

The Sword Smith

by

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WITH THE CARAVAN

A little after sunset he came in sight of the town. He reined his horse. Ahead of him the road went down into a wide valley, surrounded by low wooded hills. The town was at the valley's center: a little cluster of dimly glowing lights. A short distance from the town was a second, smaller cluster of lights, probably a caravan's camp fires. Nargri, who'd been sleeping curled up in the big saddle bag, raised her head and said, "What're you doing, Limper?"

"I was thinking those people down there might've heard about me."

"That doesn't seem likely to me," Nargri said. "We're a long way from Eshgorin, and you know the saying—what's big news in one home is no news in another."

"That's a dragon saying," Limper said, "and dragons don't travel much. Men do. And don't forget the king of Eshgorin is offering money for me. News about money is the kind of news people remember."

"You keep talking about that money the king's offering for you," Nargri said.

Limper grinned. "I know I'm worth something to somebody. That's more than many people can say."

Nargri said, "Are you going down there or not?"

"No." He turned off the road and went some distance from it, then made camp in a hollow where his campfire would be hidden. He had nothing to eat except

a loaf of stale bread, which he divided with Nargri, and nothing to drink except water from the spring. The night was cold, but he didn't want to build a big fire. Nargri slept curled up next to him, covered by his cloak.

The next day was bright and cloudless. There was no more food, so he and Nargri had water for breakfast. It was cool in the hollow, in the shadow of the trees, but once they got out into the sunlight Limper felt hot. He circled the town and came back to the road on the other side of the valley, then followed the road eastward. The land flattened out, and there were fewer and fewer trees. A little before noon he came to where the steppe began. Ahead of him there was nothing except brown grass, the narrow caravan road, and the bright blue sky, cloudless from one horizon to the other. He stopped where a tree grew beside the road, dismounted and tied the horse's reins to the tree trunk.

"What now?" Nargri asked.

"Haven't you dragons heard about the herding peoples?"

"No," Nargri said. "To us, all men are more or less alike. We've never bothered to learn how to distinguish the different breeds."

"The herding peoples live on the steppe. There are two kinds: the savage tribes that kill travelers and set their skulls up on poles outside their villages, and the civilized tribes that capture travelers and sell them to slave traders. We'll be safer on the steppe with traveling companions." He settled himself in the shade. Nargri climbed out of the saddle bag and sat crouched on the saddle. She was dappled with sunlight, and her dark grey scales shimmered. Limper looked at her a moment,

then shut his eyes and dozed.

A little after noon Nargri said, "Something's coming." He stood and stretched. There was a cloud of dust on the road to the west. He watched it for a while, then said, "They're moving too slowly to be soldiers."

"You don't really think the king's going to send an army after you, do you?" Nargri asked.

"No, but I don't like soldiers." He untied the horse, mounted and rode toward the dust.

When he got closer, he saw it was a caravan: a long line of horses carrying big packs with drivers walking beside them, and guards armed with lances riding alongside. When he was close enough to hear the drivers cursing, three horsemen came forward to meet him. One was little and dark and dressed like one of the herding peoples in a jacket and loose pants. The other two wore the same kind of pants, but they had mail shirts instead of jackets, and they wore metal helmets of the kind made in the southern cities. One of these men had a lance. The other had a bow. "What do you want?" the man with the lance asked.

Limper said, "Company. I don't want to cross the steppe alone."

They looked him over. "Very well," the man with the lance said. "What do you want us to call you?"

"Heshkya Atthal."

"I'm the caravan master, Yagoreb," the man with the lance said. He nodded toward the man with the bow. "That's Norem Archer, the captain of the caravan guards."

They turned then and rode back to the caravan, Limper riding with them.

That night the caravan camped beside the Great River at a spot where another smaller river came into it. The ground was marshy and the air full of insects. Limper bought a loaf of bread and a jar of wine from one of the drivers, then gave half the loaf to Nargri, who was in the saddlebag. He sat down close to one of the fires, ate the bread and drank the wine, and listened to the drivers tell tales about the good times they'd had with the girls in the last town they'd been in. After a while Nargri climbed out of the saddlebag and came over to him.

One of the drivers said, "What's that?"

Limper said, "A dragon."

"Small, isn't it?" another driver said.

"She's still young, and dragons grow more slowly than we do."

"It's cold out here," Nargri said softly, so the drivers wouldn't hear her. "And I'm not going to sleep in a bag full of bread crumbs."

Limper opened his cloak. She curled up beside him, and he covered her with the cloak. He lay down a little later; by that time Nargri was asleep. He disturbed her, and she stirred and hissed. He put his arm around her. After that she was quiet.

