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Opening extract from

Sun Catcher

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Published by

Orion Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2013
by Orion Children's Books
a division of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 4440 0620 9

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

www.orionbooks.co.uk

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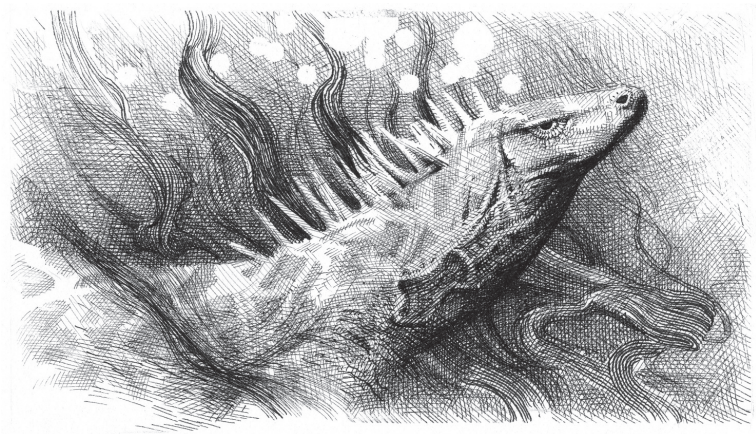

The huge lizard trawled through the garbage surging on the edge of the incoming tide. Maia gagged and tried not to breathe in. The storm had swept stinking debris around the headland and into the cove. The lizard must have followed it in, leaving its family in the sea fiord where the Untouchables would be sorting the storm waste. Nose deep in the floating rubbish, the lizard gobbled pieces of rotting carcass.

The gang of half-naked children gathering seaweed along the tide line yelled and hurled handfuls of pebbles at the lizard. The missiles bounced off its scales. The lizard raised its head, trails of seaweed festooned its jaws. The Weed Master, a tall dark-haired boy in a ragged tunic, scrambled onto the smooth rock at the far end of the beach. Waving his arms and shouting abuse, he lobbed rocks at the

scavenger. Ignoring him, the lizard stirred up more stink as it raked its long claws through the swill, trawling for the flat bottom-feeders.

The Weed Master howled a challenge and hurled another rock. The lizard hissed and swung round, its crest turning red.

Maia felt her own anger kindle. The lizards were not supposed to trespass into the weed beds, but if it was hungry . . .

'Leave it alone!' she yelled at the boys still leaping at the edge of the sea spinning stones across the water. They turned, sensing a new target.

'Lizard lover,' yelled the Weed Master. Razek. Trust it to be him, thought Maia. Razek, the handsome bully. Razek, Elder's nephew who, with his widowed mother, was forever finding excuses to invade her cave.

'Leave it,' shouted Maia. 'What harm is it doing?'

'Lizard lover! Stink mother! Flame Head!' chanted the boys.

It was an insult too far. No one else in this dark-haired tribe of Cliff Dwellers had her red hair. It was one more reason why she and her father, Tareth, would never belong. The Cliff Dwellers had not killed them when Tareth's boat was wrecked and he was swept ashore, a red-haired child strapped to his back. They had taken them in, tolerated their strangeness. Tolerated them because Tareth was useful. And now, with a new moon and her Naming Day imminent, they would decide if she could be useful too, despite her red hair. She knew what Razek planned for her, if he could persuade Elder. She had seen it in his eyes. But if he thought

she would ever agree to be hand-fast . . . Maia killed the thought. She grabbed a handful of sand and stones and hurled them at Razek.

'Weed slimers,' she screamed.

Razek yelled with fury as the sand and stones hit their mark. 'You're fish bait, lizard lover,' he roared. 'Get her. Chuck her in with the lizard.' He rushed towards her.

Maia stood her ground. Then, before Razek reached her, she turned and scrambled across the sand and up the cliff path. She reached the entrance to the cave and turned to grin down at her pursuers.

'Carrion collectors,' she spat. 'Gull bait!'

She was safe. Tareth and her home cave were close. They would not dare to trespass in the weaver's cave. Not with Magnus, the yellow-eyed sea-eagle, on his perch outside.

Maia reached into her woven bag and held out a shellfish. The eagle glared at her as she emptied the limpets she had prised from the rocks and dropped them near him. Magnus leapt from his perch, the silk jesses on his legs bright strands of colour against the limestone ledge. Delicately he started picking over the shells.

Tareth would take him hunting before sun-sleep. They would launch the dugout and row far beyond the headland. The eagle would fish and later, if the moon was bright, while the Cliff Dwellers dreamed, Tareth would dive into the dark sun-deeps to collect the shells he crushed to make his weaving colours. And, as always, she would kneel above in the boat, counting the heartbeats and the iridescent ribbon of bubbles drifting to the surface, waiting for his gasping, exhausted return.

