



slowed, but eventually Nnanji felt the challenge reverse itself—instead of the sailor inquiring whether he was afraid of the sword at his belly, he himself was inquiring whether the sailor was afraid to return it. Finally Tomiyano lowered it, wiped the blade with the cloth, and held it out hilt first.

Nnanji took it, sheathed it, and said, “Thank you.”

He walked away.

That had gone rather well.

The huddle around the wounded man was still there, so he headed for the deckhouse to see if the slave had got the bed ready . . . and by the door he came face to face with Honakura again. The old relic had apparently recovered from his shock—he was smiling in an irritating manner.

“Well, old man? Have you an explanation for this also?”

“Explanation is like wine, adept,” the priest said. “Too much of it in one day can be harmful.”

Damned slippery priest-talk! “It can also be like my mother’s homemade bread: very good when new, but harder to swallow as it gets older.”

The old man just shook his head, and Nnanji blurted, “Why didn’t She save him?”

“She did.”

He glanced at the watchers grouped around Brota and the stricken swordsman. “That’s saving? I saw no miracle.”

Honakura chuckled drily. “I saw two! Could you take that sort of a beating and then not finish the job?”

Nnanji thought about that. “Perhaps not. And he’d been totally humiliated in front of his crew.”

“That made it easier, though.”

“Why? Never mind. What was the second miracle, then?”

The old man cackled in his infuriating way. “I’ll let you work that out for yourself, adept.”

“I haven’t got time to play games,” Nnanji snapped. “I’ve got responsibilities.”

He marched into the deckhouse, feeling strangely annoyed by the old man’s stupid grin.

Shonsu had been bandaged and now was carried into the deckhouse and laid on a blue cotton pallet. Brota looked him over, glanced at Nnanji without speaking, then waddled out. The rest of the crew followed her.

Jja began washing blood off her master. He was unconscious and pale as . . . very pale. Nnanji took his hairclip, his harness and sword. He went over to sit on one of the chests and checked the pockets. Shonsu had told him of the sapphires, but he whistled at the sight of them and hurriedly put them in his own pouch before anyone else saw. Then he counted all his mentor’s money. *My goods are your goods*, but he was going to keep them separate. He laid his own coins on the chest for now. There was a cool breeze blowing in from the window beside him, waving his pony tail.

He removed his scabbard and replaced it with Shonsu’s and then he sat and studied the seventh sword for a while before sheathing it on his back. He wished he had a mirror—certainly no Fourth had ever worn a sword like that. Reluctantly he put the hairclip in his pouch, also.

Katanji peered in, still pale. Nnanji beckoned him over.

“How much money have you got, protégé?”

Katanji looked surprised. “Five gold, two silver, three tin, and fourteen copper, mentor.”

Where had the little scoundrel gotten that much?

“Okay. Count mine for me, will you?”

Katanji blinked, but he knelt down by the chest and counted without having to use his fingers.

“Forty-three gold, nineteen silver, one tin, and six copper.”

Right. “Then take it and look after it for me,” Nnanji said.

His brother obeyed, stuffing the coins into his pouch. “They”re not going to put us ashore,” he

said. “The others wanted to and Brota refused—for now. The captain”s been taken below.

Is . . . is he going to live?”

“Shonsu? Of course.”

Katanji looked over doubtfully at the wounded man, then he put on what their mother called his soft-boiled look. “Nanj? They won”t speak to me when I”m wearing this sword.”

Nnanji opened his mouth to impart some truths about proper swordsman behavior . . . and remembered. “Take it off, then.”

The expression on the nipper”s face was almost laughable. So was the speed with which he wrapped himself in that stupid breechclout—as if Nnanji would change his mind. Then he tied on his money pouch and ran. But there would be time enough to turn him into a swordsman when they all got off this rotten floating barnyard.

There were two or three hours of daylight left; Nnanji decided to stay where he was. It was the best defensive position he could have found, and he could keep an eye on Shonsu. The wounded man was neither conscious nor unconscious. When spoken to he would open his eyes and seem to understand, but mostly he just lay and thrashed around restlessly, often asking for drinks, which Jja gave him through a reed. Then he would lay his head back again and close his eyes. He shivered sometimes and sweated. She did not leave him. She had laid a rolled pallet across the door to keep Vixini from straying, but the baby was behaving himself for once.

Nnanji played with Vixini a little and talked to the slave woman a little, but mostly he thought swordsmanship. This shipboard technique was very interesting: very little footwork, and then only short steps. Tremendous armwork; point, not edge. He wouldn”t give Tomiyano a fair match, even on land, but he would certainly beat Thana there—she”d never get near him. Yet obviously on the ship he was a scratcher again. A good swordsman ought to know both ways, and clearly Shonsu did.

How good was Tomiyano? Two or three ranks below Shonsu. But he had been fighting with a longer sword than he was used to. Give him a half rank for that and take one off for being on his own deck, and at least two for wielding sword against foil. The trouble was knowing how to grade Shonsu. There was no measuring Sevenths. “To be a Seventh,” Briu had liked to say, “is simply to be unbeatable.” Shonsu was the best in the World, maybe a ten?

He finally judged that Tomiyano was a high Fifth or low Sixth. And a sailor! Where had he got his practice? Perhaps from that dead brother that Thana had mentioned. If not him, then there must be others around almost as good, for it was very hard to be greatly better than one”s fencing

partners.

Yes, he would learn this new way of fighting. As a start, he reviewed his match with Thana, and then Shonsu's, carefully going over every step and every stroke.

The morning sun climbed very slowly; it seemed uncannily slow to a woman who had lived all her life in the tropics. Fair wind, and the River wide and bright. It was a fine day, she could admit; this was a better climate for one of her size. The word in Aus had been that there were no dangers in this direction, no shallows or unexpected bars. Traffic was light. Wisely, the crew were staying away from her while she ground away at her decision, so she sat alone at the tiller with no distractions.

She had slept badly and awakened no closer to a solution, although she usually found that sleeping on problems was the best way to straighten them out. The only progress her dreaming mind had made was that it had seen what was missing. It would come, she was sure, so she was just going to wait for it—for him. A good trader knew when to be patient, so she would let him make the first move.

