A dark haze seemed to boil and swarm around them, like ash – only this was alive.

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With a cry Hylas staggered from the hut.

Further up the shore, the others were already splashing through the shallows to the ship, and Periphas was hastily untying its line from a boulder. 'Where've you been!' he yelled at Hylas. 'We're clearing out, we found bodies!'

'So did I!' gasped Hylas.

'Did you touch them?' barked Periphas.

'No, I – no.' He didn't dare mention the children. His mind shied away from what they might be.

No one sees ghosts, he told himself. And yet I saw them. They were there.

'We found three fresh corpses in a shelter,' muttered Periphas. 'Black in the face, and all over with boils.'

'What *is* it?' said Hylas.

'Plague,' snapped Periphas.

The men within earshot blenched.

Hylas' mind reeled. 'M-maybe it's only on this part of the coast,' he stammered. 'If we go further –'

'I'm not risking it,' said Periphas.

'Then inland! There are mountains, we can –'

'Let me tell you about the Plague,' Periphas cut in. 'It comes with the unburied dead. That's what happened here. First you get a fever. That's the Plague making its nests in your flesh. Soon those nests swell

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into great agonizing boils. They hurt so much you can't stop screaming, but the Plague doesn't care, it's breeding inside you. Now the boils are bursting, and the pain's so bad you're going mad.' He chucked the line towards the ship. 'It only ends one way.'

The others had stopped what they were doing and were gaping at their leader.

Hylas glanced from Periphas to the ruined shore and the hazy mountains beyond. 'I-I have to stay,' he said.

'Then you're already mad,' retorted Periphas. 'I thought you were desperate to reach Messenia and find your sister!'

'I am, but . . . The gods didn't send us to Messenia. They sent us here. To Keftiu.'

'Look around you, Hylas! Your friends won't have survived this!'

'But if they did –'

'A girl and a lion cub? There's no one here but the dead! If you stay, you'll become one of them!'

Hylas licked his lips. 'Pirra and Havoc are my friends. I sent them here. I can't abandon them.'

'What about us? Aren't we your friends?'

Hylas glanced at the others on the ship. They were tough men – escaped slaves like him – and used to unimaginable hardship. At nearly fourteen, he was

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the youngest by far, and yet they'd treated him with rough kindness. For seven moons they'd been trying to get back to Akea, but the Sea was full of huge floating islands of pumice, and they kept losing their way. Once, they'd run aground; it had taken two moons to repair the ship. And now they'd fetched up here, on Keftiu.

Hylas looked at Periphas, with his broken nose and his brown eyes that had seen too many bad things. Periphas had saved his life by hauling him aboard as the ship left Thalakrea. He'd been a warrior once, and over the winter he'd taught Hylas a bit about fighting. In a way, they'd become friends.

But Pirra was different – and so was Havoc.

'They need me, Periphas,' said Hylas. 'It's *my fault* that they're here. If there's a chance they're still alive . . .'

Periphas gave him a strange angry look. Then he scratched his beard with one grimy hand. 'It's your choice,' he growled. 'A pity. I liked you.'

After that, things happened fast. Hylas already carried his axe, knife, slingshot and strike-fire, but now Periphas gave him a waterskin, a sack of provisions and a coil of rope. 'That always comes in handy,' he said with a scowl.

Soon afterwards, Hylas was watching the ship

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heading out over the grey Sea. He watched till it was gone, and he was left alone with the vultures and the icy wind: a stranger in a haunted land ravaged by Plague.

What have I done? he wondered.

Then he hoisted his gear on his back and headed off to find his friends.

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