The next day they went east along the Great River. On every side the land was flat all the way to the horizon. The sky was cloudless. Limper wore a broad-brimmed hat, but still his face got sunburned where his beard didn't protect it, and the back of his neck got sunburned too. They traveled east and north for ten days, and there was no trouble of any kind. Then, the evening of the tenth day, Nargri said, "Yagoreb looks at you a

lot. He looks to me like a man trying to make up his mind about something.”

“Damn his beady eyes.” After a moment Limper said, “I don’t think he’ll do anything till we’re closer to Hwara. I’m not likely to leave the caravan while we’re in the country of the herding people.”

Two days later, in the evening, after they’d made camp, a driver who was nicknamed Hog came to him and said, “I think you’re in trouble, Heshkya.”

“I’m not surprised,” Limper said. “What kind?”

“I heard Yagoreb talking to Norem Archer. He said you were somebody called Limper, and you were worth a lot of money. Who would pay money for you?”

Limper shrugged. “Every man is valuable to somebody, his mother if nobody else. Thanks for telling me.”

“Yagoreb has enough money already,” Hog said. “Why should he make more?”

After Hog left him, he sat awhile looking at the camp fire. At last Nargri said, “Well?”

“It’s time to get out.” Then he said, “I wish I had a better horse. That nag of mine would have a hard time outrunning a donkey.”

That night he had trouble getting to sleep. In the end he stayed awake. Hog was lying close to him. Most nights Hog slept restlessly and muttered in his sleep, but this night he was still and silent. When Nargri woke up the next morning Limper told her, “Stay close to me.”

They ate breakfast, then Limper went to where the horses were tethered, his cloak over one shoulder. Nargri followed him. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east, but he could still see stars overhead, and it was still hard to make out the horses or the scouts who

were beginning to saddle up. Nargri bumped against Limper's leg, and he stopped and bent to fiddle with his boot. Nargri said softly, "Hog's watching you, and so is Norem Archer."

Limper said, "The scout nearest us—get behind him and bite him."

"All right."

He straightened up and went over to the scout; "it's a cold morning."

The scout grunted and checked his saddle girths. Limper looked around quickly. He saw Norem Archer moving away from the campfires toward the horses, and he saw Nargri, barely visible, coming up behind the scout. "How much longer—" Limper started to say. Nargri leaped onto the scout's leg, digging her claws in and biting the scout on the back of the thigh. The scout yelled. Limper grabbed the horse's reins out of the scout's hands and shoved him back, then mounted. The scout moved toward him. Limper got his foot out of the stirrup and kicked him in the chest. The scout stumbled backward and fell. Limper yelled, "Nargri," then leaned down and grabbed her up when she ran to him. He kicked the horse, and the horse started forward. He looked back and saw Norem Archer running toward him, bow in hand. He kicked the horse again and said to Nargri, "Hold onto the saddle horn." Then he let go of her. With one hand he guided the horse between the other horses. With the other hand he pulled his sword out of its scabbard. A scout on horseback got in front of him. Limper brought his sword up, and the scout yanked his horse back out of the way. Limper passed him and was clear of the horses. Ahead of him was the

dark steppe and the grey sky. He was just starting to grin when his horse grunted, staggered, and started to fall. He jumped free, coming down on his bad leg. He rolled over, then scrambled to his feet. His bad leg hurt. He'd let go of his sword when he hit the ground, and he couldn't see it. He shouted, "Nargri, run."

He looked around and couldn't see her. The horse was about fifteen feet from him, lying on its side in the long grass. Men were running toward him. He took a couple of steps. His bad leg hurt so much that he could barely walk. He stopped and stood still, waiting for the men. The first one to get to him was Norem Archer. He was still holding his bow, and he had an arrow in his other hand. Limper spread his hands to show he was weaponless and said, "Did you shoot the horse?"

"That's certainly what I was trying to do, and it looks as if I succeeded."

"You're better with a bow than I thought," Limper said.

Then the scout came up. He went to his horse and looked at it, then said, "You owe me a horse, Norem."

"Ask Heshkya to pay you," Norem said. "I wouldn't have shot the horse if he hadn't tried to run off on it."

"Will you pay me, Heshkya?" the scout asked.

"I don't have anything to pay you with except my horse and my sword," Limper said.

"I've seen your horse. I'd like a look at your sword."

"It's somewhere in the grass," Limper said.

The scout started looking around. By this time other men had come up, and a couple of them helped the scout look. After a moment or two one of these found the sword and gave it to the scout "I can't see it here,"

the scout said. He started back toward the campfires.

“Come on,” Norem said to Limper, and they went after the scout. Limper was walking slowly, dragging his bad leg.

When they got to the closest of the campfires, the scout stopped and looked at the sword. The blade had been made out of steel from the east and had a rippling pattern on it. The hilt was made in a northern style, and the guard and pommel were inlaid with silver and copper. “It looks as if it’s worth as much as my horse was?”

