

# A New Hawkspär Snippet

written by Holly

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This is about midway through the book – just a piece of a much longer scene, in which our sturdy Tonk sailors and the Oracle Hawkspär sit down to dinner with uninvited cannibals. The viewpoint character is Hawkspär herself. This was yesterday's green scene.

One note. Comments are open, but please don't copyedit the text. I never refer to the weblog when I'm doing edits.

## Hawkspär

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The Iage came to us in moonless dark, silent as ghosts in the wind, sliding in their longboats up to the ship, grappling their way over the sides, landing on our darkened deck in bare feet.

They had thought to come unnoticed, to slay us as we slept, to take the ship and all on it as their spoils.

We met them with the formal ceremony of the Iage negotiators – with a table and benches on the deck, with the ship's officers and me gathered around it, with tea and ale and food spread on the table, because to negotiate with the Iage, first the would-be negotiators had to provide a banquet. The cook and his assistants had labored in the galley for the better part of two bells, getting everything right. I told them which foods could be included in the treat, and which could not. Thus, pork and fowl were present, and smoked and dried and pickled fish, but beef and cheese forbidden. Ale made without grapes they could serve, but any fruit of the grape was hidden well away. We offered breads both leavened and unleavened, and beans spiced to ferocious hotness – a specialty of the cook's and a favorite of Aaran's, he assured me.

The beans were a hidden bit of tactical superiority. I had thought I'd die eating them – I'd mistaken them for food when in fact they were clearly the invention of some vile demon. Yet the captain and his men ingested them without a whimper.

This they could use against the Iage. Beans were a much favored Iage food, and the Iage were of the belief that men proved their manhood by tests of courage and strength and the endurance of pain. I thought the beans would bring them to their knees faster than bouts of knife-wrestling on the afterdeck.

The captain rose as the ruffians climbed over the rails, and one of the captain's runners lit the lamps at table, revealing the fine feast that we had set for them.

The captain bowed, and I bowed. I said, "I, the Oracle Hawksparr, Eyes of War, late of the Citadel of the Ossalenes, greet you. My companion, Ship Captain and Hagedwar Master Tracker Aaran Donin av Savissha dryn Tragyn, offers you welcome aboard his ship."

They stood there, stripped to the waists and with their knives clamped in their teeth, surrounded by armed men with swords held at attention and by Seru Obsidian dressed all in black, and presented with very attractive banquet spread, and they assessed the situation quickly. They put their knives point-first into the captain's beautifully-scrubbed deck – I could feel him stiffen at my side as the blades thumped point down into the wood – and they bowed.

Their leader stepped forward. "We had not known such as yourself traveled these waters, Oracle," he said. He bowed deeply. "We have thought often of the Eyes of War; we would never have presented ourselves thus had we known you graced this ship."

I translated for the captain, then said, "I did not choose to make my passing through these waters a public matter. A war awaits me that I long to reach, and I have little time to tarry, no matter how fine the gifts offered."

I made a point of mentioning fine gifts. The Iage were used to paying quite well for their military information. Passage through their waters would be a small, almost disrespectful gift, compared to the hundred slaves they once gave the Citadel, or the trunks of gold and jewels. We'd take it, of course. But I did want to place them on a less-than-firm footing before negotiations started.

We sat at table. Rather, I sat first, then the leader of the Iage sat, then Aaran sat, then the Iage second sat. Everyone else stood around with weapons in hand, pretending that this was a social event instead of interrupted slaughter. It was

the sort of meal that would give most people indigestion. And I knew the captain's pepper-devil beans were waiting.

The captain's kor daan and master of marines as well, Ermyk av Beyrkyn, served. We first received small bowls of pigs-foot jelly sweetened with fruit. Following that, eel soup and leeks, which I quite enjoyed. The cook had added bitters to the broth, and chervil, and I found it quite heartening. Following that, a baked sailfish stuffed with crab meat and seasoned with more of the cook's spices. Something about them stirred memories deep inside me. I could not say for certain that I remembered the food, but it seemed familiar.

Then a bread with oil and garlic and salt, baked to crispness. And then the beans.

I had been given different beans, and a kindness by the cook. He'd taken sympathy on the blisters on the roof of my mouth and assured me that he knew how to make beans that were not a weapon. And I had a bowl of those. I bit into them, and I swear, there were near as deadly as the beans I'd had three days before that had made me weep.

But no man of the Iage would be shamed if a woman – even an Oracle of the Eyes – were too weak to eat such mighty food.

I sipped my tea and wished for more of the bread, which would have eased the pain somewhat, and vowed at my earliest opportunity to have a word with the cook about what was and what was not a lethal amount of hot pepper.

Meanwhile, however, the captain had started digging into his enormous bowl of beans like he had never seen food before. And the Iage chief and his second attacked theirs with equal enthusiasm. For about three bites.

Then the pain caught up with them, and first the chief and then his second put down their dippers. They sat with their faces turned toward the captain, watching him eating. One

mopped at his eyes with his napkin. The other drank all of his tea in a gulp, and handed his mug to Aaran's second for a refill.

"You are not eating your beans," the Iage chief said to me, his voice accusing.

"I am but a woman," I said, "and this dish is man food. I am not strong enough to eat it." It seems to me that if the enemy who has come to kill you suddenly hands you his knife, you should stick it into his ribs at the earliest opportunity, and then twist it a bit. So I did.

"Man food?"

I said, "Oh, for certain, good Chief. This is a courage food of the Tonk – a warrior's meal."

Aaran asked me what they were saying, and I translated. He nodded, and said, "Tell them I'm ready for a second helping. And that we have made enough that he and all his men, and I and all my men, will have some of this fine warrior fare together." He clapped his hands, and the cook and his assistants stepped onto the deck with a huge cooking vat of the beans, and ladles, and the square wooden bowls used aboard ship because they didn't slide on the square, raised-edge trays, and in truly bad seas, they almost never broke.

I translated quickly. The Iage chief and second turned their faces toward each other, and murmured an exchange that managed to sound panicked, but that was too quick and too low for me to catch.

Around me the rivers of time swirled and flowed, and I found myself at a splitting point in the river. "Careful now," I told the captain. "Neither you nor your men can mock them if they fail at this, or they will pull other weapons out of their clothes and we will all be dead before we can draw our next breath. They will eat, because they must. But – and I

swear this – no man may dare laugh, nor any woman. Pride is a dangerous thing among the Iage.”

The Iage chief stood and told his men, “Eat – each of you. Match them bite for bite, and don’t shame me.”

Iage warriors and the Taag’s marines walked side by side, two by two, to the bean vat, and each received a bowl filled near to overflowing with the beans. They returned to their places around the deck, this time paired man to man.

And began eating the peppered beans.

I heard whimpers masked by coughing, little choking noises, wheezing, strangled muttering. And over all, the steady clicking of dippers against the wooden bowls. And then the clatter as each man put his wooden bowl on the deck and resumed his position.

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