

Hawksparr

By Holly Lisle

Chapter One

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Penitent

My Jara came at me with a quick punch and sweep of her ban. We were practicing that morning with ban-vi-ri, which means “stick like self” – they’re heavy wood staves cut to our height. Jara, taller than I, had better reach.

I was quicker for once, however, and feeling more aggressive. “Hai!” I shouted, and went over her sweep, already moving inside her defenses and punching with my ban before she could pull hers back to defend herself. “You overreached.”

My ban smacked her ribs, and she yelped, and I spun the end overhand to catch her opposite shoulder a sharp downward blow. Done correctly, this will get through the padding of the rayan – the corded shoulder protectors that are a part of our penitent garb – and weaken the opponent’s grip on her stick. Done perfectly, it will cause the arm to go numb and the stick to drop from the hand.

I, however, did it badly, because as I snapped my ban downward, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of an Obsidian stepping into the doorway to the fighting floor, then moving towards us. Which meant that my attention wasn’t fully on what I was doing. My blow bounced harmlessly, and left me with my stick up and entangled in the back of hers for an

instant. The Jara, for whom my secret name was Redbird, grinned, and used the opportunity to sweep me again and take my knees out from under me.

So it was that I found myself lying on my back with my head ringing from the rap on the floor when the Obsidian stopped beside us and stared down at me.

I had to guess she stared down at me – after all, she bore Obsidian Eyes, and it's impossible to tell what those featureless, glinting black stones are looking at.

Everything, maybe – or nothing.

“Senior Penitent Ter Light Ranwi?” she said.

I scrambled to my feet, and bowed. “Yes, sera.”

My heart was in my throat. The Obsidians are the warriors of the Ossalene Rite – silent and terrifying, dressed always in unrelieved black. They have fighting skills that defy the eyes and the mind, and what we see when they demonstrate skills for us or spar with us is only a portion of what they can do; they are rumored to walk on water and disappear and appear at will, to be able to kill with a fingertip touch or a whisper, to be able to see not just our sins of commission, but the sins in our thoughts.

As I had lately occupied myself in committing all manner of both sorts of sins, on finding myself standing before the Obsidian, I could barely breathe.

But she did not say, “I know what you've been doing.” She did not say, “I know what you've been thinking.” And she did not mention tossing me into a cage filled with starving rats.

All she said was, “Oracle Hawkspar commands you appear in her private chapel next bell.” And that was worse. All hopes I might have had of surviving the day fled. The only thing that could have made me more panicked than having an

Obsidian single me out for attention was discovering she did so in order to command me to face an oracle. In the oracle's private chapel, at that, where none entered unbidden, and where only some who entered later exited.

Nor would I be standing before just any of the Nine Holies. Oracle Hawksparr was the Eyes of War, the Living Goddess of the Blade, whose words brought kings and commanders, dictators and despots – all bearing the wealth of nations – to the

Oracle Tower to beg for her true telling of their futures.

Hawksparr was the commander of the Obsidians. She was, to us penitents, like Death incarnate.

She knew what I'd been doing, I thought. But she couldn't; if she'd known, I would already have been fed to the rats. Or perhaps she meant to make a spectacle of me. It would make sense.

I said only, "Yes, sera," for if a penitent speaks to an Obsidian, the only acceptable answers are "yes, sera" and "no, sera." My voice shook saying merely that; I was grateful no more words were required of me. In my ears, the two words I had said screamed my guilt.

Redbird's hand rested on my shoulder, silent comfort.

The Obsidian turned next to her. "Jara Light Ranwi?"

"Yes, sera."

"You will follow Ter Light Ranwi, and will see the Oracle Hawksparr when she is finished with the Ter."

Redbird's fingers tightened on my shoulder.

"Yes, sera."

The Obsidian flowed away without comment, and Redbird and I exchanged panicked looks. She, now ranked Senior Penitent Jara

Light Ranwi, had been my closest friend since the day they chained her into the hold of the slave ship next to me. When we staggered off that ship, we stood side by side on the slave block in the market of the city below the Ossalene Citadel; we'd managed not to faint when a stone-eyed monk had touched us and told us in our own language that we were going with her; and we had managed to stay together through years of slavery within the Citadel, through the choosing that brought us as lowly penitents into the Ossalene Rite of the Cistavrian Order of Marosites, more commonly called the Order of Ossalenes.

We'd risen through the ranks. We'd put together a fine, fine conspiracy.

And now we had been found out. Hawkspar would not see mere penitents for anything less than the sort of overarching criminality that we'd committed.

"You haven't much time," Redbird whispered. She looked as pale and sick as I felt. "You can't go looking like that."

"Neither of us has much time."

I needed to present myself, clean-showered and in formal garb, in less than a bell. Redbird would have a little longer – as long as it would take the oracle to sentence me to death.

"I'm sorry," I told her.

"You'll never make it unless we run. I'll help you," she said.

We fled the fighting hall, and when we were clear of the Obsidian paths, raced to Ranwi Hall, up the spiral staircase from the common area into the cells, and into the cell we shared with two other Lights, Fawi Light Ranwi, and Ghoteh Light Ranwi.

