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Opening extract from

Oath Breaker

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Published by

Orion Books

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ONE

Sometimes there's no warning. Nothing at all.

Your skinboat is flying like a cormorant over the waves, your paddle sending silver capelin darting through the kelp, and everything's just right: the choppy Sea, the sun in your eyes, the cold wind at your back. Then a rock rears out of the water, bigger than a whale, and you're heading straight for it, you're going to smash . . .

Torak threw himself sideways and stabbed hard with his paddle. His skinboat lurched – nearly flipped over – and hissed past the rock with a finger to spare.

Streaming wet and coughing up seawater, he struggled to regain his balance.

'You all right?' shouted Bale, circling back.

'Didn't see the rock,' muttered Torak, feeling stupid.

Bale grinned. 'Couple of beginners in camp. You want to go and join them?'

'You first!' retorted Torak, slapping the water with his paddle and drenching Bale. 'Race you past the Crag!'

The Seal boy gave a whoop and they were off: freezing, wet, exhilarated. High overhead, Torak spotted two black specks. He whistled, and Rip and Rek hurtled down to fly alongside him, their wingtips nearly touching the waves. Torak swerved to avoid a slab of ice and the ravens swerved with him, sunlight glinting

purple and green on their glossy black feathers. They edged ahead. Torak raced to keep up. His muscles burned. Salt stung his cheeks. He laughed aloud. This was almost as good as flying.

Bale – two summers older and the best skinboater in the islands – pulled ahead, disappearing into the shadow of the looming headland called the Crag. The Sea turned rougher as they left the bay, and a wave smacked head-on into Torak's boat, nearly upending him.

When he'd got it under control, he was facing the wrong way. The Bay of Seals looked beautiful in the sun, and for a moment he forgot the race. Spray misted the waterfall at the southern end, and gulls wheeled about the cliffs. On the beach, smoke curled from the Seal Clan's humped shelters, and the long racks of salt-rimed cod glittered like frost. He saw Fin-Kedinn, his dark-red hair a fiery beacon among the fairer Seals; and there was Renn, giving an archery lesson to a gaggle of admiring children. Torak grinned. Seals were better with a harpoon than a bow and arrow, and Renn was not a patient teacher.

Bale yelled at him to catch up, so he turned and applied himself to his paddle.

Once past the Crag, they realized they were famished, and put in at a small bay, where they woke up a fire of driftwood and seaweed. Before eating, Bale threw a morsel of dried cod into the shallows for the Sea Mother and his clan guardian, while Torak, who didn't have a guardian, stuck a chunk of elk-blood sausage in a juniper bush as an offering to the Forest. It felt a bit odd, as the Forest was a day's skinboating to the east, but it would have felt even odder not to have done it.

After that, Bale shared the rest of the dried cod – sweet, chewy and surprisingly un-fishy – and Torak pulled clumps of mussels from the rocks. These they ate raw, prising off a half-shell and

using it to scrape out the deliciously rich, slippery orange meat. Then Bale helped finish the elk sausage. Like the rest of his clan, he'd become more relaxed about mixing the Forest with the Sea, which made things easier for everyone.

Still hungry, they decided to make a stew. Torak filled his cooking-skin with water from a stream, hung it from sticks beside the fire, and added pebbles which had been heating in the embers. Bale tossed in handfuls of purple sea moss he'd found in a rockpool, and a pile of shellworms he'd dug from the sand, and Torak threw in a bunch of sea kale, because he wanted something green to remind him of the Forest.

As they waited for it to cook, Torak squatted near the fire, scorching the feeling back into his fingers. Bale made a spoon by wedging half a mussel shell in a piece of kelp stem, and binding it with seal sinew from his sewing pouch.

'Good fishing to you!' called a voice from the Sea, making them jump.

It was a Cormorant fisherman in a skinboat. His walrus-hide net bulged with herring.

'And good fishing to you!' Bale returned the greeting common among the Sea clans.

As he paddled into the shallows, the man peered at Torak, taking in the fine black tattoos on his cheeks. 'Who's your friend from the Forest?' he asked Bale. 'Are those tattoos – Wolf Clan?'

Torak opened his mouth to reply, but Bale got in first. 'He's my kinsman. Fin-Kedinn's foster son. He hunts with the Ravens.'

