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“Keep my heart true to Your laws,” Honakura warbled, laying a shaky left hand on the smooth brilliance of the tiled floor.

“Let me serve Your will with all my strength,” he wailed, cracking on the high note as usual, and placing his equally frail right hand beside the left.

“And show my eyes Your purposes.” This was the tricky part — the ritual called for him to touch his forehead to the mosaic, but he had not achieved that maneuver these last fifteen years. He curled forward as far as he could. If the Goddess chose to stiffen his ancient joints, then She would have to settle for the best he could manage . . . and of course She would.

He strained there for a moment, hearing the quiet chanting of other priests and priestesses nearby as they also made their way through the morning dedication. Then, with a quiet and unscheduled “Ooof!” of relief he pushed himself back to sit on his heels, place his palms together, and look up adoringly at Her. Now he was permitted a silent and private prayer, a personal appeal. He had no doubt what it would be, this day as many before it. *Most High Goddess, do something about the swordsmen of Your guard!*

She did not reply. He did not expect Her to. This was not the Goddess Herself, but merely an image to assist humble mortals in visualizing Her greatness. Who should know that better than a priest of the seventh rank? But She would hear his prayer and one day She would answer.

“Amen!” he quavered.

Now he could start to plan his day, but he remained for a moment sitting on his heels, hands still together, reflecting, gazing up lovingly

at the majesty of the Most High and the vast stone trelliswork above Her, the roof of Her temple, the holiest of all the holy places in the World.

He had many meetings planned — with the Keeper of the Coffers, with the Master of Discipline for Acolytes, with many others, almost all holders of offices that Honakura himself had held at one time or another. Now he was merely Third Deputy Chairman of the Council of Venerables. That innocent-sounding title concealed much more than it revealed. Power, he had long since discovered, is best exercised in secret.

Around him the morning dedications were ending. Already the first of the day's many pilgrims were being led in to make their offerings and supplications. Money was clinking into the bowls; prayers being mumbled under the quiet prompting of priests. He would begin, Honakura decided, by guiding a few pilgrims himself. It was a worthy service to the Most Holy; it was a task he enjoyed; it was a good example for the juniors. He lowered his hands and glanced around in the hope that there might be someone handy to help him rise — not the easiest of movements for him now.

At once a brown robe was at his side and strong hands assisted him. With a quiet mutter of thanks, Honakura reached his feet. He was about to turn away when the man spoke.

"I am Jannarlu, priest of the third rank . . ." He was making the salute to a superior, words and hand gestures and bowings. For a moment Honakura reacted with shock and disapproval. Surely this young man did not think that so trifling a service could justify him in forcing himself on a lord of the Seventh? This place, before the dais and the idol, was the holy of holies, and while there was no law against conversation or formal saluting here, custom forbade it. Then he recalled this Jannarlu. He was old Hangafau's grandson, said to have promise. He must know better, and therefore must have good reason for the impropriety.

So Honakura waited until the salute was completed and then made the ritual response: "I am Honakura, priest of the seventh rank . . ." One of Jannarlu's facemarks was still slightly inflamed, so he was a very new Third. He was tall — much taller than the diminutive Honakura — with a bony, ungainly presence and a hook nose. He seemed absurdly young, but then they all did these days.

Close by, an ancient crone dropped a gold in the bowl and began entreating the Goddess to cure the agony in her bowels. Beyond her a young couple were praying that She not send them any more children, for a few years at least.

As soon as Honakura had finished, the words spurted from Jannarlu: "My lord, there is a swordsman . . . a Seventh!"

*She had answered!*

"You left him out there?" Honakura demanded furiously, keeping his voice down with difficulty, struggling not to show emotion to anyone who might be watching.

The Third flinched, but nodded. "He is a Nameless One, my lord."

Honakura hissed in astonishment. Incredible! With forehead covered and wearing only black, like a beggar, anyone could become a Nameless One. By law, such persons could bear no goods and must be on the service of the Goddess. Many regarded it as a special penance, so the practice was not uncommon among pilgrims coming to the temple. But for a lord of the Seventh to reduce his standing in such a way was highly unusual. For a swordsman of any rank it was almost unthinkable. For a swordsman of the seventh rank . . . incredible!