The swordsman was still alive, and somehow she had known he would be. He seemed to understand when he was spoken to, but he would answer in grunts and nods. She had never seen so much blood come out of one body before. Even at Yok, her deck had not looked so like a slaughterhouse.

Tom'o was still sedated, and she was going to keep him that way for a while. If he had offended the gods, then he had most surely paid for it. No bones broken, thanks to the Most High, but a terrible beating. It might make him a little easier to handle for a while. He had been getting fractious, even before this torment began, and so had Thana. In fact, Thana had been growing into quite a problem. After Yok they had seemed to settle back into much the same steady, routine life as before, except that they stayed down from Hoof and never gone near Yok or Joof; those had been once-a-year destinations, anyway, for the spring crops. But no, it had not been the same. Change had been in the wind, although she had been refusing to admit it. Now they all had much more change than they could ever have wanted.

Something was going on . . . people beginning to crowd out on the main deck. She watched warily, out of the corner of her eye, not showing that she was paying attention. Then she saw the tiny figure come into view, painfully climbing the starboard steps. Here he was. This was what had been missing.

He advanced slowly, puffing a little, and smiled at her. He made no greeting and he sat himself beside her on the bench without waiting for an invitation. Only his toes touched the deck.

She glared down at the shiny skin on the top of his head. "You'll have to move off there when I tack," she growled—he had trapped her into speaking first.

"I shan't be long. Have you made a decision, mistress?"

"I've decided I like beggars on my ship as little as swordsmen."

His eyes were surprisingly bright for his obvious great age. "I outrank you."

Lina had been right—he was a priest. She could tell by the way he spoke. A Sixth? For a moment she thought of telling him to prove it, then changed her mind quickly. The mood the

crew was in, they'd all fall flat on their faces before him if he really was a priest of the Sixth. He would be giving the orders, instead of her.

She grunted, trying to make him say more, but he stayed silent, hands clasped in his lap, looking straight ahead, scuffing his feet like a child. Waiting for her, of course. Impudence! Then her attention was drawn back to the main deck again.

"What's going on down there?" She hoped her guess was wrong.

"Another fencing lesson."

Oh, no! She reached for her whistle.

"His idea."

"I don't believe it! A male Fourth asking lessons from a female Second?"

The old man nodded, grinning. He was not looking at Brota. Probably it hurt to turn his neck up at that angle. "Adept Nnanji is an ambitious young man. He says your fencing is different. Is it?"

"Yes. But I never met a landlubber who would admit it was better."

"I'm not sure he went quite that far. But he is always eager to learn."

The fencers were in position, most of the ship's company standing around to watch the sport again. The old man was silent once more, still letting her lead the conversation.

"I could put you all ashore," she said. She had seen many local jetties, most of which would likely handle *Sapphire*'s modest draft. No settlements of any size, though—none that would have a healer able to tell a sword cut from a snakebite.

"You're not going to."

"Don't be so sure."

"I'm sure you won't, mistress. I didn't say you might not try."

"So you came to warn me?"

This time he twisted his head around far enough to flash his gums at her in a smile. Then he went back to watching the fencing. The sound of clashing foils drifted up in the wind, but the crowd was oddly silent.

"You're a priest!"

"Yes."

"What's a priest doing running after swordsmen?"

"Collecting miracles."

"Such as?"

"Such as your son not finishing off Shonsu when he had him on the floor. On the deck."

"You think he's still the Goddess' champion after that fool trick he pulled in Aus?"

The little man adjusted himself on the bench. "Don't try to outguess the gods, Mistress Brota. If she wanted a swordsman to do that, Shonsu was the only one she could have chosen. Right?"

"But why—"

"I don't know. But I shall find out if I live long enough . . . or not, as the case may be. I learned patience a couple of lifetimes ago."

She studied the pennant and adjusted course. The sails filled more fully, and the ship leaned over happily, like a sleepy dog relaxing. „Tell me another miracle, then."

“Have you ever seen a slave so loved? Or a Fourth so young? Anyone who has helped Shonsu has been rewarded.”

“And my son was punished for being difficult?”

He nodded.

“Even if I agree to let you all stay, the rest of the family may not go along.”

He chuckled without looking up.

“One!” That was the swordsman’s voice. The crowd muttered.

“He’s *beating* her!” Brota exclaimed.

“He is a very fast learner. Don’t underestimate Adept Nnanji. He is not nearly as stupid as he would like to be. Youth! He will grow out of it.”

“Shonsu lost a lot of blood,” she said. “If that’s all, then he’ll be up and about in a few days—before we even reach Ki San, likely. Then what? He’ll need revenge on Tom’o for wounding him.”

The old man chuckled again. “Not Shonsu. He’ll shake his hand and offer him some lessons.”

“Then he’s like no swordsman in the whole World!”

“That’s very true.” He did not explain.

“Besides, I never heard of a landlubber giving a sailor fencing lessons. Some of them won’t even admit it’s legal.”

“Is it?”

“There’s some sutra or other,” she muttered. Water rats did not bother much with sutras. “And what if he dies? I’ve seen wounds become cursed, old man. My brother-in-law had a nick on his hand, and it killed him. My nephew—”

“A sword cut?”

Was that a threat? How had this nasty little busybody learned about that? But he was still apparently intent on the fencing, as though he had not spoken.

“Two!” Nnanji shouted.

“Shonsu is not going to die. He may be very sick . . .” The old man paused as if considering a sudden idea. “Yes, he may be quite sick. But he won’t die. And you’ll have no trouble with the rest of us. Your daughter can handle Adept Nnanji for you. His brother is—”

“His brother is a little imp! He was getting a lesson on knots from Oligarro this morning. Why would a landlubber need to know knots?”

He laughed aloud, spraying spit. “That’s what Nnanji asked him. But you can guess. And the slave won’t leave her master’s side, so she’s no problem.”

“It’s that other one. I don’t like ship’s whores. That Katanji was dropping hints to the boys. Does he?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.” He looked up at her in surprise. “I don’t think Cowie’s important any more. You can get rid of Cowie if you want to, mistress.”

