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Opening extract from

# Outcast

Written by

## Michelle Paver

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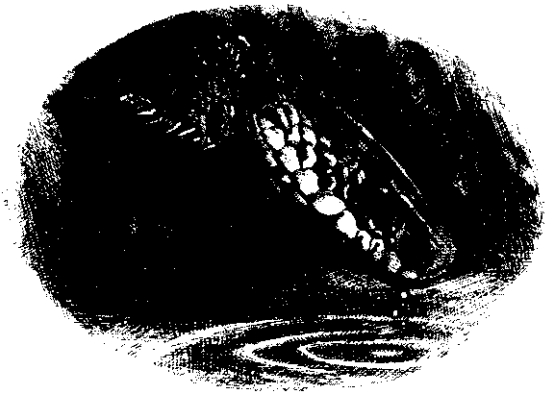
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# ONE



The viper glided down the riverbank and placed its sleek head on the water, and Torak stopped a few paces away to let it drink.

His arms ached from carrying the red deer antlers, so he set them aside and crouched in the bracken to watch. Snakes are wise, and know many secrets. Maybe this one would help him deal with his.

The viper drank with unhurried sips. Raising its head, it regarded Torak, flicking out its tongue to taste his scent. Then it coiled neatly back on itself and vanished into the ferns.

It had given him no sign.

But you don't *need* a sign, he told himself wearily. You know what to do. Just tell them. Soon as you get back to camp. Just say, 'Renn. Fin-Kedinn. Two moons ago,

something happened. They held me down, they put a mark on my chest. And now . . .'

No. That wasn't any good. He could picture Renn's face. 'I'm your best friend – and you've been lying to me for *two whole moons*!'

He put his head in his hands.

After a while he heard rustling, and glanced up to see a reindeer on the opposite bank. It was standing on three legs, furiously scratching its budding antlers with one hind hoof. Sensing that Torak wasn't hunting, it went on scratching. The antlers were bleeding: the itch must be so bad that the only relief was to make them hurt.

That's what I should do, thought Torak. Cut it out. Make it hurt. In secret. Then no-one need ever know.

The trouble was, even if he could bring himself to do it, it wouldn't work. To get rid of the tattoo, he'd have to perform the proper rite. He'd learnt that from Renn, whom he'd approached in a roundabout way, using the zigzag tattoos on her wrists as an excuse.

'If you don't do the rite,' she'd told him, 'the marks just come back.'

'*They come back?*' Torak had been horrified.

'Of course. You can't see them, they're deep in the marrow. But they're still there.'

So that was the end of that, unless he could get her to tell him about the rite without revealing why he needed to know.

The reindeer gave an irritable shake and trotted off into the Forest; and Torak picked up the antlers and started back for camp. They were a lucky find, big enough for everyone in the clan to get a piece, and perfect for making fish-hooks and hammers for knapping flint. Fin-Kedinn would be pleased. Torak tried to fix his mind on that.

It didn't work. Until now, he hadn't understood how much a secret can set you apart. He thought about it all the time, even when he was hunting with Renn and Wolf.

It was early in the Moon of the Salmon Run, and a sharp east wind carried a strong smell of fish. As Torak made his way beneath the pines, his boots crunched on flakes of bark scattered by woodpeckers. To his left, the Green River chattered after its long imprisonment under the ice, while to his right, a rockface rose towards Broken Ridge. In places it was scarred, where the clans had hacked out the red slate which brings hunting luck. He heard the clink of stone on stone. Someone was quarrying.

That should be me, Torak told himself. I should be making a new axe. I should be doing things. 'This can't go on,' he said out loud.

'You're right,' said a voice. 'It can't.'

They were crouching on a ledge ten paces above him: four boys and two girls, glaring down. The Boar Clan wore their brown hair cut to shoulder length, with a fringe; tusks at their necks, stiff hide mantles across their shoulders. The Willows had wovenbark strips sewn in spirals on their jerkins, and three black leaves tattooed on their brows in a permanent frown. All were older than Torak. The boys had wispy beards, and beneath the girls' clan-tattoos, a short red bar showed that they'd had their first moon bleed.

They'd been quarrying: Torak saw stone dust on their buckskins. Just ahead of him, he spotted a tree-trunk ladder notched with footholds, which they'd propped against the rockface, to climb up to the ledge. But they were no longer interested in slate.

Torak stared back, hoping he didn't look scared. 'What do you want?' he said.

Aki, the Boar Clan Leader's son, jerked his head at the antlers. 'Those are mine. Put them down.'