Maia shivered. She hated the moon track. Hated waiting alone until Tareth's head broke the surface of the water and he dragged himself into the dugout, his skin bright with the gleaming sea-jewels which drifted in vast trailing shoals, turning the sun-deeps silver. She was afraid the water would keep him. She was too old to sleep snuggled safely in her furs as if she was still a child. He needed her to help him. If she was not a coward, terrified of the sea, she would dive for him deep beneath the moon track. If only she could breathe like a fish, dive deep like the lizards, tumble and fight in the waves like the weed boys. But she couldn't. She sank like a stone in the water. She was useless.

Maia looked over the sun-deeps. She could see the huge lizard swimming strongly into the bay, its head held out of the water. Safe. She spun into the coolness of the cave.

She could hear the scrape of the wooden sledge as Tareth pushed himself across the floor, throwing the weft rod through the warp as he worked at his loom. The spicy smell of fish stew made her mouth water. Had Tareth had time to cook small salty dumplings to go with it? Maia felt a stab of guilt that she had spent time dreaming on the headland, watching the wind patterns on the water and hunting for the lizard scrape with its clutch of eggs, instead of gathering the roots that she had been sent to find. But she had found the eggs. She hugged the thought to herself. And she would do better tomorrow. She would cook Tareth the flatbreads and baked seabird he loved, to go with the roasted roots she would collect early before she went back to the scrape. Before she stole a lizard egg. Maia felt her heart jump at the thought.

'Maia,' Tareth called.

At the sound of his voice, the sea-eagle flew to the entrance of the cave. Tareth turned to watch and the eagle feather bound into the end of the braid in his dark hair brushed his shoulders.

'Magnus.'

The eagle strutted into the cave and perched at the foot of the sledge. Tareth leaned forward to caress its head. The eagle bobbed with pleasure. Then spread his wings over Tareth's twisted leg, lying useless on the sledge, so that Tareth could stroke the plumage on his back.

Tareth looked up at Maia, noticed her stormy expression and sighed.

'We have a guest,' he warned.

'Maia.' A short, plump woman in a saffron coloured shift stepped from the gloom. 'I brought Tareth some fish stew. I made too much for just Razek and me.'

Selora! Maia was suddenly less hungry.

'And blueberry flatbreads. Fresh baked, as you like them.'

They were Maia's favourite. She would often burn her mouth gobbling the hot, bubbling treat straight from the bake-stone before her breath had time to cool them. Her mouth watered. Maia scowled at her own weakness. What did Selora want? It was the second time this moon-set that she had invaded their home. The last time she had come with her broom and had swept the cave. She had dared touch the mounds of wool and bundles of threads lying on the floor by Tareth's loom where he could reach them as he worked.

Interfering, gossiping Selora. She'd be better occupied

keeping her headstrong son from stoning lizards than cooking and cleaning the Weaver's cave. There were more important things to do than sweeping floors: cliff-climbing for gulls' eggs, honey-hunting in the bee-cleft, cocoon-gathering in the high, treacherous moth-garden. No one else could scramble up the cliffs, finding the invisible hand and footholds she had made, not even Razek and his weed boys.

Tareth sighed again as he read the emotions chasing across Maia's face.

'Selora has made berry flatbreads for your Naming Day,' he chided.

Maia gritted her teeth. 'Thank you, Selora.'

Selora swished her skirts and sidled round the end of the sledge, wary of the eagle. 'And perhaps we may join with you to celebrate Maia's name giving.'

'No,' groaned Maia, under her breath.

Tareth glanced at her. 'Maia will be pleased to share her Naming Day. You and Razek are welcome.'

'No they're not,' thought Maia. She glared at Tareth. What was he thinking? It was her Naming Day. The day that marked her thirteenth star-shift. She should be the one to choose who she shared it with. And she chose Tareth. She'd never choose to share blueberries or anything else with Razek.

Selora was always trying to get Tareth to take an interest in her son. Did she think Tareth would take him on as weaver apprentice or gift him their cave? Maia almost laughed. As if Razek would exchange his life as Weed Master to work at a loom. She hid her grin behind her hand. But Selora was

not looking at her. She was watching Tareth as he gently stroked his eagle.

'Thank you, Tareth,' Selora's smile was triumphant.

'It'll be good to have company,' said Tareth.

Maia frowned at him. Everyone knew that Selora was ripe for another mate. Once Razek became hand-fast, his mother would leave their cave. Was Selora planning to move in, to become her new mother?

