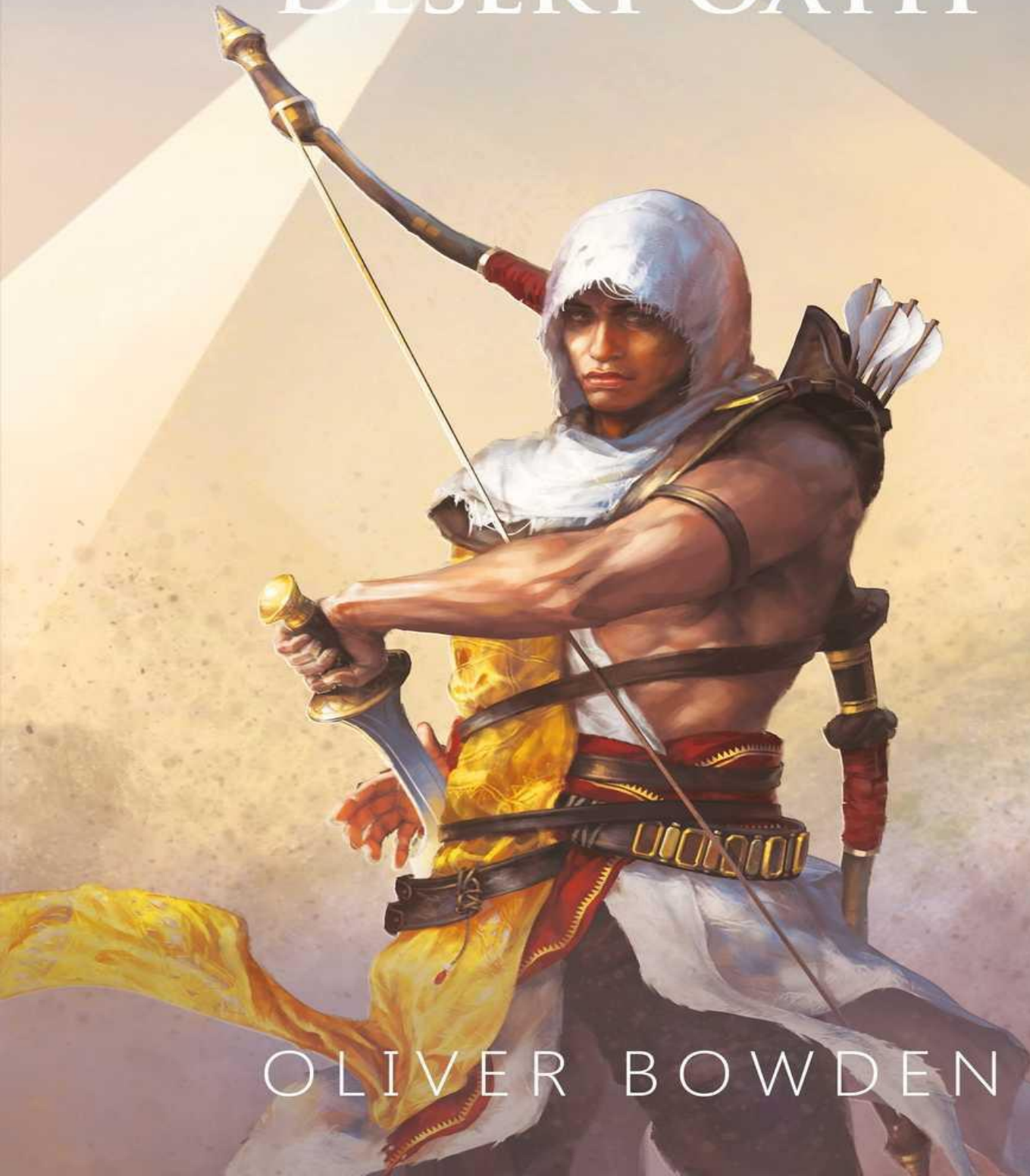


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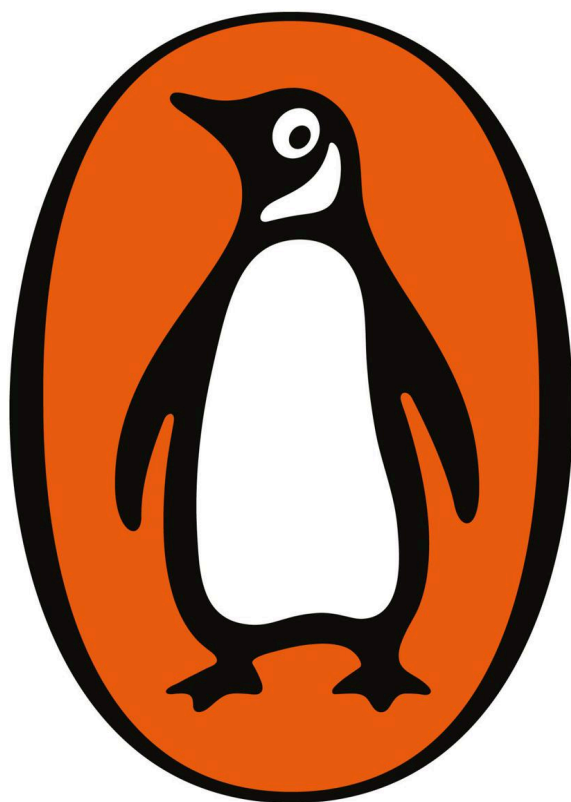
DESERT OATH



OLIVER BOWDEN



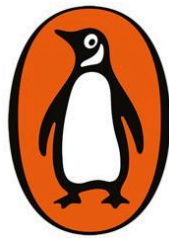
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ASSASSIN'S CREED® ORIGINS

Desert Oath



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Part I

The desert was empty but for a dilapidated flat-roofed huntsman's shelter that interrupted the horizon like a single rotting tooth. *That will do*, thought Emsaf. He tethered his horse in the shade of the shelter, then stepped into the cool interior, grateful for thick mud walls that deflected the worst of the heat.

Inside, he uncovered his head and took stock of his surroundings. Not a place in which he'd care to spend much time, of course – it was bare and dank-smelling – but even so, it was ideal for what he had in mind.

And what he had in mind was death.

He laid his bow down, placed an arrow from the quiver beside it and then turned his attention to a small window looking out on to the plain beyond. He squinted for a moment or so, studying various angles, before kneeling, trying out different lines of sight, and then reaching for the bow, notching an arrow and rehearsing his aim.

Satisfied, he placed the weapon on the ground and then ate the last of the melon he'd bought at the market in Ipou before settling to wait for his prey to appear.

And as he waited, Emsaf's thoughts went back to the family he had left behind in Hebenou, a separation occasioned by a letter he had received from Djerty. Its contents had proved so disturbing to Emsaf that he'd begun to pack at once.

'There is something I must do,' was all he would tell his wife and son, 'something that cannot wait. I will return as soon as I am able. I promise.'

He told Merti he'd be away for several weeks, months even, and that she was to take care of the planting and trampling while he was gone. He'd