Limper said, “It’s worth a lot more. You aren’t likely to get your hands on a better sword.”

After that they took Limper to Yagoreb, who was squatting down beside one of the campfires, eating his breakfast. He looked up at Limper. After a moment he said, “Put him on a horse. You’d better tie him to it. He’s lost one horse already. Norem, tell a couple of your men to stay with him and see that he doesn’t come to any harm.” Then Yagoreb picked up a loaf of bread, tore off a piece and bit into it.

Norem Archer looked around, then pointed at two men and said, “You two watch him.”

The guards came over to Limper. One was short and fat, his belly hanging out over his belt, barely covered by his shirt. The other guard was thin and looked as if he’d been handsome when he was younger, but now there were lines around his mouth, and the skin under his eyes was puffy and dark. He’d shaved within the last day or two; and his hair was carefully combed. His clothes looked pretty clean. His shirt was embroidered with gold thread around the neck. The thread was tarnished, and the shirt had been mended in several plac-

es. Limper looked the two of them over, then shrugged. “What do you two call yourselves?”

The short fat guard said, “I’m called the Geshurite, and this fellow here is Pretty Boy.” He waved at the other guard.

They took him to where his horse was tethered and saddled the horse. After he’d mounted, they tied his hands to the saddle horn. Then the guards got their horses. By this time the scouts had ridden off. The guards were all mounted, and some of the drivers were beginning to lead their horses out of camp. They rode to the front of the caravan, the guards on either side of Limper. The east was pink, and the morning star was the only star still in sight. Soon the sun came up. It was another bright, cloudless day. After a while, Limper asked Pretty Boy, “Did Nargri get away?”

“Nargri?”

The Geshurite said, “He means that big lizard of his. Some of the scouts were going looking for it.”

“Bad luck to them,” Limper said. His bad leg was still bothering him. He shifted in his saddle, trying to ease the pain.

The scouts caught up with the caravan at noon. One of the scouts who’d stayed with the caravan shouted something in the language of the herding people. They shook their heads. The Geshurite said, “It looks as if bad luck is what they had.”

Later in the day Pretty Boy asked, “That lizard, is it really a dragon?”

Limper nodded.

“I thought dragons were big and spit fire.”

“Nargri’s a child. A full grown dragon is the same

size as a full grown man. As for spitting fire, that story must've started because wherever there are dragons there's fire. They're great smiths. Their deep homes are always full of smoke and the sound of hammers."

"I never heard that dragons were smiths," Pretty Boy said.

"Where do you think the gold in dragon hoards come from?"

"I thought they stole it from men."

Limper shook his head. "Men steal it from dragons. Dragons mine the gold, refine it and shape it. There are no more skillful smiths anywhere, though I think men make more lovely things. Dragons are more interested in ingenuity than in loveliness."

"You know a lot about dragons," the Geshurite said.

Limper nodded.

"My father used to say, every man knows a lot about something."

"That may well be," Limper said.

A little before sunset the caravan stopped, and they made camp by the side of the Great River. The guards untied Limper so he could dismount. Once on the ground he stretched, then rubbed his wrists. Close by him he could see the river, brown water sliding between dull green reeds. There was a big white bird, a stork or a crane, standing on a sandbar at the river's center. All at once it spread its wings and flapped up into the sky.

"Come on and eat," Pretty Boy said.

Limper sighed and turned toward the campfire.

After he'd eaten, they tied his hands and feet. He soon found out that there was no way he could sit or lie so that he was comfortable. At last he said, "Why do

you have to tie my legs? I'm not fleet footed in the best of times, and my leg's been hurting ever since I fell on it this morning. I'm not about to run away from you."

After a moment Pretty Boy shrugged, then untied the rope around Limper's ankles. A while later Yagoreb came over. Limper looked up at him and asked, "Who do you think I am?"

"Before we set out, I heard about a man called Limper. They say the king of Eshgorin will pay well to get ahold of him."

"We're a long way from Eshgorin," Limper said.

"That isn't my problem. We're only three days from Hwara, and the king has an ambassador there. I'll sell you to him."

"Would it make any difference to you if I said I'm not Limper?"

"If you aren't Limper, then why'd you run when Hog told you I thought you were Limper?"

"Give me some time, and I'll find an answer for that."

"All right," Yagoreb said. He looked to the Geshurite. "If you aren't going to tie his legs, you'll have to take turns watching him during the night."

"We'll tie his feet before we go to sleep," Pretty Boy said.

Yagoreb left. After he was gone the Geshurite said, "How much is the king willing to pay for you?"

Limper said, "The last I heard, the king was offering a hundred pieces of gold for Limper."

"That much? The richest man in Geshur didn't have that much money, though he had enough to marry off six daughters, each one uglier than the last. Even the one with warts got a good husband."