“How?”

His eye twinkled, and they suddenly laughed together.

“And young Thana has her heart firmly on Lord Shonsu’s tray,” the priest said. “Isn’t youth

wonderful? Do you remember what that was like, mistress? The agony of being apart? How one person became the sun and all the rest of the World only stars?" He sighed. How could she forget? Tomiy, young and slender, handsome as a string of diamonds. What could landlubbers ever know of the whirlwind courtships of the riverfolk, the few scattered hours together when the two ships met in port? The awesome commitment, a leap of faith, knowing that one might never see one's family again? And what was left now of Tomiy but a son who'd been manic enough to sauce a swordsman of the Seventh and a wayward, shrewd little minx of a daughter . . .

Another yell of triumph from Nnanji. Thana had not scored at all yet. She would not now; not if the red-haired youth had mastered water rat footwork already.

"Thana has always insisted she would marry a Seventh," Brota admitted. "Tom"o says a nightsoil carrier of the Seventh . . ." She had allowed the confrontation to be turned into a conversation, almost a conspiracy, as if the two of them were arranging everything between them. This shriveled antiquity was as sharp as any trader she could think of.

"Not this Seventh, though," he said. "No matter how long she has to try."

"Expect to be on board for some time, do you?"

He nodded and rose stiffly. "It will be quite a long voyage, I think."

"Where to? There are swordsmen in Ki San."

"But Shonsu is not able to recruit them, because of the wound your son gave him. So the contract will still be in force." He beamed at her. Even standing, his eyes were no more than level with hers.

She glared angrily. "I could give back his jewel."

He shook his head. "You shook hands. I have given you your warning, Mistress Brota. Don't antagonize the Goddess any further. Serve Her well and you will be rewarded."

"And what if he dies?"

"He won't."

"You can't know that." Yet his eerie confidence impressed her, and she could usually smell lies at a hundred paces.

"I do know that," the old man said simply. "I am certain."

"Certain is a strong word!"

"There is a prophecy, mistress. I know that Shonsu is not going to die this time, because I know who is going to kill him. And it is not your son."

He walked away, unsteady on the sloping deck.

Nnanji shouted, "Four!" He had won the lesson.

††

"It's too late to drop them overboard," Tomiyano said angrily. *Sapphire* had just overtaken a wallowing ore barge and was about to pass on the leeward side of a cattle boat. It would not steal their wind, but the neighborhood would be low-class for a few minutes.

Yes, it was much too late—there were witnesses. The River was busy as a marketplace. Morning sunlight danced on the bustling waters. River gulls screamed and swooped overhead. Brota said

nothing.

“We could buy a ship apiece with that damned sword. Not to mention his hairclip. And however many more gems he may have in his pouch.” In four days he had made a remarkable recovery. The swellings were going down, although his shoulders were striped in more shades than a seamstress’ silk box, and he moved his arms as if they were old as the sutras. He was leaning on the rail at her side, grumbling. She did not think he was serious, but if she showed interest he might be. Trying her out, tempting. His ordeal had not made him easier to handle. Whatever the cost, he had felled a swordsman of the Seventh, and very few sailors had ever been able to claim that.

“Company astern,” he added.

She turned to eye the galley overtaking, its gilded oars moving like wings, its prow embellished with shiny enameled arabesques. It was heading to cut her off before she passed the cattle boat. The stench caught *Sapphire* briefly. Ugh!

“He’s going to die,” Tomiyano said. He turned around and cautiously leaned elbows on the rail. His chest was almost as gaudy as his back, and his burned face was flaking. “His leg looks like a melon. Have you listened to him? Not a word makes any sense. Gibberish!”

“I told you to stay out of the deckhouse.”

“I did. I looked in the window. And you can smell his wound from the hold. Damned landlubbers all over the ship! That Nnanji is dangerous. Every time I look at him, I expect him to start denouncing someone. Self-righteous young whelp!”

Brota did not speak. Nnanji had promised no denunciation in Ki San. Nnanji was under control. Thana had needed very little coaching. He revolved around her like a trained moth.

“And that Katanji!” Tomiyano spat over the rail.

Obviously his liver had been tainted by the bruised blood. A rhubarb purgative was what he needed. She wondered if beer would disguise the taste, for he would never take it voluntarily.

“You’re the only one to complain about him. He seems to get along with everyone else.”

“That’s what I mean! Have you seen how Diwa looks at him? And Mei? But we *are* going to throw them off in Ki San, aren’t we?”

Brota nudged the tiller judiciously. Perhaps it had been a mistake never to accept passengers before—Tomiyano was reacting as if he’d been raped, and some of the others were almost as bad. He had been born on *Sapphire* and had never slept anywhere else in his life. He worshiped the old hulk.

Roars of fury came floating across from the galley. It veered, and then feathered oars and lost way, in danger of stripping its sweeps against the cattle boat. Brota began planning her next tack. A couple of huge cargo ships, three times *Sapphire*’s size, were lumbering along ahead, while tiny luxury yachts flitted in and out like dragonflies—the owners coming to escort their cargoes, perhaps. She had never seen so much traffic so far from a dock. The great manor houses stood ranked along the shore; suburbs coming into sight. Ki San must be huge, and she felt excitement mounting, even in herself. The crew were expectantly lining the rail on the main deck.

“You *are* going to kick them out in Ki San?”

"Wait and see what the boy says."

"Him? He told Thana he'd never seen a city before Aus. This Ki San is . . ." Tomiyano

considered the shore and the river traffic. "It's going to be worth seeing. It'll snuff 'em all up and not even sneeze. He'll stay aboard!"

Of course Nnanji would decide to stay, but likely he had not worked that out yet. He was down on the main deck with the rest, his ponytail shining copper in the morning sun, the silver griffon and its sapphire shining more brightly beside it. Everyone was down there, except Shonsu and his slave. Real devotion, there. She never seemed to sleep.

Evidently Tomiyano had also been looking at the sword and suddenly he realized its significance. "But he can't go ashore, can he? Swordsmen would be a bigger threat than sorcerers!" He laughed, then muttered something scornful about swordsmen, but under his breath so Brota could pretend not to have heard.