'And I'm not Wolf Clan,' said Torak. 'I'm clanless.' His stare told the man to make of that what he would.

The man's hand went to the clan-creature feathers on his shoulder. 'I've heard of you. You're the one they cast out.'

Without thinking, Torak touched his forehead, where his

headband concealed the outcast tattoo. Fin-Kedinn had altered the tattoo so it no longer meant outcast; but not even the Raven Leader could alter the memory.

'The clans took him back,' said Bale.

'So they say,' said the man. 'Well. Good fishing, then.' He spoke only to Bale, giving Torak a doubtful glance before paddling away.

'Don't mind him,' said Bale after a moment's silence.

Torak didn't reply.

'Here.' Bale tossed him the spoon. 'You left yours in camp. And cheer up! He's a Cormorant. What do they know?'

Torak's lip curled. 'About as much as a Seal.'

Bale lunged for him and they wrestled, laughing, rolling over the pebbles until Torak got Bale in an armlock and made him beg for mercy.

They ate in silence, spitting out scraps for Rip and Rek. Then Torak lay on his side and roasted, and Bale fed the fire with driftwood. The Seal boy didn't notice Rip approaching from behind at a stiff-legged walk. Both ravens were fascinated by Bale's long fair hair, which he wore threaded with blue slate beads and the tiny bones of capelin.

Rip took one of the bones in his powerful bill and tugged. Bale yelped. Rip let go and cowered with half-spread wings: an innocent raven unjustly accused. Bale laughed and tossed him a piece of shellworm.

Torak smiled. It was good to be with Bale again. He was like a brother; or how Torak imagined a brother would be. They enjoyed the same things, laughed at the same jokes. But they were different. Bale was nearly seventeen summers old, and soon he would find a mate and build his own shelter. As the Seals never moved camp, this meant that apart from trading trips to the Forest,

he would live out his days on the narrow beach of the Bay of Seals.

Never to move camp. Even thinking of it made Torak breathless and cramped. And yet – to have such certainty. Your whole life unrolling like a well-tanned seal pelt. Sometimes he wondered how that must feel.

Bale sensed the change in him and asked if he was missing the Forest.

Torak shrugged.

'And Wolf?'

'Always.' Wolf had flatly refused to get in a boat, so they'd been forced to leave him behind. *Soon back*, Torak had told his pack-brother in wolf talk. But he wasn't sure if Wolf had understood.

Thinking of Wolf made him restless. 'It's getting late,' he said. 'We need to be on the Crag by dusk.'

That was why he and Renn and Fin-Kedinn had come. The disturbances on the island had started again after the winter, and they suspected it was the Soul-Eaters, searching for the last piece of the fire-opal which had lain hidden since the death of the Seal Mage. For the past half-moon, they'd taken turns to keep watch. Tonight it was the turn of Torak and Bale.

Bale looked preoccupied as he scoured the cooking-skin with sand. He opened his mouth to say something, then shook his head and frowned.

It wasn't like him to hesitate, so it must be important. Torak twisted a frond of oarweed in his fingers and waited.

'When you go back to the Forest,' said Bale without meeting his eyes, 'I'm going to ask Renn to stay here. With me. I want to know what you think about that.'

Torak went very still.

'Torak?'

Torak placed the oarweed on the fire and watched the flames around it turn purple. He felt as if he'd reached the edge of a cliff without knowing it was there. 'Renn can do what she likes,' he said at last.

'But you. What do you think?'

Torak sprang to his feet. Anger made his skin prickle and his heart bump unpleasantly in his chest. He stared down at Bale, who was handsome, older, and part of a clan. He knew that if he stayed, they would fight, and this time it would be for real. 'I'm off,' he said.

'Back to camp?' said Bale, studiedly calm.

'No.'

'Then where?'

'Just off.'

'What about keeping watch?'

'You do it.'

'Torak. Don't be – '

'I said, *you* do it!'

'Right. Right.' Bale stared at the fire.

Torak turned on his heel and ran to his boat.

He headed up the north coast, away from the Bay of Seals. His anger had gone, leaving a cold, churning confusion. He longed for Wolf. But Wolf was far away.

He found another inlet and put in. He carried the skinboat into the straggling trees on the lower slopes, needing the smell of birch and rowan, even if they were stunted and saltblown compared with those of the Forest. He couldn't return to the Bay of Seals, not tonight. He would stay here.