It did explain how he had arrived alive.

Could he be kept alive?

"I told him to cover again, my lord," Jannarlu said diffidently. "He . . . he seemed quite pleased to do so."

There was a hint of levity there, and Honakura shot him a warning glance while he pondered. Jannarlu's ugly brown face seemed slightly flushed.

"You did not hurry, I hope?"

The Third shook his head. "No, my lord. I followed . . ." He gestured toward the sick old crone, who was now being helped up by her attendant priestess.

"Well done, priest!" said Honakura, mollified. "Let us go and see this wonder of yours. We shall walk slowly, conversing of holy matters . . . and not in quite the right direction, if you please."

The young man blushed with pleasure at the praise and fell into step beside him.

The great temple of the Goddess at Hann was not only the richest and oldest building in the World, it was certainly the largest. As Honakura

turned from the dais, he was faced with a seemingly endless expanse of gleaming, multicolored floor, stretching off to the seven great arches that formed the façade. Many people were walking there, coming or going — pilgrims and their guides of the priesthood — but so vast was the space that mere human beings seemed hardly larger than mouse droppings. Beyond the arches, out in the brilliant sunlight, lay a view of the canyon and the River and the Judgment, whose rumbling roar had filled the temple for all its many millennia. Along the sides of the wide nave stood the shrines of lesser gods and goddesses, and above them the fretted windows blazed in hues of ruby, emerald, amethyst, and gold.

Honakura's prayer had been answered. No . . . the prayers of many. He was certainly not the only one of Her servants here to make that prayer each day, yet it was to him that the news had been brought. He must move with caution and courage and determination, but he felt warm satisfaction that he had been chosen.

It took a long time for him to reach the arches, with the young Third fidgeting at his side. They made an odd pair, Honakura knew, in their priestly gowns, Jannarlu in the brown of a Third and he in the blue of a Seventh. The younger man was tall, but Honakura had never been tall and now he was shrunken and stooped, toothless and hairless. The juniors referred to him behind his back as the Wise Monkey, and the term amused him. Old age had few amusements. In the unkind silent hours of night he would feel his bones rubbing against the sheets and quietly wish that She would soon rescue him from it and let him start anew. Yet perhaps She was reserving him in this life for one last service, and if so, then this was surely it. A swordsman of the seventh rank! They were rare, as the priests had discovered — rare, and very precious when needed.

As he walked, he decided that young Jannarlu had shown great discretion in coming to him, and not to some blabbermouth middlerank. He should be rewarded. And kept quiet.

"Who is your mentor now?" he asked. "Yes, I know him. A worthy and holy man. But the Honorable Londossinu is in need of another protégé to assist him in some new duties. They are sensitive matters, and he needs a man of reticence and discretion."

He glanced sideways at the youngster beside him and saw a flush of pleasure and excitement. "I should be greatly honored, my lord."

So he should be, a Third being offered a Sixth as mentor, but he seemed to be hearing the message. "Then I shall speak to your mentor

and the holy one, and see if a transfer can be arranged. It will have to wait until after this matter of the swordsman, of course . . . until after that has been successfully concluded."

"Of course, my lord." Young Jannarlu was staring straight ahead, but could not quite suppress a smile.

"And where are you in your inurement?"

"I am due to start the fifth silence in another week," said the lad, adding helpfully, "I am eager to begin."

"You will begin as soon as I have met this marvel of yours," Honakura stated, with a silent chuckle. "I shall send word to your mentor." An astute young man! The fifth silence lasted two weeks — the matter would certainly be settled by then.

At last they had reached the arches. Beyond them the great steps fell away like a hillside to the temple court. The top was already cluttered with rows of pilgrims patiently kneeling in the shadow. Later in the day, when the tropic sun discovered them, they would find the waiting harder.