A challenger needed no reason. That sword would be Nnanji's death warrant if any highrank caught him wearing it. Of course in theory he could carry it in a sheath and wear his own, but Adept Nnanji would surely regard that as beneath his honor. And it would not save him from civilians, or swordsmen low on scruples.

A lumber boat and two fishing smacks ahead . . . "My head's aching," she said. "Eyestrain. Pity you're not fit enough to handle this for me."

"Move over!"

"But your shoulders . . ."

"Move over, I said!"

She left him to it and headed for the steps. She was tired of his griping, and the rest of the family was as bad, although they were more subtle about it. She was going to let the swordsmen stay—until she had sold her sandalwood. She would pitch them off just before *Sapphire* sailed. Safer that way. Unless, of course, the gods were feeling generous, as the old man had predicted. She was a trader and words were cheap. Let them show it.

Brota was down with the rest of the family, sitting on a hatch cover, when Ki San himself came into view, glorious in the sunlight. She had seen more of the World than any of them, but even she was impressed. A million green copper roofs spread out over many hills in a forest of spires, cupolas, and domes. On the highest summit a palace shone in white and gold. The bustling dock front stretched out of sight, outlining a bend of the River, a giant hedge of masts, and rigging dwindling away in an arc into the far distance. Lighters and barges flitted about like gnats.

Windlasses and wagon wheels sent a continuous rumble of noise floating out over the water.

Watching the hubbub of the docks drift by, Brota began to wonder if they would ever find a berth. Then a little ferryboat pulled out ahead, and Tomiyano shot *Sapphire* into the gap as easily as he could have hit a spittoon. He grinned in lopsided triumph. The crew cheered and jumped to furl the sails and throw lines.

Brota heaved herself up and walked over to Adept Nnanji.

"Well, adept? You wish to remain on board?"

He gulped and nodded, still staring in horror at the city. "I do. You will send for a healer,

mistress?"

"Very well."

"Ah, mistress?" He turned his attention from the view and squirmed slightly. "I want to sell Cowie. A slave who has hysterics at the sight of blood is not a suitable companion for a swordsman."

"That's true." Brota nodded solemnly. Well done, Thana!

Nnanji stammered. "Er, I wondered if you would sell her for me? You would get a higher price than I would."

"Probably. A man selling a slave like that means she's no good. A woman selling her can claim she's too good. Of course I'll want a commission. A sixth?"

His face fell. "Thana said you'd only want a fifth."

"All right. For you, a fifth."

He beamed. "That's very kind of you, mistress."

"My pleasure, adept."

The port officer departed, Matarro was sent for a healer.

The chance of a Seventh as patient brought a Sixth with no less than three juniors to carry his bags. He was a butterball of a man with a low, oily voice and a smooth manner; green linen gown freshly pressed, black hair slick on his scalp. He frowned when he saw the invalid. The healers clustered around, muttering and prodding, while the laymen retreated into an anxious group in the far corner of the deckhouse. Brota carefully placed herself on Nnanji's right.

Finally the Sixth rose and regarded the group in some doubt. "To whom do I have the honor to report?" he asked.

"To me," said Nnanji, stepping forward. Brota moved with him.

"The wound is cursed," the healer said cautiously.

Obviously.

"In the case of a civilian, I would recommend that a surgeon be summoned to remove the limb."

Brota braced herself, but Nnanji's sword arm barely twitched.

"No."

The healer nodded. "I thought not. Then I regret to announce that I cannot take this case."

Brota was ready to intervene, but the lad knew the correct response. "We respect your learning, your honor. While you are here, however, perhaps you would advise us on . . . on these foil bruises on my ribs. What would you recommend?" He had a tear glistening in one eye, but he did not seem to have noticed.

The healer nodded gravely and recommended that Nnanji be kept cool, given plenty to drink but take care not to choke on it, put hot compresses on the bruises every two hours and in between apply a balm, which one of the juniors produced from a bag. Nnanji solemnly thanked him and paid gold for the balm and the advice.

"And you will return tomorrow, your honor?" Brota asked. Nnanji looked surprised, but the

Sixth beamed and said of course he would come back to check on the adept's bruises. She had no

intention of remaining overnight, but she did not want the man tattling to the garrison about a

Seventh in port. Not yet.

She accompanied the healers as they went out on deck.

"How long, your honor?" she asked.

"Five days?" said the oily Sixth. "At the outside. But he was a strong man. You could, of course, call in the priests."

*Five days*, Brota thought.

The healer was almost a sword victim himself as he left, for Matarro and Katanji had appointed themselves a ceremonial guard at the top of the gangplank, like those the big ships had, and their salutes were erratic. Brota concealed a smile and shouted for Nnanji to come and give them a lesson. He came boiling out of the deckhouse and did so in flames.

"Gods' armbones!" Matarro said when the monster had gone. "Does he really expect us to stand like this all day?"

"No." Katanji melted back into a comfortable position. "He's just upset about Shonsu. Nanj is okay mostly."

Then Brota was going ashore, and they flashed their swords again, but less dangerously.

They watched as samples of wares were set out on the dock, sandalwood and a few brass pots.

Brota settled herself in a chair, and the busy dock life of Ki San thronged by in the hot sunshine.

Wagons, rumbling along with loads of barrels and bales, raised clouds of acrid, horsey-smelling dust while highrank traders strolled by with their followers to sneer at the displays. Hawkers

pushed loaded barrows, calling their wares to the ships; porters trundled carts. Sedan chairs and pedestrians and mules and pedlars wound their way in and out through the traffic. Robes and

loincloths and wraps, in white and black, yellow, brown, and orange flashed by in the bustle and noise. There were many swordsmen patrolling the area.

"What happens now?" Katanji asked, fascinated.

"Puke all," Matarro said. "If some trader fancies what we've got out, he'll come and inspect it and say it's all crap, and Brota'll tell him he's an armpit and it's great stuff. Then they'll both try to make the other name a price so they can say that it's unthinkable. After that they get down to business. If he's serious, he'll come on board and look over the stock itself. Finally they shake hands."

