

HAWKSPAR – Sneak Peek

By Holly Lisle

You can read a sneak peek from my current version of HAWKSPAR. I think it's coming along.

Chapter One – Hawkspar

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“Senior Penitent?”

I looked up from the floor I was scrubbing and found Sister Bloodstone Ten standing over me, her red eyes glowing in the reflected light of the fire. I would as soon the sisters never noticed me, but early in my days as a slave, I discovered that if I learned quickly, I was not beaten so often, and the work the sisters gave me became progressively less onerous.

I did not figure out until it was too late that the easier

work came with a price. Notice by the sisters and the oracles, and a path that led to becoming one of the Order.

" Oracle Hawkspar has requested you join her in her study. You have until fifth bell to ready yourself."

I rose without a word and passed my scrub brush and bucket to the penitent who had followed Sister Bloodstone Ten into the Chapel of the Oracles. One does not argue with the sisters; the fact that fifth bell would ring in almost no time, and that I would have run all the way to the penitents' quarters to shower and dress in my formal robes and then hurry all the way back across the Hermitage from the penitents' cells before it rang would not matter to her. Nor would the fact that I would have to do all that and present myself, not breathing hard and sweating, to the most terrifying of the oracles would win me no sympathy either.

So I hurried from the grand chapel, and when I was out of Bloodstone Ten's sight, ran with my skirts gathered up around my knees in a most undignified fashion, galloping around the penitents who, luckier than I, had not been summoned by the terrifying Eyes of War.

In my cell, which I shared with three other penitents, I pulled my formal robes from the shelves, then raced to the penitents' bath, a large open room with one wall dedicated to showers. Water poured constantly from fifty dragon-shaped showerheads, then down a drain and into the garden irrigation system. I placed my formal robes on the long, narrow changing table, stripped off my work clothes and tossed them into the basket where the penitents assigned to laundry would gather them up, and plunged into the icy water. I scrubbed quickly, soaping body, face and hair with the harsh lye-and-ash soap we penitents used. And made. I hated soap-making days.

I did not let myself think about Oracle Hawkspar, or what she might want with me. I had served her for a season my second

year as a penitent; I could be said to know her better than most, yet she remained a mystery to me, and she terrified me. As the Eyes of War, kings and princes and chieftains traveled across the world to seek her out, both in times of peace and times of trouble, hoping to curry favor with her in exchange for her word. Would their wars go well? Would their allies stand by them? Did they negotiate with traitors, liars, duplicitous curmudgeons, or did they treat with honorable men? With the Eyes – translucent brown streaked with silver and flecked with gold – she saw what had been, what was, and what would be in the dealings of the great men of many nations, and if she was so moved, she would tell those who petitioned her.

Oftentimes she sent them away with nothing. She was a harsh woman, cold and demanding, and if her visitors displeased her, she gave them nothing.

Most things displeased her. She did not like children at all, and the girls who were assigned to serve her, slaves and penitents alike, cowered at her slightest whisper of displeasure. In the season I spent serving her, I had wished one of the two of us dead every single day. The longer I served her, the more I didn't care which of the two that might be.

Now she had summoned me.

I stepped out of the shower, shivering, and dried off with a clean, coarse hemp towel pulled from the rack. A few flicks took care of my hair, what little of it there was. Slaves' heads are shaved, penitents must wear a fuzz no longer than our first finger to the first joint, acolytes' will have their hair cut straight at the level of their chins. Sisters wear a single twisted rope braid. Oracles wear whatever they like.

Damp but with no time to get completely dry, I tossed my towel into the laundry bag as well. The sisters were unforgiving of messes left lying; slaves and penitents kept ourselves and our

quarters neat as a simple matter of survival.

I put on my formal wear carefully. Black cotton split-toed hose held by ties to black cotton pantlets. Black cotton breast-binder. Formal shoes, which have thick wooden soles, black duck split-toe uppers, and ties that lace from instep to knee. Then the next layer – the underblouse of heavy gray cotton with full sleeves that must be bound from wrist to elbow in perfect diamond patterns – these in black cord; then the long, full underskirt of heavy white cotton with the sash that must be wrapped tightly around the waist, then knotted in front in such a way that it did not leave a bulge. Over these went my green summer tabard, which hung all the way to the hem of my skirt, a rectangle of color front and back with black cord waist-ties tying it in place at each side. The tabard was embroidered with yellow silk thread, rather than black silk thread, because I had been elevated to the position of senior penitent. The design was the Hermitage Penitents' Sigil, which all penitents wear.