Out of habit the priest glanced over the faces of the closest. As his eyes met theirs they bowed their heads respectfully to him, but from long experience he had already read the rank and craft marks of their brows and made a preliminary diagnosis — a potter of the Third, probably a health problem; a spinster of the Second, perhaps a sterility case; a goldsmith of the Fifth, good for a fair offering.

Few of the heads were bound. Honakura could make an easy guess as to the swordsman. The man had chosen to approach one of the side arches, which was fortunate because the token guard stood only at the center arch, but it was a curious choice for one of his rank. Something must be seriously awry for him.

"The big one, I assume? Very well. And there, I believe, is the Honorable Londossinu himself. Let us speak to him right away." That was convenient, for Honakura disliked overloading his memory these days, and it was surely the handiwork of the Holiest. The whole affair was then disposed of in a dozen words — plus a few meaningful glances, nuances, hints, and insinuations. The transfer of mentors would be arranged, and Londossinu would get the committee appointments he had been seeking for two other protégés, plus promotion for another. And young Jannarlu would be kept quiet. Honakura waited until he saw the young man head back into the

temple to begin the ritual of silence, quite unaware of most of the dealings that had just been completed around him. There was no hurry; the Nameless could bring no offerings and hence were low priority for the attendants.

Yes, the handiwork of the Goddess! His prayers had been answered by a highrank swordsman, the man had come — *incredibly!* — incognito and hence safely, and he had even avoided the two bored swordsmen posturing by the center arch, who might just possibly have guessed from his long hair that he was a swordsman. Praise to the Goddess!

Honakura began to amble in the right direction, nodding his head to the bows he received. By law, a Nameless One could only be questioned by priests or searched by swordsmen, but it was not unknown for junior swordsmen to torment such for sport. The little priest wondered what the reaction would be if some were to try that and discover that they were dealing with a swordsman of the Seventh. It would be an entertaining incident to watch. Fortunately, in the present case, the man's rank had not yet been revealed.

At last he reached his objective.

The man was very large indeed — even kneeling, he carried his eyes not much beneath Honakura's. Swordsmen were rarely large, for speed was more important to them than strength. If this man also had agility he would be formidable, but then he was, reputedly, a Seventh, and there could be none more formidable. Apart from the black rag around his head, he wore only a dirty scrap of black loincloth. He was filthy and sweat-streaked, yet his size and youth made him impressive still. His hair was also black, hanging to his shoulders, and his eyes were utterly black, the pupils lost in the iris. Forceful eyes . . . bearing anger they would strike dread. Looking into them now, Honakura saw other things: pain and fear and despondency. Those came often to the Goddess in the eyes of supplicants — the sick, the dying, the bereaved, the lost — but rarely had he seen them so intense, and their presence in the eyes of this huge and healthy youngster was a staggering shock to him. Awry indeed!

"Let us go over to a more private place," he said quickly. "My lord?"

The young man rose effortlessly, rising over the little priest as dawn climbs the sky. He was very big and when he moved he rippled. Even for a swordsman he was young to be a Seventh, probably younger than Priest Jannarlu of the Third.

They walked to the end of the façade, and Honakura motioned to the plinth of a badly corroded statue. The swordsman sat without argument. His apathy was astonishing.

“Let us dispense with formalities for the moment,” Honakura said quietly, remaining on his feet, “for we are not unobserved. I am Honakura, priest of the seventh rank.”

“I am Shonsu, swordsman, and also of the Seventh.” His voice was in keeping with the rest of him, massive. Distant thunder. He raised a hand to remove the rag, and Honakura shook his head.

“You seek help from the Goddess?”

“I am haunted by a demon, holiness.”

That explained the eyes. “Demons can be exorcised, but they rarely ravage those of high rank,” Honakura said. “Pray tell me of it.”

The fearsome young man shuddered. “It is the color of sour milk. It has yellow hair on its belly and its limbs and its face, but none on top of its head, as though its head were put on upside down.”

Honakura shuddered, also, and made the sign of the Goddess.

The swordsman continued, “It has no foreskin.”

“Do you know its name?”

“Oh yes,” Shonsu sighed. “It babbles at me from dusk until dawn, and lately even by day. Little it says makes sense, but its name is Walliesmith.”