“What’d you do to make him want you so badly?”
Pretty Boy asked.

“You’ve never heard of Limper?” Limper asked. “I thought he was a famous man.”

Pretty Boy shook his head.

“He’s a master smith. He used to work for the king of Eshgorin.”

“What’d he—you—do?” Pretty Boy asked.

“He left Eshgorin.”

“Is that all?” the Geshurite asked.

“Do you think there are so many good smiths around that the king can afford to lose one?”

“That’s true,” the Geshurite said. “The old smith in Geshur had no sons. When he died, it was two years before we found a new smith, and he wasn’t much good.”

A little while later Limper saw Hog by another one of the campfires and called to him, “Come over here, Hog.”

Hog looked over at him, then looked away and stayed where he was.

“He’s tied up,” the Geshurite called. “He can’t hurt you.” -

After a moment Hog came over and said, “What do you want?”

Limper said, “There are a lot of stories about what happens to men who sell their fellows. The one I like best says after they die they go to the bottom of a deep hole. There are snakes above them that drip poison on them, and the poison burns like fire.”

“That’s a good story,” the Geshurite said.

Hog said, “I owed you nothing,” and walked away.

Pretty Boy spat on the ground.

A little while later the guards retied Limper's feet, and he lay down to sleep. He woke from time to time during the night to turn from one side to the other. When he woke the last time, at dawn, his arms ached, and his wrists and hands were numb. He sat up. The Geshurite was lying close by him. Limper put his feet against the Geshurite's side and pushed. The Geshurite rolled half way over, then said, "Huh," and sat up.

Limper said, "Untie me. I think my hands are going to fall off. If I were Limper, and I'm not saying I am, the king of Eshgorin wouldn't want to get me back without my hands."

The Geshurite grunted, then got up, came over and untied Limper. He sat awhile rubbing his wrists and arms, and clenching and unclenching his hands.

After that Pretty Boy got up and went to get them breakfast. After they'd eaten, the guards saddled their three horses. They tied Limper's hands to the saddle horn, as they had done the day before.

It was another clear day. The caravan trail left the Great River and went straight east across the steppe. In the early afternoon the land they crossed began to rise. Late in the afternoon they saw a band of riders a long way off. The Geshurite shaded his eyes and watched them for a while, then said, "Herding people."

"It seems strange to me that we haven't seen them before," Limper said.

Pretty Boy said, "The scouts say most of them are still far north of here in the summer country."

Soon after that the caravan stopped for the night. There were more guards than usual keeping watch at the edges of the camp. The drivers kept looking around

and stopping their conversations to listen. But nothing happened. The herding people never showed up.

While they were eating, Limper said to the Geshurite and Pretty Boy, "A hundred pieces of gold is a lot of money. Haven't you thought of getting ahold of it for yourselves?"

The Geshurite said, "If we took you back to Eshgorin, we'd have to cross the steppe by ourselves and risk meeting the herding people. Besides, it's a long trip, and there'd be only the two of us watching you. You might get away from us before we got to Eshgorin."

"What about Hwara?" Limper asked.

Pretty Boy shook his head. "If Yagoreb found us gone, he'd send a man to Hwara to say we'd stolen you from him. Then we'd end up in court. And when have poor men won a court case against a rich man?"

"I don't suppose you'd let me get away."

The Geshurite shook his head. "We'd be out of a job, if we did that. Pretty Boy might find a rich widow to take care of him, but I wouldn't."

"I just thought I'd ask," Limper said. "Norem Archer knew what he was doing when he picked you two to watch me."

They finished eating, and Pretty Boy tied Limper up. That night he had trouble sleeping again, and he woke up the Geshurite sometime before dawn and told him, "Untie me."

"Go back to sleep," the Geshurite said.

"I can't. My arms hurt," Limper said.

The Geshurite swore and got up and untied him.

They were on the steppe for one more day. In the evening the caravan made camp in sight of the moun-

tains. The next day before noon, they came to the foothills. The caravan trail went beside a narrow river, low at this time of year and full of rocks. There were poplars in the valley and pine trees on the upper slopes, and the air smelled of pine. Early in the afternoon they passed below the first watch towers. They were tall and round, built out of big blocks of stone. Late in the afternoon they came to Hwara, which was a high walled city on top of a hill. Beyond the hill were cliffs where the Iburi Pass began. In front of the hill was a flat place enclosed by a second outer wall. The wall was built of stone and had watch towers along it. Where they were—on the trail beside the river—they were in shadow, but the city and its fortifications were sunlit. Limper saw metal glittering on top of the wall and the watch towers and the gate. He said, “They don’t trust strangers, do they?”