He had no pack or sleeping-sack, but since being cast out, he always carried what he needed wherever he went: axe, knife,

tinder pouch. Propping the skinboat upside-down on shoresticks, he stacked branches and last autumn's bracken against the sides to make a shelter. Then he woke a driftwood fire and piled rocks behind it to throw back the heat. There was plenty of dry bracken and seaweed for bedding, and he'd be warm enough in his reindeer-hide parka and leggings. If not, too bad.

It was a clear night at the end of the Birchblood Moon – the Seals called it the Moon of the Cod Run – and from the shallows came the clink of a lonely little ice floe bumping against the rocks. Beyond the firelight, Rip and Rek slept huddled together in the fork of a rowan, their beaks tucked under their wings.

Torak lay watching the flames. It was nine moons since he'd been outcast, but it still felt strange to be in the open and not hiding his fire.

He should go back.

But he couldn't face Bale. Or Fin-Kedinn. Or Renn.

As he hunched deeper into his parka, something dug into his side. It was Bale's spoon; he must have shoved it into his belt before he left. He turned it in his fingers. It was carefully made, the sinew wound tight, the loose end neatly tucked in.

He blew out a long breath. He would go back in the morning and say sorry. Bale would understand. He was good that way, he never sulked.

Torak slept badly. In his dreams he heard an owl calling, and Renn telling him something he didn't understand.

Some time after middle-night, he woke. It was the time of the moon's dark, when it had been eaten by the sky bear, and only a glimmer of starlight rocked on the quiet Sea. He needed to get going: put in at the Bay of Seals, climb the Crag, find Bale.

Feeling groggy and unrested, he dismantled the shelter and poured water on the fire to put it to sleep. Rip and Rek reluctantly

stretched their wings and fluffed up their head-feathers to show their dislike of such an early start; but when Torak carried his boat into the shallows and set off, he heard the strong, steady whisper of raven wings.

In the east, the sun was a scarlet knife-slash between Sea and sky, but the Bay of Seals was in shadow, the Crag looming against the stars. The gulls were roosting, the seal-hide shelters silent. Only the waterfall broke the stillness, and the stealthy lapping of the Sea, and the cod creaking on the racks.

Torak came ashore at the north end of the bay. Shells crunched beneath his boots, and he breathed the bitter tang of banked-up fires. On the racks, the cod watched him with dead, salt-crusted eyes.

Rek gave an eager cark – she'd spotted carrion – and both ravens flew to the rocks at the foot of the Crag.

It was too dark for Torak to see what they'd found, but something made the skin on the back of his neck tighten.

Whatever it was, Rip and Rek approached cautiously, as ravens do, hopping nearer, then flying away.

Torak told himself it could be anything. But he was running, stumbling through mounds of rotting seaweed. As he drew closer, he caught the sickly-sweet smell that is like no other. He sank to his knees.

No. No.

He must have shouted it, because the ravens flew off with caws of alarm.

No.

He crawled closer. His fingers touched wetness and came away red. He saw shards of white bone and spatters of greasy grey sludge. He saw darkness seeping through the long fair hair that was beaded with blue slate and capelin bones. He saw the familiar

face staring sightlessly at the sky.

Sometimes there's no warning. Nothing at all.

TWO

This isn't happening, thought Torak.

He wasn't staring at those claw-like fingers; at that blood blackening under the nails. It wasn't real.

A gull screamed on the cliff, and Torak raised his head. High above, at the lip of the Crag, a juniper bush hung down. He pictured Bale on his knees, leaning over too far. His desperate grab at a branch, the sickening jolt as it gave way. The rocks hurtling towards him.

Oh, Bale. Why did you go so close to the edge?

A chill wind stole down his neck, and he shivered. Bale's souls were close, and they were angry. Angry with him. *If you'd been with me, I wouldn't have died.*

Torak shut his eyes.

Death Marks. Yes. The souls must be kept together, or Bale might become a demon or a ghost.

At least I can do this for you, thought Torak.

With clumsy fingers, he untied his medicine pouch and shook it. Out fell the medicine horn which had been his mother's, and the little mussel spoon. He blinked. He hadn't even thanked Bale for it. They had eaten in silence. Then they'd fought. No, he corrected himself. Bale didn't fight. *You* did the quarrelling. The last thing you ever said to him was in anger.