Not much happened for a while. A few traders sniffed like dogs and wandered away. Then Thana led out Cowie, cleaned, coiffed, and appropriately clad, and took her down to the dock. The Firsts saluted and ogled as they went by.

"You never did," Matarro said.

"Did, too!" Katanji rolled his eyes. "Last night again! Nanj was snoring like a grindstone. I crawled over and helped myself. Three times."

"She looks like a lump!" the ship boy said doubtfully.

"Never!" Katanji assured him. "As soon as I start, she just goes wild. Loves it! Heaving and panting! Great stuff!" He went into slaving detail.

Matarro was impressed, but not quite convinced. "Swear on your sword?"

Certainly he swore on his sword, Katanji said, with the confidence of one who could not be discredited. Then their attention was called to the dock.

Cowie's appearance had proved more interesting than a whole mountain of sandalwood. A trader of the Sixth broke off negotiations at the next ship and hurried over, which was enough to get Brota off her chair right away. A Fifth crossed the roadway at the same time, then another Sixth. Their followers streamed in behind them, forming a crowd, which began to grow and jostle. Matarro swore a few oaths of disbelief, and Nnanji emerged from the deckhouse to watch. It looked as if Brota might be holding an auction, for hands were waving and voices bellowing. "Haven't they ever seen boobs before?" Katanji demanded.

"Not like those!" Matarro said longingly.

Then there was a disturbance at the back of the crowd and it hastily opened for the latest newcomers, swordsmen.

"Holy ships!" said Matarro. "A *Sixth*?"

Nnanji bolted back into the deckhouse. He peered out through the windows, muttering under his breath, trembling with rage and frustration.

Jja was applying balm. She looked up, white-faced and red-eyed, brushing her hair aside with the back of one hand. She smiled slightly. "Adept? If you put the sword under the edge of the bedding and stayed close to the door, then it would come to no harm."

But Nnanji could not dispose of a trust so easily. He remained in the deckhouse, fretting angrily by the shutters.

The crowd rapidly dispersed, leaving only the troop of swordsmen and a few curious onlookers. Then Nnanji suddenly exclaimed, "Jja! Look at this!"

Together they watched Cowie being assisted into a sedan chair. Incredulous, they saw her borne away with an armed escort. "I have seen many miracles around Shonsu," Nnanji whispered, "but never one like that. A slave in a sedan chair?"

Brota stopped a moment to talk to one of the traders, then came stumping up the gangplank.

When she reached the safety of her own deck she threw her head back and roared a carillon of river oaths, waving her fists in the air. Her crew melted away, knowing better than to speak to her in that mood. She wheeled round and stormed the deckhouse. Katanji trotted after her.

Matarro followed more circumspectly.

She almost took the door off its hinges. "There's your money!" she snarled, smiting a small leather bag into Nnanji's hand with considerable force. "Twenty golds!"

"The Sixth bought her?"

"Yes! The Honorable Farandako, swordsman of the Sixth, reeve of Ki San!" She spat the words.

"I had them up to fifty and they would have gone higher—eighty or ninety. Then your *noble* swordsman comes up and says that twenty is more than enough for a slave and takes her.

Swordsmen!"

Armed robbery! Nnanji looked at the little bag that still lay in his oversize hand, looked at

Brota . . . looked down at the restless, flushed face of Shonsu. "Brother," he said sadly, "we have need of an honorable swordsman."

There was no reply.

"He was generous, his honor!" Brota was still quivering with rage. "He needn't have paid more than one. Or none at all!"

"Why, mistress?" Nnanji asked. "What is so special about Cowie? Why a sedan chair?"

"The king," Brota said, lowering her voice almost to conversation level. "He collects slaves like her. He need only deliver her to the palace steward and he can be sure of at least a hundred." And if she had thought to research her market properly, she could have done that.

"I'm happy for poor Cowie," said Jja. "She goes to live in a palace. The Goddess rewards those who help my master."

Nnanji and Brota looked at each other, startled and rather shamefaced at not having thought of that.

"Well, you got them up to fifty golds," Nnanji said, spilling the coins into his other palm. "A fifth of that is . . . ten, right? So ten for you and ten for me, which is what I paid for her."

Brota snorted, but took the money before he came to his senses.

"Here, Katanji, keep those for me," Nnanji said. Then he remembered that the two Firsts had been left on guard duty. He exploded at them, driving them from the deckhouse with prophecies of cataclysms and doom.

"Five score gold pieces!" Katanji growled when they were back at their posts, safely out of range. "For a mattress?" He pulled a face in disgust. "Boy, someone's going to get a king-size disappointment!"

Matarro grinned, knowing that now he was getting closer to the truth. Then they started to laugh. They laughed so hard that they almost dropped their swords.

†††

"*Three hundred!*" Tomiyano glanced hurriedly over his shoulder to see if the traders had overheard his astonishment. But they were watching their slaves carry the sandalwood down from the ship and load it onto the wagon.

Brota merely nodded and continued weighing coins from the table into a leather sack. Never had *Sapphire* carried a more profitable cargo, and at those rates they had left thirty golds' worth sitting on the jetty where Shonsu had boarded.

It was not yet quite noon, and good sailing weather was going to waste.

"Next port?" she asked.

"Three days to Wal. After that three, maybe four, to Dri."

*Five days!* "Cargo?"

"Brass," her son said, and she nodded. Ki San was proud of its brass and copperwork. Her own collection of pots had been greeted with derision, but fortunately there were only a few score in the hold, leftovers. Load up with this good stuff, and they would all sell together. Moreover there was a brass warehouse directly opposite their berth—that might be a clue from the Goddess or it might not, but it could save the rent of a wagon. Indeed, the trader was already standing at the front, hoping. She handed the bag to Tomiyano and led the way across the road. Had they had to go far, she would have donned her sword. Had it then been needed, he would have wielded it.