'Never!' thought Maia fiercely. She didn't need a mother. She had Tareth. She needed no one else. She had no memory of a mother, no memory of anything before the caves. It was as if there had never been a has-been. Yet sometimes Maia heard Tareth whispering strange names as she lay listening to him weaving long after he thought her asleep. Whispers that seemed like dreams and were never repeated at sun-wake.

'Sun-sleeps are lonely when the young leave,' agreed Selora. 'And Maia will soon be hand-fast.'

Maia felt her stomach churn. Hand-fast? Not yet. No way.

'Not yet, surely?' said Tareth.

'The girls often leap the hand-fast fires on their Naming Day,' said Selora comfortably. 'Seeker will come to speak with you, Maia. He'll tell you which man has chosen to leap with you.'

Maia's eyes narrowed. 'But I'm not a Cliff Dweller,' she said. 'And I've other things to do on my Naming Day.'

'As does everyone.' Razek strolled into the cave.

He had smoothed his hair, noticed Maia, until it was as glossy as a raven's wing.

'We've driven off the lizard, but the weed beds will need cleaning,' announced Razek.

Unasked, he stooped to pick up one of the woven bags Tareth and she had stuffed with leaf-fall.

'Sea-rise hasn't washed the storm scourings away. The beds will have to be cleaned.'

'Razek will have to summon all the Cliff Dwellers to help,' said Selora proudly.

Razek nodded. 'Everyone will be needed in the weed beds. Even girls.' He glanced at Maia. 'With the exception of the Weaver, of course.'

Maia felt as if she had swallowed a sea urchin. She choked on prickles of anger. How dare Razek suggest that Tareth wasn't needed. Did he think Tareth's twisted leg made him unable to work in the kelp beds? He would paddle the dugout to the deeps at the edge of the levee. Everyone knew it was the most dangerous place to work since a sudden sea-surge could drag you out and drown you. Tareth never shirked any of the communal work. He always worked harder and longer than any of them.

'Thank you, Razek,' said Tareth mildly. 'It's good to know you can do without me.'

A rush of blood stained Razek's face. 'Weaver. I didn't mean . . .' he mumbled.

'And I've other work to do,' said Tareth.

'And so does the Weaver's daughter.' Maia glared at Razek. 'I'm sure you can manage without me too.'

Maia felt Tareth look at her. She held her breath, but he didn't ask her what her tasks were though. He'd given her none. After a storm everyone was supposed to help collect any scourings that the Untouchables and their lizards had not harvested before it drifted into the weed beds. But she

wanted to return to the lizard scrape. She had to be there when the eggs hatched. And they were hard now. Another sun-sleep and she could be too late.

She shivered at the thought of what she was planning to do. Stealing a lizard egg was forbidden. The lizards belonged to the Lizard Keeper.

'I've berries to collect,' she said. It wasn't a lie. She did have to climb to the thorny garden, just not before the next sea-fall.

'I'll help harvest the berries once the weed beds are cleaned,' offered Razek. He glanced at Maia. 'If Maia will take me.'

Maia took a breath, but Tareth forestalled her and shook his head.

'It's a job for small hands,' he spread his own long fingers wide. Shadows like feeding herring danced across the walls. 'The berries cluster among thorns. My hands, and yours, are too large.' He smiled at Maia. 'And the cuts fester if you're scratched. You could lose a finger, if Healer cannot drain the poison.'

He didn't say that he had an earthenware jar of cool, green salve that drew the poison and healed the seeping cuts. Maia felt a jolt of triumph. He didn't want Razek to be shown the way up onto the cliffs. The moth-garden, its entrance guarded by the thorn bushes, was their secret. Soon she must collect the hidden cocoons before the moon-moths chewed their way free and spoiled the silk.

'And Maia climbs like a squirrel. The path is long and dangerous.'

'I'm not afraid,' said Razek.

'Nor was I,' said Tareth. 'A mistake.' He glanced down at his leg. 'A wise man knows when it's good to fear, eh Magnus?'

He stroked the sea-eagle's breast. The eagle blinked its fierce amber eyes.

'I must fly Magnus. He's growing lazy.' The eagle lowered his beak to gently scratch Tareth's hand. 'I'll hunt him across the cliffs at sun-wake.'

Selora shivered. 'Then I'll not go gathering mushrooms.'

'He'll not harm a Cliff Dweller,' said Tareth. 'But he'll attack a stranger.'

Maia glanced at Tareth and wondered if he could see the secrets behind her eyes. Did he know about the lizard scrape and that she'd planned to take the eagle there?

Would Magnus find the Untouchable boy who had watched her and attack him?