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opening extract from
**Corvus: Oath of
Vengeance**

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CHAPTER 1

OATH OF VENGEANCE

Corvus rounded a bend in the trail and skidded to a halt. Two guards stood at ease by the wooden gate in front of Wulfric's Hall. Drawing his axes, Corvus ran straight at them. The guards were unprepared. They stood there for a moment, stunned.

Crash! The first guard went down, unconscious from a single axe strike to his helmeted head. The second only just had time to draw his sword and shoulder his shield before Corvus was upon him, bringing one axe down on the shield with such force that the bronze-rimmed wood split in half. A half-second later, he'd hooked the other axe around

the man's ankle and pulled, toppling him over. Before he'd even hit the ground, Corvus had knocked him out with a single blow.

Neither guard had managed to utter a single word.

Corvus ran on into the compound, blue eyes blazing under a crown of long, shaggy, black hair. He came into a wide courtyard, enclosed by a wooden stockade. Several farm buildings were scattered near the fence. In the centre rose a large hall, shaped like an inverted Viking longboat with twin dragon prows rising up from either side of the doors, poised as if to strike at any unwanted visitor. Corvus was an unwanted visitor, that much was for sure...

The commotion at the gate had roused the inhabitants of the hall, and a large man came racing out of the wooden doors. At the sight of Corvus, he stopped, but not for long. Grabbing a spear from a stack of weapons by the door, he charged straight at Corvus, screaming a battle cry: "Slaughter, slaughter!"

Corvus was unimpressed. He sidestepped, deftly

avoiding the thrusting spear, which just missed his belly. Capitalising on his forward momentum, Corvus wheeled into the air once more, bringing both axes down on the spearman's helmeted head, sending him sprawling to the ground. Corvus had hardly broken his stride. As he ran forward, another of Wulfric's men emerged and stood, frozen in fear at the sight of Corvus' battle-skill. Corvus stood tall and roared at him. The man dropped his spear and ran. Corvus grinned, but soon his expression changed to a scowl. Why weren't there more guards? Corvus was ready to fight a hundred men! And where, by Odin's fury, was Wulfric?

The gutless coward must be hiding, thought Corvus. With only revenge on his mind, he dashed up the low wooden steps leading into the great hall. The dragon prows on either side of the doors seemed to glare at him in outrage. He stopped and stared at them for a moment, the hairs on the back of his neck bristling. Then, with one eye on the dragons, Corvus lifted a booted foot and kicked open the wooden doors. They burst inward with

a loud crack, splintering into matchwood. With a final glance at the dragon heads, he ran inside, axes at the ready, then came to a stop, scowling. Where was Wulfric, by the sleet-cold halls of Hel?

Ahead, on a finely carved wooden throne studded with gems, sat an old woman. Behind her, a young woman held her stripling son close, clearly terrified. The boy was scowling angrily; the old woman seemed calm and resigned.

"Where is Wulfric?" bellowed Corvus.

The old woman rose slowly to her feet.

"Who are you?" she said haughtily. "How dare you enter this hall unbidden, with murder in your eyes?"

"Murder? This is not murder, this is vengeance! Do you not know who I am? I am Corvus Gunnarson, son of Gunnar Halleson, and I have sworn an oath by Odin All-father and Ullr, god of the blood feud, against that murdering villain Wulfric!"

As he said this, Corvus lifted his axes above his head. The weapons were well honed and deadly, and his wrath-twisted face made him look like a

demon from the underworld of the White Christ.

At the sound of Corvus' name, the old woman blanched, and the young mother began to sob. They knew why he was here now, and, by the look of him, they were certain their death-day was upon them. Suddenly the boy broke free from his mother's arms. He dashed straight at Corvus, wielding a small sword that seemed almost a toy, save for its razored edge and needle-sharp point. The young mother screamed, "Wulfric, no!"

Corvus stepped back, surprised. He had to admire the boy's courage, even if he was obviously the son of Wulfric Cold-blood, the man he had sworn to kill. As the lad closed in, Corvus reversed his axe, so as not to draw blood, and swept it across the boy's path, knocking his feet from under him. He then placed a booted foot on the lad's chest, pinning him to the ground. Leaning down, he let forth his most ferocious snarl, deep and fearsome, right into the boy's face. The lad's courage gave out, and he quailed.