Pretty Boy grinned. “They don’t trust each other in Hwara. Wait till you see the city. Every house has bars on the windows and a strong lock on the door.”

The caravan went in through the gate and made camp below the city, inside the outer wall. Beggars and peddlers and cheap whores came down out of the town. The drivers bought wine and got drunk and listened to the beggars tell their hard-luck stories. Then the drivers began to go off with the whores into the darkness beyond the campfires. Pretty Boy and the Geshurite bought a jug of wine and shared it with Limper. They swore at him because they had to stay put and watch him.

“You can go for all I care,” Limper said. “And I hope you get the whore’s disease.”

Pretty Boy shrugged. “There’ll be time enough for that.”

“Watch it,” the Geshurite said.

Pretty Boy hid the jug under his cloak. Limper looked up and saw Yagoreb coming toward them. There was another man with him, short and dark, like most of the men of Eshgorin. He wore a red gown, fastened by a belt with a big gold buckle, and he had gold bracelets on both his arms. He and Yagoreb stopped and looked at Limper. After a moment Yagoreb said, “Well?”

The short man said, “He might be Limper, and then again he might not. I never saw Limper when I was in Eshgorin.”

Yagoreb said, “From what I heard, Limper is a northerner and has hair so fair that it looks white, and he’s lame in one leg. Well, this fellow is a northerner and white haired, and he limps.”

“I haven’t seen him limp,” the short man said.

“Get up and walk,” Yagoreb told Limper.

The short man said, “There must be more than one northerner who limps. As for the white hair, most of them have white or yellow hair.”

Limper said, “Why don’t you ask me if I’m this fellow?”

The short man asked, “Are you?”

“No.”

Yagoreb said, “You aren’t going to take his word, are you?”

The short man shook his head. “If he is Limper, he’d certainly say he isn’t, since if he says he is he’ll be sent back to Eshgorin. So it’s clear that I can’t take his word.”

“Then why’d you ask me?” Limper said.

“Do you know any way to find out whether or not he’s Limper?” Yagoreb asked.

The short man nodded. "I never saw Limper, but I've seen many things he made. We'll set this fellow to making something. If he makes it skillfully and well, then we'll know he's Limper."

"Why should he make anything skillfully and well? If he botches the work, he'll go free."

The short man frowned. "Why set him free? If he isn't Limper, he's no use to either of us. Kill him."

Limper said, "What do you want me to make?"

The short man frowned a second time. "When I was last in Eshgorin, I saw a tree Limper made. It was made out of silver, and the leaves were fastened to the branches in such a way that when the windows were open and a wind blew in, the leaves moved in the wind. Also there were golden birds sitting on the tree's branches. They opened and shut their mouths and whistled."

"Something like that would take a long time to make, and it'd cost a lot to make, too," Limper said. "What else did you see in Eshgorin?"

"The king's sword. He showed it to me himself. The pommel was a gold dragon coiled around itself, and there were more dragons engraved on the guard and inlaid with gold, and there was writing in a strange language engraved on the blade and inlaid with gold."

Limper said, "I wrote a curse on the blade in the language of the dragons. So far it hasn't worked."

"The king won't like to hear that."

Limper shrugged.

"Can you make something like that?" Yagoreb asked.

"I can make you a sword, and it won't take all that much time and money, unless you want gold all over it,

the way the king wanted it on his sword.”

The short man said, “I’ll ask the Council of Hwara to let us use a smithy.”

Yagoreb nodded, and they turned and went away. Limper said, “Give me some more wine.”

Pretty Boy gave him the jug, and he took a big gulp. Then he wiped his mouth and handed the jug back. “I think I’ll get some sleep before you two decide it’s time to tie me up. It’s hard as hell sleeping tied up.” He lay down, his cloak around him, his back to the campfire, and shut his eyes. The Geshurite woke him sometime in the middle of the night and said, “We’ve got to tie you up now. We’re going to go to sleep.”

Limper swore at him. The Geshurite grinned and tied him up, then left him to lie down and try to go back to sleep. The next day, a little after sunrise, Yagoreb came back. Limper was awake, but Pretty Boy and the Geshurite weren’t, and they were lying far enough away from him that it would’ve been hard work for him to get to them to wake them up and make them untie him. There was another man with Yagoreb. This one was dressed like a Hwaraite in a kilt and a sleeveless jacket. He was short, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, his bare arms thick. He looked at Limper, then looked at Yagoreb. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you smiths are sacred like poets and lunatics? If you tie one up like a chicken going to market, the gods get angry.”

Yagoreb shrugged. “These are hard times, and no one is as pious as he ought to be.”

“That may be,” the man said, “but I don’t intend to allow impiety around me, if I can help it. Untie him.”

After a moment Yagoreb went over to the Geshurite

and kicked him. The Geshurite swore and sat up. "Untie the smith," Yagoreb said.