tasked Ebe, who was just seven years old, with looking after the geese and ducks, making the boy promise to help his mother with the cattle and pigs, and he had every confidence Ebe would do just that, because he was a good boy, devoted to his parents and diligent in the execution of his chores.

Tears had shone in their eyes and Emsaf found it a struggle to maintain his own composure, his heart weighing heavy in his chest as he mounted his horse. 'You'll look after your mother, boy,' he told Ebe, pretending to flick dust from his eye.

'I will, Papa,' replied Ebe, a tremor in his bottom lip. Emsaf and Merti exchanged a heartbreaking smile. They had all known this day might arrive but, even so, it came as a shock.

'Say a prayer to the gods for me. Ask them to keep us safe until my return,' said Emsaf, and with that he turned his horse and headed south-west, glancing behind him just once to see his family watch him leave, the act of departure like a knife in his heart.

He had estimated it to be a twelve-day journey from north of Hebenou to his destination. With him he took the bare essentials and he rode by night, using the moon and stars to navigate. In the daytime he rested his mount and slept, staying out of the treacherous burning sun in the shade of a leafy terebinth or in shacks.

One early evening, he had risen when the sun was still up and scanned the horizon with a practised eye. There in the distance, almost invisible, was a slight disruption in the heat haze that lay like silt across the horizon line. He made a mental note but thought little more of it. The next day, however, he made sure to rise at the same time and there in the band of light on the horizon, in the same place as the day before, was a pockmark. No doubt about it, he was being followed. What's more, whoever was tracking him knew their business. He was obviously keeping the distance between them constant.