"Please," the boy's mother begged, taking a step forward. "Please don't kill my son!"

Then the old woman said, "We thought you were dead, Corvus Gunnarson."

"Ah, so that's why Wulfric killed my parents and burnt my father's homestead not two weeks ago! He thought I was dead – that there'd be no one to come back, eh? The gutless coward!"

"They've always hated each other, Gunnar and Wulfric," said the old woman, her eyes flicking from the struggling boy to Corvus' raised axe and back again.

"That's true, but Wulfric didn't have to kill him," said Corvus, his voice tense, full of barely suppressed anger.

The old woman said, "They'd been feuding for years; one of them was bound to die."

Corvus had to agree with that. Viking feuds were always bloody, and the feud between Wulfric and his father had lasted as long as he could remember. But then he smiled, a chilling sight.

"But Wulfric didn't have to kill my mother as well, did he?" he said, his voice ominously quiet. "He didn't have to take my sisters."

For a moment, there was silence. The old woman

stared at the floor. She knew Corvus' oath of vengeance was justified, according to the Old Ways. Wulfric had gone too far, and now his family would have to face the consequences.

"You're Kelda, aren't you, Wulfric Cold-blood's mother?" said Corvus.

The old woman went pale. "That I am." She took a step forward. "Take me, and spare my grandson," she said, holding up her head.

Corvus raised an eyebrow. Brave words, he had to admit.

"And that's his wife, Hildir, is it not?" said Corvus, pointing an axe at the young mother, who was wringing her hands, silently begging him to spare the boy.

"Aye, it is," said Kelda.

Suddenly Corvus felt a sharp sting of red-hot agony in his calf. The boy had stabbed him in the leg with his sword!

"Ow!" yelled Corvus, and he brought his axe hurtling down.

"No!" cried Kelda and Hildir in unison.

But Corvus' axe crashed into the wooden plank

near the lad's head. Wood chips sprayed across the floor, one of them drawing a bloody scratch along the boy's cheek. The boy looked aghast at Corvus, suddenly terrified. He started crawling backwards, as fast as he could, trying to get away from the vengeful Viking. Corvus straightened. The anger drained from his face.

"Bah, I do not make war on women and children!" he said. "I am not Wulfric."

The boy stood and ran into his mother's arms, staring back at Corvus with fear and hatred. Kelda and Hildir exchanged a look of relief. Maybe today would not be their death-day after all.

"Where are my sisters, Ingrid and Freia? And where is Wulfric?" demanded Corvus.

Kelda frowned and shook her head, signalling to Hildir that she should not tell. Corvus growled, a sound full of threat.

"He has taken them to England!" Hildir blurted out suddenly. "Just days ago."

"What? Why?" said Corvus.

Kelda glared at Hildir to shut up, but Hildir was having none of it. Wulfric was a pig; he had always

been a pig, in fact, and she'd never wanted to marry him in the first place. All she cared about was her child. If telling Corvus what he wanted to know would keep her son out of danger, then so be it.

"He means to sell them," she continued. "He and his war band, the Slaughter Wolves, have built a settlement in the land of the South Saxons, and Wulfric has paid for his piece of earth with gold and slaves taken from the raids here in our own lands. The Saxons do not yet realise what a viper they have allowed into their midst. Your sisters are part of the final payment for that land."

Corvus narrowed his eyes in anger. His sisters. Slaves? Oh, how Wulfric would pay. He would pay in blood and gold, he would pay with his life.

Corvus took a menacing step forward. "If you lie..." he said.

"No, it is the truth! I swear it by Odin, and the White Christ!" said Hildr.

Corvus nodded, convinced. Such oaths were not to be taken lightly. "I will go to England."

With that he turned and walked out of Wulfric's hall, leaving Hilda, Kelda and young Wulfric

shocked and scared, but glad to be alive. Corvus didn't see the glint of sour malice in Wulfric's mother's eyes as she glared at the back of Corvus' head, fingering the old bone necklace she wore around her neck and muttering under her breath.

As Corvus stepped over the splintered wreckage of the doors, he had a thought. It was obvious Hildr had little love for Wulfric. Maybe he hadn't really needed to charge in like that. Maybe if he'd just asked politely... Corvus shrugged. The event was in the past now, and there was no point spending too much time dwelling on it.