With the robes on, I struggled with the head-wear – the tight gray wimple and flowing white hood that went over it. The hood ties to the underblouse at the collar.

I'd had years of practice with formal robes, and still could not get into them as quickly as I should. This meant the slaves and penitents and sisters and oracles who meditating in the day gardens watched me hurtle over the cobbled paths, leaping flowerbeds that impeded my race to Oracle House, while I clattered like a mule in my wood-soled shoes, with my tabard points tucked into my skirt-waist and my formal skirts lifted to show off black hose.

Word of my behavior would no doubt reach Oracle Hawkspar, who would have my hide.

And then the bell rang, and I was no longer merely indecorous, but also late.

I took the steps up to Oracle House two at a time, dodging sisters who cluttered the broad stairs like great green birds – one walks in Hermitage, but most so wherever Oracles might be, and I had no doubt I would pay horribly for my sins, but there is no greater sin to an oracle than to present oneself late. I skidded into the vast entry hall, gasping for air.

One of the white-eyed Sisters Moonstone – I have never been assigned to infirmary, and they almost never mingle with penitents not their own, so I did not know which Sister Moonstone – crossed her arms over her chest and said, “You’re late, and you’ve been running.”

” Yes, sister.”

” I could have you taken away this very minute and given ten lashes for being late, and a week of solitary prayer in a silent cell for the running.”

” Yes, sister.”

The sister sighed heavily and turned away from me. ” I have no doubt the Blessed Oracle will be able to do a better job of punishing you than I could ever hope to.”

” Yes, sister.”

” Go in, then. You’ve kept Oracle Hawkspar waiting, but she still wishes to see you. You know which quarters are hers?”

” Yes, sister.”

” Go, then. She said you were not to be announced.”

I bowed the deep bow of a senior penitent, and the sister gave me the head-nod that is all one of her station is required to give when dealing with one of mine.

Through the heavy brass-bound doors at the back of the greatroom, Oracle Hawkspar had her living quarters. They were

surprisingly simple for one who is regarded by most as a living goddess. She could have had the lavish hangings and grand bed of Oracle Sunspar, the Eyes of Secrets; the fat couches and silk curtains and lovely statues with which Oracle Sapphire, the Eyes of Magic, decorated her quarters. She could have dressed in robes made of cloth of gold if she so desired – Oracle Starstone, the Eyes of Justice did.

Yet The Blessed Oracle Hawkspar's sleeping quarters held a mat no softer or more forgiving than mine, a wall of stark wooden shelves that hold her robes and her cordbooks, and a small, unornamented trunk that I supposed contained personal items. I had never seen inside it, so could not say.

She had a private bath, as well, and that seemed a luxury to me, but they were built into each oracle's quarters, and each bath was exactly the same as all the rest. The quarters offered a huge carved ebony tub and an enclosed shower with adjustable taps that allowed water to be shut off, and that ran both hot and cold – an oracle's privilege alone, and one that slaves in the Hermitage's boiler rooms worked hard to maintain. Oracle Hawkspar had a private privy, too, one of the flushable sort, not the composting variety that the slaves and the penitents and even the sisters used.

The oracle was in neither her bath nor her sleeping chamber. Her last room was her private chapel, which was where she retired to summon the spirits or cast her runes or whatever it was that she did to divine the futures of the rich and powerful. And it was there that I found her.

She sat on her bench, dressed in black silk robes as simple as the sack dresses of the slaves, her head bowed. But when I stood in the doorway, her head came up and her face turned toward me.

I was surprised at how gaunt she had become, and how pale. Hawkspar had always been a lean woman; she had seemed to me

one who in another time would have ridden astride a horse with a sword in her hand. No one could have mistaken her for Oracle Ruby, the Eyes of Family, whose vast, matronly girth no doubt made her seem motherly and welcoming to the women who sought her out for matters of the heart, childbirth, and the home.