Death Marks.

He shoved the spoon back into the pouch. Shaking earthblood into his palm, he tried to spit on it, but his mouth was too dry. He stumbled to a rockpool and made the red ochre into a paste with seawater. On his way back, he wound oarweed round his forefinger, so as not to touch the corpse.

Bale lay on his back. His face was unmarked. It was the back of his skull that had cracked like an eggshell. Numbly, Torak daubed earthblood circles on the forehead, chest and heels. He'd done the same for Fa. The mark on Fa's chest had been the hardest, as he had a scar where he'd cut out the Soul-Eater tattoo. Torak's own chest bore a similar scar, so when his time came, that mark would be difficult, too. Bale's chest was smooth. Flawless.

When it was done, Torak sat on his heels. He knew he was too close to the body, that this was the most dangerous time, when the souls are still close, and might try to possess the living. But he stayed where he was.

Someone was crunching through the seaweed, calling his name.

He turned.

Renn saw his face and stopped.

'Stay back.' His voice was rough, as if it belonged to someone else.

She ran to him. She saw what lay beyond. Her cheeks drained of colour.

'He fell,' said Torak.

She was shaking her head, her lips soundlessly shaping *No, no*. Torak saw her take in the empty gaze, the spattered brains, the blood under the nails. These things would stay with her for ever, and he could do nothing to protect her.

The blood under the nails.

The meaning of it drenched him like an icy wave. That blood

wasn't Bale's. Someone else had been with him on the Crag. Bale didn't fall. He was pushed.

Fin-Kedinn appeared behind Renn. His fingers tightened on his staff and his shoulders sagged, but his face remained unreadable. 'Renn,' he said quietly. 'Go and fetch the Seal Clan Leader.'

He had to repeat it twice before she heard, but for once she didn't argue. Like a sleepwalker she trudged towards camp.

Fin-Kedinn turned to Torak. 'How did it happen?'

'I don't know.'

'Why? Weren't you with him?'

Torak flinched. 'No, I . . . I should have been. I wasn't.' If I'd been with him, he wouldn't have died. This is my fault. *My fault.*

Their eyes met, and in Fin-Kedinn's sharp blue gaze, Torak saw understanding and sorrow: sorrow for *him.*

The Raven Leader raised his head and studied the Crag. 'Go up there,' he said. 'Find out who did this.'

The morning sun glinted on the juniper thorns as Torak climbed the steep path towards the Crag. Bale's bootprints were unmistakeable – Torak knew them as well as he knew Renn's or Fin-Kedinn's or his own – and they were the only ones on the trail. So whoever had killed him hadn't come this way; not from the Seal camp.

Whoever had killed him. It still wasn't real. Only yesterday they'd been gutting cod together on the foreshore; Rip and Rek sidling closer to the steaming entrails, Bale tossing them scraps now and then. At last the final cod hung by its tail from the rack, and they were free to go skinboating. Asrif had lent Torak his boat, and Detlan and his little sister had come to see them off, Detlan on his crutches, waving so hard he nearly fell over.

Only yesterday.

The neck of the Crag was shaggy with rowan and juniper, but from there it broadened into a huge, flat boat shape jutting over the Sea. Long ago, the surface had been hammer-etched with a silvery web of hunters and prey. In the middle squatted a grey granite altar shaped like a fish.

Torak swallowed. Two summers before, the Seal Mage had tied him to that altar and prepared to cut out his heart. He could still feel the granite digging into his shoulder blades; still hear the click of the tokoroths' claws.

From far below came a cry like a creature being torn in two. Torak sucked in his breath. Bale's father had found his son.

Don't think about that. Think about this. Do this for Bale.

The Crag glistened with dew. It was naked rock, except for the odd crust of lichen or stonecrop. Tracking would be hard, but if the killer had left any trace, Torak would find it.

From the neck, he scanned the Crag. Something wasn't right, but he couldn't work out what. Storing that for later, he moved forwards. Fa used to say that to track your quarry, you must think yourself into its spirit. This took on a dreadful meaning now. Torak had to see Bale alive on the Crag. He had to see his faceless killer.

The killer must have been strong to have overcome Bale, but that was all Torak knew. He had to make the Crag tell him the rest.