The Geshurite got up and said, "The gods help me in my time of pain." He went over to Limper and untied the ropes around Limper's hands and feet. Limper stood up, somewhat unsteadily.

The man said, "I'm Telgir Etrin, the president of the iron-workers' society."

"Do you have somewhere for me to work?" Limper asked.

"My own smithy," Telgir said.

"Then let's go there. I might as well start working now."

Yagoreb said to the Geshurite, "Wake Pretty Boy and go with him. The ambassador hasn't paid me yet."

"All right," the Geshurite said. He shook Pretty Boy awake, and the four of them went up the hill together and into the city, through the inner gate. The gate had iron doors, and there were guards at the doors. The buildings in the city were stone, three or four stories high. The streets were paved with stone with deep gutters on either side for rainwater and refuse. There were men of every kind there, some off the steppe and others out of the mountains. The mountain men wore fur cloaks and had tattooed faces. The steppe folk wore pants and embroidered shirts. Their cloaks were of felt, trimmed with fur, and some of them had tied brightly colored feathers on their long, dark, tangled hair. There were men, too, from the great cities of the south and east. They wore long robes and a lot of jewelry. Once Limper saw a tall, yellow-haired northerner, his face sunburned bright red. A little way from the gate, they

turned into a side street. There was a tanner's shop close by. Limper could smell the dog dung used in tanning. Halfway down the street, men were taking bolts of cloth off the backs of horses. The horses filled the street from side to side, so they had to squeeze by along the wall. The smithy was at the end of the street. It was empty, the forge fires out, the bellows hung up on the wall, the tools set down on benches: hammers of different weights, tongs, chisels and shears. Limper looked around, then said, "It'll do. What about the metal?"

"Here," Telgir said and led him into a storeroom. Bars of iron were stacked on the floor, also round cakes of steel from the cities of the east. Limper looked at the cakes of steel, then said, "I'll need someone to work the bellows for me."

"I'll do that," Telgir said.

Limper looked at him. "What?"

"If one of my apprentices works with you, he'll learn new ways of doing things from you, and then he'll argue with me for months about how I should do this or that."

"All right," Limper said. "We might as well get a fire going."

Telgir nodded and went to get charcoal. While Telgir got the fire going, Limper found himself a leather apron and hefted the hammers till he found two he liked. Then he went and got a cake of the eastern steel. By this time the forge fire was burning well. Limper looked at the brightly glowing coals, and Telgir working the bellows, his face beginning to shine with sweat. He grinned, set the cake of steel in the fire, and got hammer and tongs.

When the cake was hot enough to work, he began

beating it. The steel wasn't the same quality throughout. On the outside of the cake, it was hard and brittle. At the center of the cake, it was soft. He had to make sure that the two kinds of metal were intermixed. He beat the piece of steel until it was long and flat. Then, he bent it over the anvil, so that it was shaped like a narrow archway. He turned this archway on its side, holding it with the tongs, and beat it flat. After that, he reheated the steel. He bent it a second time, then beat the two sides of the archway back together. When he was done, he straightened up, stretched, and rubbed his hands. "I will be sore tomorrow."

Telgir grinned.

Limper heated the steel a third time. He made the archway and beat it back into a single, flat piece of steel.

Telgir nodded. "Three times through the archway, and the sword will not break. So my grandfather said."

"I do it five times," Limper answered. "Sometimes six." He kept on working. When it began to get dark, he said to Telgir, "Tell the guards where they can get lamps."

"In the storeroom in the back," Telgir said.

The guards got lamps and lit them. Limper kept working. His back and arms began to ache, and the fire's smoke began to bother his eyes.

While it was still twilight, Yagoreb came in. He stopped and watched Limper work, then said, "You seem to know what you're doing."

Limper looked up. "Shut up and get out." Then he looked back at the glowing steel.

After a moment Yagoreb left.

At last, late at night, Limper lifted the blade away

from the coals and set it down, then put aside the hammer and the tongs. He stretched and rubbed his arms. "It's good steel. Do you have any wine?"

Telgir nodded. He went into one of the storerooms and came out with a jug. He gave it to Limper, then sat down beside him. Limper drank, then handed the jug to Telgir. Telgir drank and handed it back, and Limper gave it to the Geshurite,

"Why'd you leave Eshgorin?" Telgir asked.

"I don't like working for other men," Limper said. He looked at Pretty Boy, who had the jug, and said, "Don't drink it all."

Yagoreb came back a little while later. By then Limper was lying on a bench, looking up at the ceiling. "Is he a good smith?" Yagoreb asked Telgir.

"He knows one or two things about metal working," Telgir replied.

Limper turned his head and looked at Telgir, who was sitting on the floor, the empty jug in front of him, "One or two things?" he said.