But Hawkspar had never seemed frail before. Nor had she seemed old; merely ageless.

" Sit, girl," she told me, pointed to a place beside her on the worn rosewood bench.

I sat.

The oracle waved a hand in a casual fashion, and suddenly, silently, the walls, ceiling and floor around us glowed with a pale blue shimmer.

" Now we can talk," she said. "You don't want to be here." When I did not answer, she laughed. "That's all right, girl. When you hear why I've summoned you, you'll want to be here less."

I said nothing, because I had not yet been invited to speak.

Oracle Hawkspar said, "I'm dying, girl. I'm old and worn thin, and while I've hung onto this life so long that I cannot even remember coming into it, hoping the mission I discovered would come to me, the time is nearly come for me to give up my last breath."

I sat. Waiting.

Hawkspar reached over, grabbed my chin in one birdlike claw – still surprisingly strong, and turned my head so that I had to look into her terrible stone eyes. Her gleaming hawkspare eyes, which saw nothing and everything.

" A war builds, girl – a terrible war in which both you and I have a personal stake."

I look at her, wishing I could turn away, and dared speech though it had not been invited. "How could I have stake in a war?"

She released my face, took my left hand in hers, and turned it over so my palm face up. "You bear a mark on your hand. Do you remember why?"

" I don't," I confessed.

" What is your name, Penitent?"

My name.

I had a name once.

It bound itself tight to pictures in my mind: of horses galloping in great thundering herds; of my mother singing to me in darkest night while outside our waxed felt walls a great storm raged; of my father walking beside me as I rode my first horse. I could see the faces of other children in these images – so many. My brothers and sisters, they might have been, but I had long ago forgotten.

My name died in fire and blood, when I watched my parents slaughtered and when I was bound with the other children around me and dragged to a ship and thrown into darkness.

In darkness I found weeping, and prayer. I felt pain. Chains around my ankles, a metal collar around my neck. Some around me coughed out their lives in the darkness and died – unheeded, untended, unmourned.

When darkness birthed me back into daylight, I became Slave. I stood naked on an auction block, blinded by daylight, and women from the Hermitage of the Oracle came to the slave market and examined my teeth and my hands and feet, and spoke to me, and when I did not understand their words, poked me with sticks until I walked. Something in me satisfied them, and money changed hands.

And Slave I remained. I carried water, scrubbed floors, washed cloths for the oracles and the sisters and the acolytes and the penitents. Along with other girls, some who arrived and stayed, some who were sold back to slavers because they were unsuitable for life in the Hermitage, and some who would eventually be chosen as penitents, I toiled from first light until last, and ate my meager meals, and slept on a mat on a dirt floor with dozens of others just like me. Evenings I studied with the rest of the slave girls at the feet of a succession of stone-eyed sisters who taught the lot of us morning and evening prayers, manners and courtesies, and the language of the Sry people. We were beaten terribly if ever we spoke a word of our own birth-tongues.

Words fall away if unused, and my name was nothing more than a word. I'd kept it hidden close to my heart, as I kept the images of the people who had loved me, but I never spoke my name, and no one else ever spoke it, and one day it was gone and I could not call it back.

"I have no name," I said. "I have not yet proven worthy of a name."

"Garbage, girl. What was your name before the bastard slavers grabbed you?"

I stared down at my hands – at the black lines that curled across my palm. "I don't remember," I said.

She sighed. "We got you young. So I don't suppose you do. Well, you and I are kin, of a sort. We're Tonk, you and I, born for the wild places, for war and freedom and adventure. Neither you nor I was ever meant to live in this ridiculous cage." She held out the palm of her left hand to show me, and it bore the same mark as mine – two short horizontal bars stacked one atop the other, both of these sitting on a bar twice as wide, and beneath the third bar, another narrow bar, this one with a tail on the right side that curved down.

" This mark is Eskuu," she said. "You and I – we share a clan, a history, and blood. And a mission." She smiled slightly. "You still say your prayers every day."

" All the penitents do," I said, my mouth dry with fear."