Outside he saw the young warrior who'd fled earlier, standing fully armed by the main gate.

"So, you've changed your mind, have you?" said Corvus, and without further ado he strode towards him purposefully, twirling his twin axes like juggler's clubs. The young man went pale and moved aside, his new-found courage dissolved.

Corvus gestured with his axe. The young man stepped further back, well away from the gate, and laid his spear and shield on the ground. Corvus nodded, and continued on and out of Wulfric's

homestead. There was no point in killing people just because you could.

Corvus headed for a path that led to the seashore. He would go and see the fisherman, Orm the Old. Orm had a boat, and had been a friend to his father for many years. As he paced, his left boot began to make an unpleasant squelching sound. Looking down, he saw it was soaked in blood, thanks to Wulfric's boy, the god-cursed little dwarf. Brave, though, to stab a full-grown warrior. Corvus felt a twinge of guilt. He'd terrified the life out of that boy. You shouldn't do that to children or women – honour demanded it. That was what his father had taught him, and that's what he'd learnt at the court of the Danish King Godfred, where he'd spent the last five years in service in his royal body-guard. On the other hand, the little boy had given as good as he'd got, if not better, Corvus thought, smiling wryly to himself.

Corvus stopped by the side of the path and removed his boot. He drew bandages, needle and thread from his belt-pouch, then cleaned and stitched the wound. Though he grimaced against

the pain, he uttered not a sound. When he was finished, he strode on, as if it was nothing. It *was* nothing, just another wound, one of many to come, no doubt.

He made his way to Orm's hut on the seashore, where he found the old fisherman dragging a net from a single-masted fishing boat drawn up on the beach. He grinned when he saw Corvus approaching.

"Corvus 'Twin-axe' Gunnarson, by Thor!" said Orm, his weather-beaten face browned and wrinkled by years on the sea. "We thought you were dead – we got word that a Gunnarson had been killed at the battle of Lokr's Keep. As you were serving the king of Denmark, naturally we assumed it was you."

"Ah, now I see why everyone thinks I'm dead," said Corvus. "Actually, the Gunnarson that was killed at the battle was Karfves 'Blood-axe' Gunnarson, from Gotland, not me. We weren't even related."

"That's good news, then!" said Orm. "Well, not from Karfves' point of view, though," and he

laughed. Then his face clouded. “You’ve heard about your parents, have you?”

“Aye, and seen the homestead as well. Wulfric will pay, I’ll see to that,” said Corvus. “I’ve just been looking for him but he was nowhere to be seen.” His eyes narrowed in anger, and he gripped the hammer-shaped talisman he wore around his neck. “I’ve sworn an oath of vengeance.”

Orm nodded. That was the honourable thing for Corvus to do, and only to be expected. He’d known the lad from when he was young – always fighting, exploring and having adventures. He’d only been twelve when he’d gone off to serve the king of the Danes in payment of a blood debt that his father had owed to King Godfred. Five years’ service in the king’s personal bodyguard, and now he was back, no longer a lad but a full-grown man. Corvus was seventeen years old and undoubtedly believed the world was there for the taking, that he was invincible, unstoppable. His reputation with the twin axes had reached his homelands some time ago. Well, thought Orm, if there was going to be a seventeen-year-old who was invincible and

unstoppable, it would be Corvus. Only time would tell if he had his father’s wisdom as well.

“Wulfric’s gone to England with his war band, the Slaughter Wolves, and he’s taken your sisters with him, to sell to the Saxons,” said Orm.

“Aye, I know.” Corvus felt a momentary twinge of guilt. He hadn’t thought to ask Orm where Wulfric was. If he’d asked him first, there would have been no need to go up to Wulfric’s hall. He’d scared those women to death, as well as the boy. Maybe he should have planned it all a bit better. He’d been so full of rage he hadn’t really stopped to think. Seeing his family’s burnt-out home had driven him over the edge.

But that was done. Now he had to hunt down that cruel murdering cur, Wulfric Cold-blood, and rescue his beloved sisters. Family was family and there was no one else but him. He would save them or die trying.

Corvus stepped up and put a hand on the old fisherman’s shoulder. “Will you take me to England in your boat, Orm?” he asked.