Penitents are designated by bed color, cell name, and hall name. These change each time a penitent moves on, either to

become an acolyte or to be sent from the Order; all the other penitents move up a bed, and their designations changed. Bad months, when a sera or two dies, or something unspeakable happens with a group of acolytes, our designations changed half a dozen times. We learned not to get attached to names – but we'd already learned when we were slaves. All slaves are called Slave. Nothing more – ever.

We were beaten for ever speaking our real names, for ever using nicknames for each other. But Redbird and I had developed a system. We found common items around the monastery: wild animals, birds, flowers wild and domesticated, bits and pieces of cookware. We marked each other and our other co-conspirators with these hidden nicknames, and by so doing, managed to hold on to news of each other, to stay in touch, to pass messages, to keep friends – the very things I suspected the ever-changing rank names had been designed to prevent. Our hidden nicknames could be passed in casual conversation, along with a specific movement of the face. Whatever magic their terrifying Eyes gave them, the blind

Ossalene sera, we had discovered, could not read facial expressions.

In our cell, which Redbird and I shared with three other penitents, we pulled our formal robes from the shelves. Then Redbird and I raced to the ground floor and to the penitents' bath, a large open room with one wall dedicated to showers.

Water poured constantly from twenty dragon-shaped showerheads, then down a drain and into the garden irrigation system. We placed formal robes on the long, narrow changing table, stripped off our work clothes, and tossed them into the basket where the penitents assigned to laundry would gather them up. And we plunged into the icy downpour. I scrubbed quickly, soaping body, face and hair with the harsh lye-and-ash soap we penitents used. That the slaves made. When I was a slave, I had hated soap-making days.

Even terrified, though, I kept to my ritual. I sent the magic into the water. If all hope was gone for me, it still might remain for some of the girls in the monastery. I put everything I had into the little spell. And I prayed to a forbidden god that rescue would come in time to save even me. For the love of Jostfar, by the hands of the Five Saints, save us before we perish.

I did not let myself think about Oracle Hawksparr, 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. With her stone Eyes that replaced her sacrificed human eyes, 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 the mighty and the rich away with nothing. She was a harsh woman, cold and demanding, and if her visitors displeased her, she turned her back on them. 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.

I stepped out of the shower, shivering, and Redbird tossed me a 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 the first joint of our first finger, acolytes' hair is cut as long as their longest finger.

Seru wear a single twisted rope braid capped at the end with a hedu, or little metal ball. Oracles wear their hair in whatever fashion they like. The Oracle Hawksparr shaved her head like a slave. I could not guess what she meant to say by

doing this.

Damp but with no time to get completely dry, I tossed my towel into the laundry bag. The seru were unforgiving of messes left lying; slaves and penitents kept ourselves and our quarters neat as a simple matter of survival.

Redbird helped me put on my formal garb. Brown cotton split-toed hose held by ties to brown cotton pantlets. Brown cotton breast-binder. Soltis, which are the formal shoes of our Order. They have thick wooden soles, brown duck-cloth split-toe uppers, and broad, flat ties that lace in an overlapping pattern from instep to knee. Getting the pattern right is both difficult and important. The seru will have a girl beaten for sloppy lacing. So Redbird did one leg while I did the other.

The next layer was the formal penitent's tabi, a hip-length sleeveless blouse of heavy brown cotton. To these we had to attach the rayan, for even in formal garb we are a warrior Rite, and such little armor as is permitted those of our rank must be worn at all waking hours. The formal rayan, though, were made of heavy brown silk, layered and quilted over row after close-spaced row of thick silk rope.

Hakan-ara, the fighting pants of penitents, which are full, but nowhere near as full as the hakan-allar of the acolytes and seru and oracles, and which, unlike the pants of advanced members of the Order, are held tight to the ankles by blousing straps, came next.

Those were simple enough to do. But the bo, the beginners' sash that wraps at the waist over the loose tabi, was not such a simple thing. It had to be wrapped in layers around the waist, then knotted in front in such a way that it did not leave a bulge, with the ends tucked up into the folds. At the best of times, it's difficult to do well, and an appearance before the Oracle Hawkspar could never be considered the best of times. My hands shook so badly I ended up holding lengths of the thick brown silk away from my body while Redbird did

the knot and tucked the ends, and both of us whispered Tonk curses. When the bo was perfect, I threaded my beaded cepa, my rank apron, which is of the brilliant blood red we call ter, beneath the outermost layer of my bo, and then folded it under the innermost layer so that both ends hung even with the skirt of my tabi.

“Is it straight?”.

Redbird stood on tiptoe and peered out of one high ventilation slit. “It’s going to have to do,” she said. “The bell-slaves are heading into the tower now.

“Already?” My body went rigid with fear. I looked to Redbird, my mouth dry. “How about you. Will you be ready in time?”

She nodded.

I ran.

So the slaves and penitents and seru and oracles meditating in the central garden 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.

Word of my behavior would no doubt reach Oracle Hawkspar well before I did.

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 Bloodstone seru who cluttered the broad stairs like great red birds – one walks in the Citadel, but most especially, one walks wherever Oracles might be.

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 Seru Moonstone crossed her arms over her chest and said, “You’re late, and you’ve been running.”

“Yes, sera.”

“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, sera.”

The Moonstone 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, sera.”

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

“Yes, sera.” But my feet dragged.

“Go.” She made shooing motions with her hands. “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.

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