" They might," Hawkspar laughed, "but you still say the Tonk prayers, morning and evening. Haabudak aveerzak each sunrise, Gitaada each sunset."

" You ... knew?"

The oracle smiled a slow, secretive smile. "I watched for my successor these long years – there was a girl thirty years ago who could have done what needed to be done, but the time was not yet right. We can only act when the events allow – I was not willing to die to let her inherit the Eyes. I did not know if she could remain steadfast, and the time when the trouble would come was not yet clear to me."

I longed to ask her what she wanted from me, but a penitent would never dare such forwardness. So I kept quiet.

" You – you have a fire in you that will serve our people well," the oracle said. "And now, at last, the time has come. The oracles will be told that you are the penitent my eyes have chosen to be my successor."

That seemed to me a strange wording, and I am of a suspicious nature. "Am I?" I asked.

" No," the oracle said, and grinned. She seemed in this blue-lit room very different from the oracle I had served for my season. "They would confer themselves on another senior penitent, one who loves the order above all and seeks advancement with her every step, and who would gladly serve the interests of the Hermitage. Whereas you despise the order, and have been looking for some time for your escape."

She knew about that, too? I was lucky I had not been sold to

the kept-house to serve as amusement for any who would pay my owner coin. "I do not want the Eyes, Blessed One," I said. "I have never wanted the Eyes."

"Not even the eyes of an oracle? The Eyes of War, which would make you, arguably, the most powerful woman in the world, able to direct the courses of wars and declare the paths of peace? The Eyes of War make their wearer a goddess, child, with powers you cannot conceive. Men will give you anything you ask if you will make them kings, and with this power you can make any man you choose into a king, or any king you hate into a pauper. Or a corpse."

"I never doubted otherwise," I said, trying to sound humble and to avoid arguing. "But I ... I love the sight of the sun, Oracle, and to see the stars. The colors and shapes of roses and daisies, the shimmer of glass, the beauty of clouds on a stormy day. The green of grass, the blue of sky. I fear blindness. And the pain." I looked into the hawkspare eyes in the old, thin face, and they held no emotion, no cue. The oracles and the sisters were aware of all that was around them – aware of more than we could ever be. But they were blind to a one, chosen by the women they would succeed, trained for as long as their mentors survived, then taken to the chamber at the back of the Chapel of Oracles, and had their own eyes ripped out in a ceremony in which their mentors' Eyes were removed and placed into their bleeding sockets, at which time they assumed their Eyes' names, and inherited their magic.

Some of the penitents practiced walking about blindfolded so that they would be ready to assume their Eyes when the time came. Some talked endlessly about the ceremony and what it must be like.

Me – I used every minute to figure out how I would escape from the Hermitage when my time came, when the sisters and oracles gathered to say goodbye to one of their own and to welcome her successor into their midst. I had ... plans.

Hawkspar said, "The pain can be terrible, girl. The blindness is no joy. But that you have not sought power, that you know it would be there and have not reached out your hand for it – this makes you special to me. It tells me that like me, you will not sell your power to those who do not deserve your aid. Penitent, your family is in desperate need of your help. Enemies surround them, forces range against them that they do not fully recognize, and you are young and strong, and with the Hawkspar Eyes, you will be able to save them."

" I watched my family die," I said. "My time to help them was long past."

" No. You watched your parents die. Perhaps your village. But your family – well, you touch them morning and evening when you whisper your prayers. Can you not feel them beside you in those moments? Uplifting you? Strengthening you?"

I could. I whispered "Haabudaf aveerzak" to the rising sun, and all around me the voices of others seemed to whisper the same words. I could almost feel hands linking into mine, could almost imagine a place with great broad plains and free-running horses, and no stone walls to pin me to one place. "Yes," I told the oracle. "When I pray, I can feel them."

" Your family is all of the Tonk, and the Tonk are losing ground in a war that will see not just them, but all who love freedom, enslaved. Most of what is worth being in the world is in danger, child, and your sacrifice will save more than you can imagine. More than you can even comprehend until the moment when the Eyes accept you."