'No they're not,' said Torak. 'I found them.' To remind them he had weapons, he hoisted his bow on his shoulder and touched the blue slate knife at his hip.

Aki wasn't impressed. 'They're mine.'

'Which means *you* stole them,' said a Willow girl.

'If that was true,' Torak told Aki, 'you'd have put your mark on them and I'd have left them alone.'

'I did. On the base. You rubbed it off.'

'Of course I didn't,' said Torak in disgust.

Then he saw what he should have seen before: a smudge of earthblood at the base of one antler, where a boar tusk had been drawn on. His ears burned. 'I didn't see it. And I didn't rub it off.'

'Then put them down and get out of here,' said a boy called Raut, who'd always struck Torak as fairer than most. Unlike Aki, who was spoiling for a fight.

Torak didn't feel like giving him one. 'All right,' he said briskly, 'I made a mistake. Didn't see the mark. They're yours.'

'What makes you think it's that easy?' said Aki.

Torak sighed. He'd come across Aki before. A bully: unsure if he was a leader, and desperate to prove it with his fists.

'You think you're special,' sneered Aki. 'Because Fin-Kedinn took you in, and you can talk to wolves and you're a spirit walker.' He raked his fingernails over the scant hairs on his chin, as if checking they were still there. 'Truth is, you only live with the Ravens because your own clan's never come near you. And Fin-Kedinn doesn't trust you enough to make you his foster son.'

Torak set his teeth.

Covertly, he looked about. The river was too cold to swim; besides, they had dugouts on the bank. That meant there was no point running upriver, either – or back the way he'd come, he'd be trapped in the fork where the Green River merged with the Axehandle. And no help within reach. Renn was at the Raven camp on the north bank, half a daywalk to the east; and Wolf had gone hunting in the night.

He set down the antlers. 'I said you can have them,' he told Aki. He started up the trail.

'Coward,' taunted Aki.

Torak ignored him.

A stone struck his temple. He turned on them. 'Now who's the coward? What's brave about six against one?'

Beneath his fringe, Aki's square face darkened. 'Then let's make it even: just you and me.' He whipped off his jerkin to reveal a meaty chest covered in reddish fuzz.

Torak froze.

'What's the matter?' sniggered a Boar girl. 'Scared?'

'No,' said Torak. But he was. He'd forgotten the Boar Clan custom of stripping to the waist for a fight. He couldn't do that, or they'd see the mark.

'Get ready to fight,' snarled Aki, making his way down the ladder.

'No,' said Torak.

Another stone whistled towards him. He caught it and threw it back, and the Boar girl yelped and clutched a bleeding shin.

Aki had nearly reached the bottom of the ladder, his friends swarming after him like ants on a honey trail.

Grabbing one of the antlers, Torak ducked behind a pine, hooked the tines in the nearest branch, and swung into the tree.

'We've got him!' shouted Aki.

No you haven't, thought Torak. He'd chosen this tree because it grew nearest the rockface, and now he crawled along a branch and onto the ledge they'd just left. It was littered with quartz saws and grindstones, a small fire, and an elkhide pail of pine-pitch, planted in hot ash to keep it runny. Above him the slope was less steep, with enough juniper scrub to make it climbable.

Throwing stones and dodging theirs, he raced to the ladder and gave it a push. It didn't budge. It was lashed to the ledge with rawhide ropes, no time to cut it free. He did the only thing he could to stop them coming after him. He seized the pail and emptied it down the ladder.

There was an outraged roar – and Torak dropped the pail in astonishment. Aki was faster than he looked – he'd nearly reached the ledge. Without meaning to, Torak had just dumped hot pine-pitch all over him.

Bellowing like a stuck boar, Aki slid down the ladder.

Torak clawed at juniper bushes and hauled himself towards the ridge.



He ran north-east through the trees, and their cries faded. He *hated* running away. But better be called a coward than get found out.

After a while the slope became gentler, and he was able to skitter down it and make his way to the river again, keeping off the clan trail and sticking to the wolf trails which he could find almost without thinking. Once he reached the ford, he could get across and double back to the Raven camp. There'd be trouble, but Fin-Kedinn would be on his side.

In a willow thicket on the bank, he came to a halt, the breath sawing in his chest. Around him the trees were still waking from their long winter sleep. Bees bumped about among the catkins, and a squirrel dozed in a patch of sunlight, its tail wrapped around the branch. In the shallows, a jay was taking a bath. No-one was coming. The Forest would have warned him.