“Walliesmith?” Honakura echoed doubtfully.

“Walliesmith,” the swordsman repeated in a voice that could not be doubted.

That was not the name of any of the seven hundred and seventy-seven demons — but a demon would naturally not tell the truth unless properly invoked. And, while the sutras catalogued demons of the most hideous and grotesque aspect, Honakura had never heard of one so perverse as to grow hair on its face.

“The Goddess will know it, and it can be expelled,” he said. “What offering will you make to Her in return?”

Sadly the young man dropped his gaze. “My lord, I have nothing left to offer, except my strength and my skill.”

A swordsman, and he did not mention honor?

“Perhaps a year or two of service in our temple guard?” Honakura suggested, watching closely. “The reeve is the valorous Lord Hardduju of the Seventh.”

The swordsman's was a hard face, and now he gave the priest a hard look. "How many Sevenths do you need in a temple guard?" he asked warily. "And by what oath would I be sworn?"

Honakura edged a little closer to his meaning. "I am not familiar with all your swordsman oaths, my lord. Now that you mention it, I never remember more than one Seventh in the guard at a time, and I have worked here more than sixty years."

They studied each other in silence for a moment. The swordsman frowned. While his kind had few scruples at eradicating each other, they did not often appreciate advice on the subject from civilians. Honakura decided to reveal a little more.

"It is rare for highrank swordsmen to visit the temple," he said. "None at all for at least two years. Curiously, though, I have heard of several who arrived at Hann and stated that to be their intention — at least one Seventh and a couple of Sixths."

The swordsman's huge fists clenched. "Implying?"

"I imply nothing!" Honakura said hastily. "Pure hearsay. They were reported to be planning to take the ferry, and then that long trail through the trees. Probably they changed their minds. One did make as near as a pilgrims' hostelry, but was unfortunate enough to partake there of some tainted meat. You are all the more welcome for your rarity, my lord."

Muscles did not necessarily imply stupidity — the young man understood. A dark flush of fury crept over his cheekbones.

He glanced around, looking at the grandiose façade of the temple and at the great court below, flanked by the shingle beach and the still pool, beyond that to the River frothing and foaming as it emerged from the canyon, and along the canyon to the mist-shrouded splendor of the Judgment. Then he turned his head to survey the wooded park of the temple grounds with the big houses of the senior officials. One of those would certainly go with the office of reeve. "To be a swordsman in Her temple guard would be a great honor," he said.

"It seems to be even better rewarded these days than it used to be," Honakura remarked helpfully.

The hard face became menacing. "A man could borrow a sword, I expect?"

"That could be arranged."

The young man nodded. "My service is always to the Goddess."



Now that, Honakura thought happily, was how a deal should be made. Murder had not even been mentioned.

"But first the exorcism?" the swordsman said.

"Certainly, my lord." Honakura could not remember an exorcism in the last five years, but he was familiar with the ritual. "Fortunately, it does not require that your craft or even rank be mentioned. And your present garb will be adequate."

The swordsman sighed with relief. "And it will succeed?"

One did not become or prevail as Third Deputy Chairman of the Council of Venerables without learning to cover one's hindquarters. "It will succeed, my lord, unless . . ."

"Unless?" echoed the swordsman, his broad face darkening with suspicion . . .

Or was it guilt? Carefully Honakura said, "Unless the demon has been sent by the Most High Herself. Only you know whether you have committed some grievous transgression against Her."

An expression of great agony and sorrow fell over the swordsman's face. He dropped his eyes and was silent for a while. Then he looked up defiantly and growled, "It was sent by the sorcerers."

Sorcerers! The little priest staggered back a step. "Sorcerers!" he blurted. "My lord, in all my years in this temple, I have never heard a pilgrim mention sorcerers. I had hardly thought that such truly existed any more."

Now the swordsman's eyes became as terrible as the priest had guessed they might. "Oh, they exist!" he rumbled. "I have come very far, holy one, very far. But sorcerers exist, believe me."