I bowed my head. I did not want the Eyes. I did not want power. And I could not imagine myself saving anyone from anything. I had been trained to see myself as subservient to the will of all else around me. I had been a slave, and I served the Syr gods, and beneath them, the oracles, the sisters, and the acolytes. I was told daily that I was

nothing. I had been beaten to force me to believe it.

And I would face the ceremony of the Eyes, and horrors I did not want to contemplate. A lifetime of blindness. The pain that sometimes drove sisters and oracles alike to the infirmary, sometimes to madness, and sometimes, it was rumored, to their deaths.

Three words alone I had kept of my own language – three. And those three prayers to a god whose name I could not even remember. Could I truly call myself Tonk? Could I claim family among a people I did not know, could not even speak with, did not remember beyond brief warm images from a time when I was so tiny my hands barely wrapped around the reins of the horse I rode, and my feet stuck out almost straight to either side?

"What if this family you claim does not want me?" I asked.

And the oracle laughed – something I could not remember ever having heard her do. "You do not know what it means to be Tonk. But when you wear the eyes, you will remember. They will want you. You are their own daughter."

"I'm inside the Hermitage."

"You will find a way out."

"No one has ever escaped before."

"No one save slaves and penitents has tried in centuries. No oracle has ever considered escape. Save me, but by the time I thought to go to the Tonk instead of bringing them to me, I was too old and frail for the work that must be done. Girl, you alone of all the penitents can take these Eyes from me. You alone are a senior penitent, and Tonk, and still have enough backbone that I can hope you will do what must be done to save our people. I could command you, but I will not. I must have your answer now, though, because I must protect you from the sight of the other oracles if you choose to take this

burden. And then I must quickly call a conclave of the oracles and name you my successor. We have little time.”

” If I do not take the Eyes?”

” Then all your family will fall into slavery – they will know the same pain that you have known, and the same grief, and the same longing for a life that will no longer exist. You can save something good, girl. Something worth saving.”

I wanted to tell her no. I wanted so very much to walk away. She had given me the choice, and I did not know of anyone who was permitted to refuse the will of the sisters and the oracles, or who successfully fought off the choice of the Eyes.

If I refused them, I suspected that my life would remain much as it was for a while. Then some Moonstone sister or some Obsidian sister would grow ill, and her eyes would choose me to take her place, and I would suffer the same pain, the same dangers, the same loss – but for nothing. I would save no one. I would do nothing more than what the sisters had been doing for thousand of years.

Perhaps outside the Hermitage walls I did have a family who needed me. Perhaps I could find my way to freedom. Perhaps I could do something wondrous with my life. Or at least something worthwhile that did not keep me bound within these walls for the next sixty years as I had been bound for the last twenty.

I was afraid. Afraid of everything that would come.

But it would come whether I chose the moment or not. So I chose.

” I will do as you ask, Oracle Hawkspar. I will become your mentor, and serve you until the Eyes come to me.”

” I thought you had it in you to do that,” she said.

She reached out a hand and touched me, and for a moment cold blue fire engulfed me. It stung me, and I could not catch my breath, and my head pounded and my eyes ached. And then she released me. "You no longer can be read by the sisters or the other oracles. I have had a bit of a shield around you for years, but not so much of one that it would draw attention to you. I simply hid your few fatal indiscretions from the others, and let you take your beating for those sins for which they would be obliged to kill you, or sell you away from here. Now, though, none save I can read what you do or think; you are my mentor, and marked as such. Upon my death, my Eyes will come to you. You will not be permitted to change your mind, nor will you have an opportunity to escape. Do you understand."

" Yes, oracle."

" My name is Raaksa," she said. "It is part of a much longer formal name, but you may call me Raaksa. We will not have long to work together, but for what little time remains to me, I would have you, in private, call me by my name. It has been a very long time since I heard it spoken."

" Yes, Oracle Raaksa," I said.

She patted my arm. "Just Raaksa. Don't worry about it – you'll catch the use of it quickly enough. For now, though, go to your quarter and bring all your belongings. Until I die, you will share my quarters with me. You and I will eat together, study together, and pray together – and we will work, as well, on the plan of your escape, and how you shall reach our people again."

I nodded.

" Hurry, girl. We have much to do, and so little time."

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