"Three or four," Telgir said, "Maybe five."

Yagoreb looked at the Geshurite and Pretty Boy. "Are you drunk, too?"

Pretty Boy said, "A mouse couldn't have gotten drunk on what they let us have."

"Why should they be drunk?" Telgir said. "They did nothing all day. We worked." He stood up. "Let's go to my house, Limper. I've more wine there."

"No," Yagoreb said.

"Why not?" Telgir asked.

"He'll be safer here, if you have a room with a good lock on the door."

Telgir frowned. He sat down at the end of the bench Limper was lying on, then looked at Limper. "Will you give your word to the merchant you won't try to get away?"

"No," Limper said.

The Geshurite said, "What are promises except words? What are words except wind? All men break wind at one time or another."

Limper sat up and looked at the Geshurite. "You must've got more wine than I thought you did." Then he said, "If you're going to lock me up, do it. I want to get some sleep."

They put him in a storeroom with bags of charcoal stacked along the walls and one small window with bars across it. He lay down on the floor and went to sleep. Sometime later he woke. There was someone out in the street, singing about his peerless Ataia, while a companion beat on a drum and a second companion tried to play a flute. The singer sounded pretty drunk. Limper sighed and listened till the musicians had passed on down the street. Then he rolled over and went back to sleep. When he woke again in the morning, the muscles in his arms and back and chest were stiff, and it hurt him to move. There were even a couple of blisters on the palms of his hands. He shouted, "Let me out of this hole."

The Geshurite let him out. Telgir was sitting on a bench, eating a piece of cheese. "Here," he said and tossed another piece to Limper. Limper caught it, "It's goat cheese. The mountain men make it."

"What I want is water or milk, if you have it," Limper said.

There was a basket beside Telgir. He took a jug out of it, opened the jug and sniffed at it, then gave it to Limper. "Milk. My wife packed bread and sausages as well."

Limper drank half the milk, then sat down next to the basket and bit into the cheese. He looked at Pretty Boy and the Geshurite and said, his mouth full, "Is there enough for them?"

Telgir nodded. "Take what you want."

The two guards came over and took bread and sausages and began to eat.

When the food was gone, they got the forge fire going. Limper heated a new piece of steel and beat it out till it was long and narrow, then welded it onto the blade to make the tang, around which he would build the sword hilt when he got to that part of the job. At first his arms, chest, and back hurt every time he lifted the hammer and every time he brought it down. The blisters on his hands broke. His head started to ache. He went through all the curses he knew, in his language and the language of Eshgorin and the language of the dragons.

A little before noon, one of Telgir's sons brought lunch: meat pies and wine. By that time the blade was finished from point to tang. Limper put it aside, and they ate. After lunch Telgir brought out a sandstone grinding wheel, and Limper began to grind the blade. He spent all afternoon doing that, swearing often, for it was slow work, and it made his back hurt. At last, late in the afternoon, he stopped and stretched and rubbed the back of his neck. Then he said, "If I hadn't had the bad luck to get myself lamed, I could've taken up an easy trade such as soldiering."

Another one of Telgir's sons brought supper in then: roast goat, bread and wine, dates, and honey cakes. They sat down and ate. While they were eating Telgir said, "What do you temper steel in?"

"Whatever's at hand," Limper said. "Most of the time in Eshgorin I used either palm oil or cottonseed oil. I met a fellow once who said in his country the smiths tempered steel in honey. I tried it, and it worked well enough. I've never tried blood, though the old stories say smiths used to temper weapons in it." Limper drank some wine. "What do you use for tempering?"

Telgir frowned, then after a moment he said, "I have my own recipe that I worked out myself, and I've never told anyone about it. But I'd like to be able to say that I'd taught the master smith of Eshgorin something." He looked around to make sure that Pretty Boy and the Geshurite were nowhere near, then leaned toward Limper and said softly, "It's a mixture—the juice of radishes, cut up earthworms, and urine from a redheaded boy."

"Now that's something I've never heard of before," Limper said. "Do you have any trouble finding a red-headed boy? Most of the people I've seen here have dark hair."

Telgir nodded. "If I can't find one, I use goat piss instead."

"I see," Limper said. "Does the goat have to be any particular color?"

Telgir looked at him and frowned. "No."

"I'd like to try that recipe," Limper said. "Could you get the ingredients together tomorrow?" Telgir nodded.

Limper finished eating, then said to the Geshurite, "Stop stuffing food into your mouth and lock me up."

He went into the storeroom, and the Geshurite locked the door after him. Then he lay down and went to sleep. He woke up in the middle of the night and heard a scratching sound. He looked up at the window. There was bright moonlight outside, and he saw Nargri squeezing in between the window's bars. She got through, jumped down onto a bag of charcoal, tumbled off the bag onto the floor, sat up and said, "There are rats out there almost as big as I am. Do you have anything to eat?"

