

FRIDAY SNIPPET: The Stowaway

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I'm doing Hawksparr copyedits today, so this snippet is fresh in my mind.

This is from Aaran's POV (Aaran is by this time captain of his own beat-up ship and on his way to rescue Hawksparr). Some of the men have caught a young stowaway on board, and locked him in one of the ship's cells. Aaran has come in to interview him. This is a middle slice of a much longer scene.

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"You'll want to talk to me. I'm captain of this ship, so there's no higher authority from whom you can beg mercy, and I'm not in a mood to be patient with thieves. We're in warm waters, now. Sharks in plenty here, and other things that would find someone like you tasty."

The kid crossed his arms over his chest and turned his face away from Aaran.

"Well, see," Aaran said. "That's why I sent the sailor away. I don't want him to see what I'm going to do to you if you don't tell me who you are and why you're on my ship."

"You can't do anything to me worse than what's already been done," the kid said. He spoke Tonk, though, not trade. But he wasn't Tonk.

Was he?

Aaran grabbed the kid's left hand and pried the suddenly-clenched fingers open. No clan mark.

Spoke Tonk with a good clean Hyrian accent. And yet wasn't Tonk. Tonk was no common tongue for the non-Tonk to learn. People spoke their own language, they picked up Trade, and they'd learn one or two regional pidgins to get them through the tricky bits.

But this kid spoke Tonk like someone who'd been speaking it for years.

"There's where you're wrong, you see," Aaran said, switching to Tonk. "So far you're still breathing. But I have the right to make that not so. After all, we're at sea, and all you've shown me so far is that you're trouble I don't want to have."

The kid looked him straight in the eye and said, "If it makes you happy, kill me. You still can't hurt me like they did."

Aaran sat on the bench opposite him. "Who?"

"If I tell you that, you'll take me back, and I'm not going back."

Aaran laughed. "I'm not taking anyone anywhere. We're not on a pleasure cruise, boy. We're going to war, and I'm in a hurry to get there. I might dump you at the next civilized port if you act decent—from there you could go wherever you wanted. But there's no way I'll take you back where you came from. I haven't the time."

Arms crossed, body rigid. "Beat me. I won't talk."

"You think so, do you?"

"My father beats me. My uncle. Some of their friends."

"Why?"

The kid was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "Because

they like to.”

Aaran knew about drunks who liked to beat their children. They grew up to be wharf rats, and then ship’s runners, and then sailors. He had a good double handful of such men onboard.

Aaran looked at the boy, wearing his too-big shirt, sitting there on the bench. And he realized the kid had no reason to trust anyone. If a child couldn’t trust his own father, who could he trust? The name of the kid’s father didn’t matter.

He said, “All right. I won’t push you for details about what happened to you. But if you ever want to talk to me, you can tell me.” He propped his elbows on his knees and rested his chin in his hands. “So. Here you are, and you’re going to have to have food, and clothes to wear, and if you’re going to be eating, you’re going to be working. You want to get off at the next island we pass that has a town on it?”

“Not very much,” the boy said. “I want to go a long way away.”

Aaran said, “How old are you?”

“Ten.”

“I swear ... hearing starts to fail when you get to be twenty-five. I didn’t hear you very well, I’m afraid. A boy can sign papers to work on a ship if he’s twelve years old. How old did you say you were again?”

The kid looked downtrodden for a moment, and then hopeful. “Twelve?”

“You’re pretty puny for a twelve-year-old, you know?”

“Yessir. I’m small.” He nodded.

“But twelve? You’re sure about that?”

"Oh, yessir. I'm twelve."

"You have a name?"

"Um ... what is a good Tonk name?"

Aaran grinned at him. "You speak good Tonk, kid, but you don't look Tonk. You've got no clan mark, you wear your hair short and ugly, and I bet you haven't chosen your saint yet, either."

"Can you make me a Tonk?"

"Only Jostfar can make you Tonk," he said, and laughed. But the kid didn't laugh. Didn't have any idea who Jostfar was, of course. "We'll see about you becoming Tonk. It's not easy, but it's not impossible, if you want it enough. First, though, we have to make you not Marqallan. All right?"

The kid nodded, puppy-eager.

"You can be Eastil. Anybody can be Eastil, and sometimes that seems not such a bad thing. For now, we can call you Eban. That's as much an Eastil name as anything. Eban ... Coopersson. The Eastils have as many Coopers and Cooperssons as they have everything else combined. And you could pass for Eastil, once we shave off that idiotic hair-cut and put you into a sailor's clothes. I'll let you sign papers to work on the ship as a ..." He looked at the kid. Aaran had been almost ready to tell him he could be a rope rat—but the kid looked too frail. Within a month, rope-rats knew the language of a ship, how to climb and how to fall, how to hang on, where to run when things got nasty. This kid's hands were as soft as a girl's. Or a keeper's. He'd spent a lot of time being hurt, not a lot of time running outdoors in the streets with friends. He'd toughen up in time, no doubt. But Aaran didn't want him to die in the process.

"You want to learn how to be Tonk, you think?"

“Yessir.”

“Right. I’ll sign you on as Assistant Keeper, then, and you can work with my cousin Tuua. You’ll be on rope-rat half pay until Tuua says you’re worth more to him.”

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