Testing his theory risked alerting his pursuer, but he had to do it. He slowed his pace. The heat signature remained constant. He travelled during the day, braving the searing sun. The follower must have done the same. One

night he galloped, pushing his horse as hard as he dared. The one who was tracking him saw, anticipated and did likewise.

There was only one thing for it. He had to abandon his mission, at least temporarily, until he could do something about whoever was stalking him. When had his pursuer picked up his trail? An experienced scout himself, Emsaf had been cautious.

Right, he thought. *Let's think about this*. He had spotted his ghost on the fifth day of his travels, which was encouraging, because it meant that Merti and Ebe were safe. As long as whoever it was stayed well away from his home, that was good. What he needed to do now was try to flush out his stalker.

Not far outside Ipou, Emsaf came upon a settlement. Traders had set up stalls and were selling oils, cloth, lentils and beans in tall jars. Many were passing through, and he managed to find one going in the direction of Thebes, offering him coin to deliver a message, with the assurance of more when the job was done. Emsaf bought provisions but didn't linger long. Passing farmers and oxen made him think of Merti and Ebe with a pang of homesickness. He found a crossing and traversed the Nile to the Western Desert, drawing his pursuer, planning his next move.

Two nights later he had come across the huntsman's shelter on the plain, and decided it was the ideal spot to lie in wait.

And sure enough, now his target came into view – a lone figure on horseback in the distance, emerging from the heat haze. Emsaf thanked the gods the sun was at his back and notched the arrow, sighting the rider. He noted the same, now-familiar shape of the cape, the colouring of his horse.

It was time.

Emsaf took a long breath, keeping his quarry sighted, holding his aim for what felt like a long time. The bow needed to be loosed before his muscles shook and his aim was spoiled. He needed to end this now.

He opened the fingers of his right hand.

His arrow found its mark. In the distance the rider tumbled from his mount with a puff of dust and sand as he hit the ground. Emsaf notched

another arrow and took aim, ready to fire a second time if needs be, watching the body for signs of life.

None came.

Two Weeks Earlier

The killer awoke at dawn, just before the rising sun streamed through the screens and put the white fire in his eyes. In a short while his house would be warm, but as he dressed and then pulled the shawl from his bed and wrapped it around himself, he noted that a crisp chill inhabited the silence.

In another room he prepared the last of his bread and fruit and ate slowly, deep in contemplation, clearing his mind for the task ahead. It had been a long time, but his mind and body were prepared – his blades were sharp.

When the meal was finished he made final preparations, consulting maps. A criss-cross of scars on the side of his face showed in the bronze mirror he used to apply kohl beneath his eyes to prevent the glare of the sun.

Would Iset, Horus and Anubis smile upon him, he wondered.

Time would tell.

Three days and nights he travelled before he came to the farmstead at Hebenou, a collection of buildings in the sand with fences for livestock and a line of washing that gleamed white. Confident he was hidden by the contours of the land, he stopped at a cluster of palm trees and tethered his mount in the shade of a tree. There he took a waterskin from his pack, checked the position of the sun and made sure to keep it at his back as he made his way forward, found a suitable dip in the desert and then dug himself in. He covered himself with the shawl and settled in to wait.

There. At the farmhouse. Movement. A figure was making his, no, *her* way to the sakia well. She carried a large bucket, and the killer's eyes narrowed as he saw how she walked, her motions economical, controlled. As he watched, she filled the vessel, rested it on the lip of the well and then stood with her hands on her hips for a while. Moments later she cupped her hands to her mouth, calling a name that carried on a light breeze.

Ebe!

His target's name was Emsaf, who was either elsewhere – in the town, tending to crops out of sight – or not at home at all. At the farmhouse a boy appeared. This was Ebe, no doubt. The killer watched as the two of them went to work, lifting another bucket from the lip of the well and then carrying them back to the farmhouse. They used smaller buckets to fill troughs for the animals. Goats bent their heads to drink. Out on the plain their watcher followed suit.