Shaky with relief, he leaned against a tree-trunk.

His hand moved to the neck of his jerkin and touched the tattoo on his breastbone. The Viper Mage hissed in his mind. *'This mark will be like the harpoon head beneath the skin of the seal. One twitch, and it will draw you, no matter how hard you struggle. For now you are one of us . . .'*

'I'm not one of you,' muttered Torak. 'I'm *not*!'

But as he'd lain awake through the storm-tossed nights of winter, he'd felt the mark burning his skin. He dreaded to think what evil it might do. What evil it might make *him* do.

Somewhere to the south, Wolf howled. He'd caught a hare, and was singing his happiness to the Forest, his pack-brother and anyone else who was listening.

Hearing Wolf's voice lightened Torak's spirits. Wolf didn't seem to mind his tattoo. Nor did the Forest. It knew, but it hadn't cast him out.

The jay flew up, scattering droplets, and for a moment, Torak followed its flight. Then he pushed himself off the tree and began to run. He left the thicket – and Aki head-butted him in the chest and sent him sprawling.

The Boar Clan boy was almost unrecognisable. His reddened eyes glared from a skull that was black and slimy with pitch, and he stank of pine-blood and rage. 'You made a fool of me!' he shouted. 'In front of everyone, you made a fool of me!'

Struggling to his feet, Torak scrambled backwards. 'I didn't do it on purpose! I didn't know you were there!'

'Liar!' Aki swung his axe at Torak's shins.

Torak jumped out of the way, then side-stepped and kicked Aki's axe-hand. Aki dropped the axe. He drew his knife. Torak drew his too, and they circled one another.

Torak's heart hammered against his ribs as he tried to remember every fighting trick Fa and Fin-Kedinn had taught him.

Without warning, Aki lunged. He mistimed it by a heartbeat. Torak kicked him in the belly, then punched him hard in the throat. Choking, Aki went down, grabbing at Torak's jerkin. The throat-lacing ripped – and Aki saw it. The mark on Torak's chest.

Time stretched.

Aki released him and staggered back.

Torak's legs wouldn't move.

Aki glanced from the mark to Torak's face. Beneath the pine-pitch, his features were blank with shock.

He recovered fast. He pointed one finger at Torak, aiming straight between the eyes. He made a sideways cut of the hand: a sign Torak had never seen before.

Then he turned and ran.



Aki must have regained his dugout and paddled faster than a leaping salmon, because when Torak finally reached the Raven camp by mid-afternoon, the Boar Clan boy had got there first. Torak knew at once from the stillness of the Ravens as he ran into the clearing.

The only sounds were the creak of the drying racks and the murmur of the river. Thull and his mate Luta, whose

shelter Torak shared, stared at him as if he were a stranger. Only their son Dari, seven summers old and Torak's devoted follower, rushed to greet him. He was yanked back by his father.

Renn burst from a reindeer-hide shelter, her dark-red hair flying, her face flushed with indignation. 'Torak, at last! It's all a mistake! I've told them it isn't true!'

Behind her, Aki emerged with his father, the Boar Clan Leader, and Fin-Kedinn. The Raven Leader's face was grim, and he leaned on his staff as he crossed the clearing; but when he spoke it was in the same quiet voice as always. 'I've vouched for you, Torak. I've told them this can't be so.'

They had such such faith in him. He couldn't bear it.

The Boar Clan Leader glared at Fin-Kedinn. 'Are you calling my son a liar?' He was a bigger version of Aki: the same square face and ready fists.

'Not a liar,' replied Fin-Kedinn. 'Simply mistaken.'

The Boar Clan Leader bridled.

'I've told you,' said Fin-Kedinn, 'the boy is no Soul-Eater. And he can prove it. Torak, take off your jerkin.'

'*What?*' Renn turned on her uncle. 'But you can't even *think* – '

Fin-Kedinn silenced her with a glance. Then to Torak, 'Quickly now, let's clear this up.'

Torak looked at the faces around him. These people had taken him in when his father was killed. He'd lived with them for nearly two summers. They had begun to accept him. Now he was going to end that.

Slowly he took off his quiver and bow and laid them on the ground. He untied his belt. There was a ringing in his ears. His fingers belonged to someone else.

He said a prayer to the Forest – and pulled his jerkin over his head.

Renn's mouth opened, but no sound came.

Fin-Kedinn's hand tightened on his staff.

'I told you,' cried Aki. 'The three-pronged fork, I *told* you! He's a Soul-Eater!'