The trader was a Third—young, nervous, probably just started on his own. His establishment was small by local standards, yet he had an open-fronted shed large enough to have taken *Sapphire*. New businesses had debts. She made the conventional opening remarks and he replied. There were the customary objections about traders only trading with traders, but she had already found the local way around that, and few traders ever put a sutra ahead of a profit. The quality impressed her, and Tomiyano signaled that it was as good as any he had found. Cauldrons, tankards, pans, knives, and plates—above all, plates. Plates were heavy. She wandered around between the piles, eyes busy. Metal gleamed everywhere, even hanging from the ceiling. She found the dark corner with the junk and allowed for that. Volume, weight, packing, damage . . . Then she gratefully accepted a chair and put on her helpless widow act. Tomiyano played skillfully along, reading her signals as she seemed to fidget. How much brass could they carry? Depends how many plates, how many pots. She appealed to the trader for help, knowing that *Sapphire* was much roomier than she looked—the cabins were small. They discussed hold size. She said big and Tomiyano patiently said small. The trader believed the sailor.

“Here,” she said suddenly, dumping the bag down. “Three hundred that we just got for our lumber. You take that and we take as much as we can carry. That’s easiest, isn’t it?” She smiled innocently.

Tomiyano roared at her: three hundred golds—they could never carry that much. Yet the trader was suspicious. “You are serious, mistress?”

“Certainly.” Keep him off balance. “Three hundred for all we can carry, our choice. Delivered on deck.”

He laughed. “Mistress! A thousand, perhaps.”

*Hooked!*

“Three hundred in that bag, that we just got for our lumber. If you have it brought at once, we can get in half a day’s sailing. If I go elsewhere I haggle and we stay the night.”

He nodded, staring across at the ship, calculating. “For a shipload . . . eight hundred.”

She waddled out of the shed and looked at Tomiyano. “Two more this way, three that,” he said, pointing. The trader called to her, and she kept walking. Seven hundred. She kept on, Tomiyano blustering at one elbow and the trader at the other.

“All the best craftsmen in the city—”

“There just isn’t room for three hundred golds” worth! It’ll get scratched and dented. And weight! It’ll sink us.”

She snorted. “With Shonsu on board? Ha!”

The cobbles were hard on her ankles and slowed her pace.

“Five hundred, my last offer.” The trader was still with them, and the next brass dealer coming up ahead.

“What if he dies?” Tomiyano snarled. No talk of throwing overboard now.

“The healer said we had five days. We’ve used half of one.”

“Four hundred,” the trader said.

They had reached the next warehouse, a much larger place. The proprietor had been warned by

his spies and was waiting. He made the sign of greeting. "Done!" said the young man behind her in a sob, and she turned round and held out both hands.

There were pots everywhere: in the cabins, along the passages, in the dinghies, on the decks. The plates had gone in the hold, and Tomiyano fretted about draft and shifting cargo and incomplete repairs and ballast and trim. The trader had wept hysterically, screaming that he was ruined. The crew were astounded and wondered if she had taken leave of her senses. With pots all over the deck, what do you do if it rains? How do you get to the ratlines in an emergency? Brota ignored all of the comments. She knew an opportunity when it barked loud enough and she did not think Shonsu was going to be drowned. She could get three fifty for this lot, perhaps more. Five days. A slow death, that, and his leg had not started to turn black yet.

The only place without metal was the deckhouse. One load had been placed in there. Nnanji had moved it all outside and stood glaring in the doorway, his arms folded and the seventh sword on his back. He might be a simple swordsman, but he seemed to have made a good guess as to what was happening and why. The deckhouse stayed clear.

*Sapphire* moved drunkenly away from the dock, responding to her tiller with a reluctance that felt like resentment.

The deckhouse was the only place left to eat, so when the anchor fell, it was there that the food came—roast dodo and rich-smelling manatee pie; fresh brown loaves and steaming dishes of fresh vegetables from Ki San. Brota sat on one of the chests, and everyone else crowded in on the floor.

She sensed strange moods in the company. The crew were worried about the trim and the cargo, anxious about tomorrow's weather; but they were also jubilant over the windfall from the sandalwood, believing now that the Goddess was smiling on them. Hool was a discarded memory. Their only sadness was a certainty that the wounded man in the corner was going to die of his wound as Matyrri and Brokaro had died. The passengers were morose, but were equally certain that he would live. As dishes passed around, little conversations would start up and then fade away again uneasily.

Then Tomiyano came in, carrying a large copper pot with a strange coil on the top of it. Brota held her breath. He glanced around until he located Nnanji, then picked his way cautiously over legs and around people to reach him, and laid the pot gently on the deck.

"Adept Nnanji," he said in a gruff voice. "Do you know what this is for?"

Nnanji frowned at it, looked up, and shook his head.

"Your mentor saw some like these in Aus," Tomiyano said, "but larger than this. He was very interested in them for some reason. I had hoped you would know. We got it with the others."

Nnanji closed his eyes. "All he told us was: „I saw some copper coils that I thought might have something to do with sorcerers and I went over to look at them.“ " His voice had taken on some of Shonsu's low rumble. He opened his eyes again. "I can't help you, captain. But perhaps you would let me buy that, so he can look at it when he recovers."

"I'll give it to you," Tomiyano said gruffly.

Brota thought a prayer to the Holiest: a peace offering! Incredible! But would the swordsman

take it?

"I cannot accept a gift from you, Captain," Nnanji said. "How much to buy the pot?"

Tom'o flushed furiously. "Five golds!"

Nnanji calmly reached into his money pouch and counted out four golds and twenty-one silvers, laying them on the deck at the sailor's feet. *Madness!*

As soon as he had finished, the sailor kicked the coins away across the floor. He stamped over to the other side of the deckhouse, his face dark with rage, leaving the pot where it was.

Brota sighed and decided not to interfere. When men behave like children, women should stay out

"What's the next port, my lady, and how long?" Honakura asked from a corner.

"Wal, in about three days," she said with her mouth full.

"There are sorcerers in Wal!" Nnanji said sharply.

Brota looked quickly at Tomiyano. "Is that right?"

"I didn't think to ask," he confessed, frowning, angry with himself. "Times and current and landmarks and shallows and trading, but I didn't ask about sorcerers! I didn't ask about Dri, either; the one after."

"Dri's all right," Katanji said.

He had a great gift for throwing rocks into still pools, that lad, thought Brota.

"I didn't give you permission to go ashore," Nnanji growled in the silence.