It wasn't long before he found the first sign. He crouched, squinting sideways in the low morning light. A bootprint, very faint. And there: the suggestion of another. An older man walks on his heels, a young man on his toes. Bale had walked lightly onto the Crag.

Step by step, Torak followed him. He forgot the voice of the

Sea and the salt wind in his face. He lost himself in the search.

The sense of being watched brought him back. He stopped. His heart began to pound. What if Bale's killer were still hiding in the rowans?

Whipping out his knife, he spun round.

'Torak, it's me!' cried Renn.

With a harsh exhalation, he lowered his knife. '*Never* do that again!'

'I thought you'd heard me!'

'What are you doing here?'

'Same as you!' She was angry because he'd frightened her, but she recovered fast. 'He didn't fall. His fingernails . . . ' They stared at one another. Torak wondered if he, too, wore that bleak, stretched look.

'How did it happen?' she said. 'I thought you were with him.'

'No.'

She met his eyes. He glanced away. 'You go first,' she said in an altered voice. 'You're the best tracker.'

With his head down, he resumed his search, and Renn followed. She rarely spoke when he was tracking; she said he went into a kind of trance which she didn't like to break. He was grateful for that now. Sometimes, she saw too much with those dark eyes; and he couldn't tell her about his quarrel with Bale. He was too ashamed.

He hadn't gone far when he found more signs. A crumb of lichen scraped by a running boot; and behind the altar, a lobe of stonecrop ground to a green smear. Snagged in a crack, a strand of reindeer hair. Torak's skin crawled. Bale wore seal hide. This had belonged to his killer. An image began to take shape, like a hunter emerging from mist. A big, heavy man clad in reindeer hide.

At once a name sprang to mind, but Torak pushed it aside.

Don't guess. Keep your mind open. Find proof.

He pictured Bale leaving his hiding-place in the rowans, running towards the figure kneeling by the altar. The killer rose. They circled one another, moving closer and closer to the cliff edge.

At one point, the lip of the Crag was cracked, and in the soil the wind had blown in, a juniper clung to life. It had been half yanked out by the roots, and was still oozing tree-blood. Torak saw Bale desperately clutching a branch, his free hand clawing mud. He had fought so hard to live. And the killer had stamped on his fingers.

A red mist descended over Torak's sight. Sweat broke out on his palms. When he caught the killer, he would . . .

'Whoever it was,' said Renn shakily, 'he must have been hugely strong to have beaten B—' she jammed her knuckle in her mouth. For the next five summers, it would be forbidden to speak Bale's name, or else his spirit might return to haunt the living.

'Look there,' said Torak. He picked up a tiny speck of dried spruce-blood. 'And this.' He drew aside a branch to reveal a handprint.

Renn breathed in with a hiss.

Bale's murderer had leaned on one hand to watch his victim fall. That hand had only three fingers.

Torak shut his eyes. He was back in the caves of the Far North, facing the Soul-Eater. Wolf sprang to his defence, leaping at the attacker, snapping off two fingers.

'So now we know,' said Renn in a cold voice.

They stared at one another, both remembering cruel green eyes in a face as hard as cracked earth.

Torak's fist closed over the spruce-blood. 'Thiazzi,' he said.

THREE

The Oak Mage had made no attempt to cover his tracks. He'd found his way down the steep north flank of the Crag to a small pebble beach, picked up his skinboat, and paddled away.

Torak and Renn tracked him to where the trail ended in the Sea.

'From where I was,' said Torak, 'I might have seen him.'

'Why were you camping out here?' said Renn.

'I – I needed to be alone.'

She gave him a penetrating stare, but didn't ask why. That was worse. Maybe she'd guessed that he'd made a terrible mistake; so terrible that she couldn't bring herself to talk of it.

'He might be anywhere by now,' she said, turning back to the waves. 'He could've made for the Kelp Island, or one of the smaller ones. Or gone back to the Forest.'

'And he's got a head start,' said Torak. 'Let's go.'

To return to the Seal camp, they had to climb all the way to the Crag again. The altar still looked subtly wrong. It was Renn who noticed why. 'The carvings. The tip of the altar is lying across that elk's head. That can't be right.'

'It's been moved.' Torak was appalled that he hadn't seen it sooner. The scrape marks were as plain as a raven on an ice floe. He pictured the Oak Mage – the strongest man in the Forest – putting his shoulder to the altar to shift it, then moving it back, but