Honakura pulled himself together. "Sorcerers cannot prevail against the Holiest," he said confidently. "Certainly not in Her own temple. If they are the origin of your distress, then the exorcism will succeed. Shall we see to it?"

Honakura beckoned over an orange-gowned Fourth and gave orders. Then he led the swordsman through the nearest arch and along the length of the nave to the statue of the Goddess.

The big man sauntered at Honakura's side, taking one stride to his three, but his head twisted and turned as he gaped around at the splendor, as all visitors must on their first glimpse of this most holy sanctuary — seeing the great blue statue itself, the silver dais before it loaded with heaps of glittering offerings, the multicolored flaming of

the stained-glass windows along both sides, the miraculous fan vaulting of the ceiling hanging like distant sky above. The temple was busy, with many priests, priestesses, pilgrims, and other worshipers moving over the shining mosaics of the pavement, yet their tiny figures were dwindled to dust specks by its immensity, and the vast space seemed filled with a still peace.

Inevitably, as he drew near, the swordsman became conscious only of the majesty of the statue, the Goddess Herself, the shape of a robed woman sitting cross-legged with Her hands on Her knees and Her long hair spilling down. Huge and ominous and majestic, She loomed more and more enormous as he approached. At last he reached the edge of the dais and threw himself on the ground in reverence.

An exorcism called for many priests and priestesses, for chanting, dancing, gesturing, ritual, and solemn ceremony. Honakura stood to one side and allowed Perandoro of the Sixth to officiate, for it was a rare opportunity. He himself had led an exorcism only once. The swordsman crouched on his knees within the circle, head down and arms outstretched as he had been instructed — put a tablecloth on that back, and it would hold a dinner for three. Other priests and priestesses watched covertly as they went about their business. Pilgrims were shunted tactfully to the sides. It was very impressive.

Honakura paid little attention to the preliminaries. He was busy planning his next move against the unspeakable Hardduju. A sword was easy — he could get one from Athinalani in the armory. A blue kilt for a Seventh was no problem, either, and a hairclip was a trivial detail. But swordsmen sported distinctive boots, and to send for a pair of those, especially in the size required, would certainly provoke suspicion. Furthermore, he was fairly sure that the rituals of dueling required that his new champion obtain a second, and that could make things complicated. It might be that he would have to spirit this dangerous young man out of sight for a day or two while the preparations were put in hand, but so far his presence was a secret. Honakura felt great satisfaction that the Goddess had not only answered the priests' prayers in this fashion, but had also entrusted him with the subcontracting. He felt sure that Her confidence was not misplaced. He would see that there were no mistakes.

Then the chant rose to its climax, and a chorus of, "Avaunt!" The swordsman's head came up, first looking wildly around, and then up at the Goddess.

Honakura frowned. The dolt had been told to keep his head down.

"Avaunt!" proclaimed the chanters once more, their rhythm just a fraction off perfection. The swordsman jerked upright on his knees, head back and eyes so wide that the whites were showing all around. The drummers went ragged on their beat, and a trumpeter flubbed a note.

"Avaunt!" cried the chorus a third time. Perandoro raised a silver goblet full of holy water from the River and cast the contents over the swordsman's head.

He spasmed incredibly, leaping straight from his knees into the air and coming down on his feet. The dirty loincloth fluttered to the floor, and he stood there naked, with his arms raised, his head back, water dribbling down his face and chest. He shrieked the loudest noise that Honakura had ever heard uttered by a human throat. For perhaps the first time in the age-old history of the temple, one voice drowned out the chorus, the lutes and flutes, and the distant roar of the Judgment. It was discordant, bestial, horrifying, and full of soul-destroying despair. It reverberated back from the roof. It went on for an incredible, inhuman, unbelievable minute, while the singers and musicians became hopelessly tangled, the dancers stumbled and collided, and every eye went wide. Then the ceremony ended in a chaotic, clattering roll of drums, and the swordsman swayed over backward.

He fell like a marble pillar. In the sudden silence his head hit the tiles with an audible crack.

He lay still, huge and newborn-naked. The rag had fallen off his forehead, revealing for all to see the craft marks on his forehead, the seven swords.