Katanji didn't say anything, kept eating.

Nnanji admitted defeat. "All right. What did you discover?"

"The left bank is sorcerer country," said his brother, waving a crust in the general direction of the mountains.

"Don't you know your right hand from your left?"

"He's right, adept," Brota said. "We're going upstream, so that side is the left bank."

Nnanji glared, seeing that he had been trapped. Katanji's eyes were twinkling, but he was careful not to smile. "There are Black Lands to the south, mentor," he said. "The sorcerers have taken over at least three cities on the left bank: Aus, Wal, and Sen, maybe more. And Ov, of course, on the other side of RegiVul, the mountains. Even the sailors don't seem to know much farther than two or three cities. But there are no sorcerers on the right bank, at least near here. Ki San and Dri and then Casr—they're all right."

His brother nodded and growled, "Well done, novice." Again he sounded like Shonsu—Katanji noticed and hid a grin in a mouthful of pie.

"Well done," Nnanji muttered again, scrunching up his forehead in thought. He looked at Brota.

"We'll bypass Wal, then?"

"No more sorcerers for me," she said. "We can go on to Dri." But they couldn't reach it in five days.

The food was eaten and the dishes removed. Oligarro brought out his mandolin and played awhile. Then Holiyi shrilled a few tunes on his pan pipes. Then a sleepy silence . . . It was almost dark. The Dream God was starting to shine, this strangely low Dream God, wider and brighter.

"Nanji?" said his brother. "Sing us a song."

"No," Nnanji said.

"Yes!" said everyone else. The passengers were in favor now. Jonahs brought profit.

So Nnanji let himself be persuaded. His voice was reedy and not strong enough for a minstrel's, but his unconscious gift of mimicry led him through the tune, and the words were apparently no problem. He chose one of the great sagas, about the tryst of Illi and the ten-year siege, about the great hero Akiliso of the Seventh and how he had sulked in his tent because his liege had taken away one of his slave girls. It was a familiar tale, but he sounded like a minstrel and he had the cadences and the pauses and the triumphs and griefs in all the right places.

But when he got to the place where Akiliso's oath brother went to fight in his stead, he suddenly stopped. "I think that's enough for one night," Nnanji said. "Finish it another day."

The deckhouse applauded and praised and wiped a few eyes. Brota flexed her shoulders stiffly. She had been as much caught up in the song as any of them. The old man might be right. Shonsu might recover before they reached Dri, where there were swordsmen. Then the Goddess would release *Sapphire*. Three hundred golds for a load of sandalwood!

But she thought that Shonsu was going to die.

Matarro's young voice came out of the shadows, for it was quite dark now. Only the windows glowed. Reflected ripples of light played over the ceiling. "Adept Nnanji? What will you do if Lord Shonsu dies?"

"That's none of your business, my lad," his mother snapped.

"It's all right," said Nnanji's soft voice out of the blackness on the other side. "It's a swordsman problem, so he's right to be interested. I die also, novice."

A terrible coldness ran through Brota. "Bedtime!" she called loudly, surging to her feet. One or two of the children copied her, but everyone else stayed still, waiting.

"Nanji!" squealed his brother. "What do you mean?"

"There was no abomination!" Brota shouted. "Tom'o had been empowered as a posse!"

"That's correct," Nnanji said. "No denunciation. You see, novice, if I were only bound to Lord Shonsu by the first oath, as a follower, or me second oath, as his protégé, then there would be no difficulty. But we two swore a greater oath, so I would have to try to avenge him."

Tomiyano snarled wordlessly from somewhere to Brota's right.

"It isn't going to happen, though." Nnanji might have been discussing the price of fish, so quiet and level was his voice. "But it would be an interesting problem. The captain isn't a swordsman, so I couldn't challenge him, and there was no abomination, so I couldn't just pronounce sentence and kill him. Probably I would have to give him a sword and empower him as a posse again, to kill me. But it doesn't matter, because Shonsu isn't going to die."

"Filthy landlubber sword-jockey!" Tomiyano snarled. "You think you can get away with that?"

"Not a chance. You would knife me or run me through with the sword. And even if I did do you, the others would get me."

The men growled in angry agreement.

"So don't worry about it," Nnanji said. "I wouldn't do it without warning you. Shonsu isn't

going to die, and even if he does, you'll easily get me first."

"That means all of you!" Brota screamed. "Witnesses, your brother for certain. Yes, all of you!"

"I expect so," Nnanji said coldly. "But an oath is an oath."

She swore loudly, silencing the rising noise. "That settles it!" she snapped. "You go ashore tomorrow at the first jetty we see. All of you. I've never broken a deal in my life, but this one is finished!"

The crew shouted agreement.

In the darkness to her left the little old priest coughed. "You did well on your lumber, mistress?"

The coldness increased, filling her with ice. She had not only accepted Shonsu's gem—now she had also taken gold from the Goddess. And she had so overloaded the ship that any sudden squall would lay her on her beam ends.

"Well . . . we'll see tomorrow," she said faintly.

The deckhouse filled with shouts of disbelief. They thought she was crazy. So did she.

††††

Four days out of Ki San, in late afternoon, Brota sent Tomiyano to fetch Nnanji. The lanky young swordsman, pale-skinned and bony, was leaning morosely on the rail, staring out over the River. Flashes of sunlight streaked on the silver handle of his great sword; the sapphire gleamed against his red ponytail. Very few people on the ship would even answer him now, let alone venture to address him.

She watched from the tiller as Tomiyano approached and saw him deliberately jostle a few of the copper vessels so that Nnanji would hear him coming. Oligarro and Holiyi were on deck, also, keeping a wary eye on things.

The captain spoke; Nnanji glanced up toward her and then shrugged and led the way aft. If he was uneasy at turning his back on the knife-bearing sailor, he did not show it. The poop was even more closely packed with pots than the deck and the two men edged their way through.

"Mistress?" Nnanji was curious but cautious.

Brota pointed to starboard. Far off over the bright waters, the eastern shore was a thin line, on which sharp eyes could just discern the tops of buildings and a good imagination could see a tower. Beyond lay the remote mountains of RegiVul, crumpled blue like crystallized sky.