He remained in the dip until he was satisfied Emsaf was absent, just the woman and the boy inside the house, and then he scrambled to his haunches and set off at a sprint. He arrived at the farmhouse breathing hard, standing with his back to the mudbrick. Through a rear-facing window he heard the sounds of mother and child eating. He caught the word 'father'. In the mother's reply came the words 'soon be back'.

Now the killer closed his eyes to contemplate. This was a drawback – a minor one, but a drawback all the same. Had Emsaf been warned?

No. Not of his coming. If that were the case Emsaf would have stayed to protect his family. But given notice of something. Made haste in order to warn others, or set to a task maybe? He would find out when he caught up, he decided, dismissing the matter for now.

Time, now. Time was the thing. Time was his enemy.

He slipped off his sandals, the sand hot beneath his feet as he crept around the farmhouse, ducking low beneath windows until he came to the front entrance. There he took up position beside the door, flat to the wall, listening hard to judge the position of the boy to his mother. He took his knife from

his belt and looped the leather thong that hung from its handle around his wrist.

Waiting. Counting the sound of footsteps.

Now.

He pushed aside the screen, stepped smartly inside, grabbed the woman from behind and held the knife to her throat, a short scuffle that was over in seconds.

On the other side of the room Ebe heard, turned and saw a man with a scarred face holding a knife to his mother. The boy was scruffy-haired, his eyes wide with surprise and fear. He had a plate in one hand, a knife upon it, and his gaze skittered across the room.

‘Nobody need be hurt,’ said the killer. A lie. The woman’s breathing hitched. ‘Boy, put down the plate, get to your belly.’

‘Don’t do it, Ebe,’ said the woman, her voice strained, determined.

‘I’m not playing games,’ he warned, and dug his blade into her flesh to make his point. Blood leaked from her wound and on to the killer’s wrist.

‘Put down the plate,’ he repeated.

‘Remember what Papa said,’ gasped the woman. ‘Run, Ebe. Take the window. You can outrun him. He’ll have a horse. Find it and go.’ Her hands rose to grasp at his arm, to steady herself.

The killer shook his head. ‘Take a step and I’ll open her throat. Now do as I’ve asked.’

What happened next was fast: Ebe’s wrist flicking, the plate hurtling away to break on the stone. In his other hand bloomed the knife, blade between forefinger and thumb. A flick of the wrist and the knife spun towards the killer at the same time as the boy’s mother made her move, twisting and sinking her teeth into her attacker’s arm.

It was a good knife-throw but the killer jinked and the blade went nearly entirely clear, leaving barely a scratch on his shoulder. The boy’s mother jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow, once, twice. Solid, knowing hits. She had training as well. Now he had no choice but to deal with them both. He chose quickly, slitting her throat as she tried to hit him a third time, and then

in the same back-and-forth motion tossed his dagger at the boy who was lunging forward, clearly intent on helping his mother fight him.

The boy was close. The killer's aim was true. Young Ebe clutched at his neck where the knife was embedded, blood spilling and then gushing from the wound as he sank to his knees, then lurched to the side. Mother and son died within feet of each other on the flagstones.

The killer tilted his head and stared at the blood as it inched into a pool between his two victims, mingling, slowly soaking into the dirt floor. His lips quirked, a brief, downward motion of annoyance. He'd meant to keep them alive long enough to question them. In choosing to fight, they had denied him this. In death they had won Emsaf time, perhaps even a chance at escape.

Bion sighed, frowning slightly. How contrary of them.

He picked up the trail, following Emsaf on the road to Ipou.

His quarry was skilled, no doubt about that. When caravans or merchants travelled through he followed in their footsteps; struck out in the wilderness when the only trail on the road would be his. But although he suspected he was being followed, it took him too long to confirm his suspicions and the killer had already anticipated his plan by the time he made it.

When, in the distance, he saw the huntsman's shelter but no sign of Emsaf, the killer knew a trap was being laid. It was the kind of trap he'd lay. That knowledge meant that Emsaf's fate was close to being sealed.

Close to fields, some distance from the river, he came upon a traveller riding a donkey laden down with vases. Far off in the distance he could guess at the silhouette of field workers, too far away to see what would happen next.

'Hello,' the traveller called cheerfully as the killer dismounted and approached, knife out of sight beneath his shawl. The traveller raised a hand to shade his eyes. 'And what can I do for y—' he began to say, a cordial, cheerful greeting that he never completed.