"Wal?" said Nnanji.

"Wal," she agreed, then pointed over the port bow.

He turned and studied the swampy, desolate bush flowing past only a few cable-lengths away.

There had been no hamlets or even shacks on that bank for hours. Then he looked up at the rigging and back to her, puzzled. "What am I supposed to see?"

Landlubber! "The sky," she said.

"Oh!"

It could not have been more obvious—a gigantic, boiling thunderhead, dazzling white on its foaming top, lightning flickering in the dark below its flat base.

"You overloaded the ship, didn't you?" he said, turning to her with amusement.

"Even if I hadn't, I'd want a port for that thing," she said. "I've never seen one grow so fast."

Suddenly he grinned, broadly. "She wants us to visit Wal."

Brota could see nothing to grin about. She leaned on the tiller, and grudgingly *Sapphire* began to respond. "We have no choice," she said grimly.

"Fine," Nnanji said. "I'll stay in the deckhouse."

Tomiyano's face held hatred and resentment. He fingered the sorcerer brand on his cheek. "So will I," he said.

An hour later she sent for Nnanji again, and this time he came alone. The ship was carrying every stitch that Brota and Tomiyano dared hoist, rolling uneasily in a fitful breeze, and Wal was dismally far away. He was wearing his own sword again, instead of Shonsu's—evidently ready for trouble.

"We may not be going to make this," she told him. Perhaps she had been wrong; perhaps Shonsu was destined to drown, and she was to be punished for greed.

The swordsman looked puzzled. The fingers of the storm were reaching out above them and about to seize the sun, but Nnanji ignored that. He pointed at Wal. "I thought you were going there, mistress?"

"We're tacking," she snapped. "Can't sail straight upwind, Nnanji!"

"Oh!" he said, not interested in technicalities.

"We have to clear the decks," she told him, clenching her teeth at his smile.

"The pots will fill with rain?" he asked.

"They'll roll. We're going to put as many as we can in the deckhouse."

His smile vanished and for a moment she thought he would argue, but then he nodded. "If we put Shonsu behind those two chests he will be safe?"

"We had thought of that. He will be safe from rolling pots, at least."

Nnanji nodded. "Anything I can do to help?" he asked.

She gestured at the cluttered poop. "You can throw these overboard, if you like."

He blinked. "You are serious, mistress?"

"Yes!"

He did a fair job of not laughing at her, but it was an effort. "Fine!" he said, and started tossing the pots and urns and ewers over the rail. Lae and Mata were already doing the same on the main deck, while others were starting to pack the deckhouse. Tomiyano was emptying the dinghies.

Then an army of shadow came racing over the water after them, and the sunshine died.

*Sapphire* staggered along, leaving a trail of bobbing brass and copper behind her. Brota avoided Nnanji's eye.

Suddenly there was no wind. The sails flapped listlessly, the ship lost way and then wallowed in waves outrunning the storm. Pots dropped alongside now stayed there, no longer falling astern.

"What's happened?" Nnanji demanded suspiciously.

"It is the calm before the storm. We expected it. When the wind comes, it will be from behind us—and strong. That's why I said that we may not be going to make it. All we can do now is wait."

They could also shorten sail. Tomiyano's whistle shrilled, and the hands started for the ratlines.

Nnanji shrugged and went back to heaving cargo overboard.

“ . . . nothing of which I may be ashamed . . . avoid no honor . . . ” declaimed a voice below them, a deep voice, but faint; audible now only because the wind had dropped.

“What’s *that*?” Brota exclaimed, taken by surprise.

Nnanji looked uncomfortable. “It is Lord Shonsu. He is repeating the code of the swordsmen. Usually what he says makes no sense, but today he keeps quoting bits of the code.”

Brota and Nnanji looked at each other uneasily. “Like a prayer?” she muttered.

A prayer for forgiveness?

Above them the sky grew steadily blacker, and to the west was the father of all blacknesses.

Brota yielded the tiller to Tomiyano and Oligarro. It might take both of them to hold it when the time came. The air was calm, humid, and menacing. *Sapphire* drifted aimlessly on the great River.

Little deck cargo remained, all securely tethered. The dim deckhouse was packed tightly, and when Brota and Nnanji went to inspect it they could not see the patient. Jja was sitting in a far corner on a chest. Shonsu lay at her feet, safely barricaded behind it. She smiled bravely across the forest of pots at them. “The sorcerers will find it difficult to reach my master here,” she said. Brota made a cheerful reply, but if they had to abandon ship there would be no quick way to get Shonsu and his slave out of that corner. Nnanji did not seem to have thought of that. She wondered if Jja had.

“ . . . sutras of the swordsmen . . . the will of the Goddess . . . ” the sick man said.

Then the wind came.

Tossing and rolling, creaking angrily in every timber and rope, *Sapphire* ran before the storm. Brota huddled in a leather cape in the shelter of the deckhouse wall and wept for the old ship. It had been an unkindness to load her so, a breach of trust. At every roll or pitch, there was a muffled clashing of metal from the cabins below, but Tom“o was magnificent. His grandfather could have done no better, reading the air by the look of the water, angling the old vessel along the edge of the wind, arrowing toward Wal, staying out of the calm before them and out of the fury behind.

Still there was no rain, only cold blasts of wind and darkness, pitchings and creakings. Wal gleamed in sunshine ahead of them for a while, growing closer now, but oh! so slowly. The tower became obvious, an ironic beacon of hope. Then the shadow fell on Wal, also, and only the distant mountains knew sunlight. The children were already stowed in a dinghy. The adults stood by the rails and tried to seem unconcerned as the storm pursued them, marching on pillars of lightning across the waters, grumbling thunder like a cursing of giants.

Wal looked much like Aus, wooden walls and red tile roofs. There were no ships at anchor here; all lay safely moored at the dock, stirring nervously as the waves grew. Tomiyano took *Sapphire* in and found a berth.

Then he marched angrily down to the deckhouse to hide his face from the sorcerers. Brota, watching him go, suddenly realized that he was going to be shut up in there with Nnanji. There was room for two people inside the door, but not much room. She shouted, and the captain