"No," Limper said.

"Then I'm going to sleep." She curled up next to him and closed her eyes. After a while Limper went to sleep too.

When he woke in the morning Nargri was sitting on a bag of charcoal, licking one of her forefeet. For a while he did nothing except watch her. She was sitting in sunlight. Her dark grey scales shimmered the way fish scales did when a fish was newly taken from the water. Her eyes were the clear orange color of amber. When she was done licking her foot, she looked at him and said, "I'm hungry, and my feet hurt."

"And you wish you'd stayed at home with mother. How'd you find me?"

"I followed the caravan till it came to this city. That part wasn't difficult, though my feet got sore. I got through the outer gate by waiting till a wagon went through and running in underneath it. Then I hid in a gully till it was dark, and then went and found Yagoreb's camp." Nargri stopped speaking for a moment, then said, "I didn't like that part. I was afraid the scouts would kill me if they found me."

“They probably would have,” Limper said.

“I saw you in the camp, Limper, but I didn’t think I could get to you without somebody seeing me. So I hid in another gully. Then the next day saw them take you into the city. I followed, but I was afraid to go through the inner gate. There were guards there with spears. So, I waited till some people went through, and I went through with them. I don’t think the guards saw me, but know the people did. One of them kicked me. Then I ran and hid and when it got to be dark, I started looking for smithies. I’d heard them at Yagoreb’s camp, talking about taking you to a smithy. That’s all there is to tell, except that the rats in this city are enormous, and I hope you can keep yourself out of trouble after this.”

“I’ll do my best,” Limper said. He heard a key going into the lock and said softly, “Get out of sight.”

Nargri got behind a bag. The Geshurite opened the door, and Limper stood up and went out into the smithy. Telgir was nowhere in sight. Pretty Boy said, “The smith said he’d be back around noon.”

Limper nodded, then ate breakfast, which was in a basket on a bench. Then he went back to grinding the blade. He finished sometime before noon, settled himself in the smithy’s doorway, and drank wine. The day was bright with only a few small clouds in sight. A brisk wind blew and kept changing direction, so sometimes he smelled pine trees and sometimes the tanner’s shop. Down the street he saw men loading sacks full of something onto a cart. After a while the wine and the warm sunlight made him sleepy, and he dozed off. He woke when someone poked him in the ribs. He opened his eyes. The ambassador from Eshgorin stood over him.

This time he had on a blue robe and a wide belt made of elaborately worked silver plaques. "So you call this work?" the ambassador asked.

"No," Limper said.

"Well, get to work."

"Go away," Limper said and shut his eyes.

The ambassador poked him again. Limper got to his feet and went into the smithy. The ambassador followed him. Pretty Boy and the Geshurite were squatting down, playing dice. They looked up, then stood quickly. Limper picked up a hammer, turned, and said, "Get out before I use this to reshape your head."

The ambassador's face turned red. He looked at Pretty Boy and the Geshurite. "Take that hammer away from him."

They shook their heads. The Geshurite said, "We work for Yagoreb, not for you, sir, and Yagoreb wants that sword made. I don't know how Heshkya's going to make a sword unless he has a hammer."

"Get out," Limper said.

"The king will hear about this. He can deal with you as he wishes," the ambassador said and turned and left. Limper set down the hammer.

Pretty Boy said, "Did you do things like that when you worked for the king of Eshgorin?"

"Not to the king, if that's what you mean," Limper said. "I was as polite as I could be to him."

"I've heard that kings set a high value on politeness," the Geshurite said.

"This one did. I don't know about other kings."

Midway through the afternoon Telgir came back, carrying two big covered pots. He set them down, then

said, "That's two of the ingredients. I've set my sons to digging up the third ingredient."

Soon after that two of Telgir's sons came in. One of them carried a covered pot, which he gave to Telgir, saying, "Here are the things you told us to get, papa."

The other boy carried a basket, which he set down, saying, "And mama sent dinner."

"We'd better eat before tempering the sword," Limper said. "I've been drinking wine all afternoon, and I like to be sober when I work."

"That sounds like a good idea to me," the Geshurite said.

Telgir nodded and waved his sons out, then took the food out of the basket. His wife had sent over a pot of beef stew and bread and wine and goat's cheese. They ate. After they'd eaten, Telgir brought a big iron pot out of one of the storerooms, then said to the guards, "You two take this out back and fill it from the well."

"That's not our job," the Geshurite said.

"It's not much to ask," Limper said, "after Telgir's fed you so much food."

"That's true," Pretty Boy said. The two of them took the pot out and brought it back full of cold water. Limper built the forge fire and laid the sword blade in it and heated it till it was orange in color. Then he put it into the water. The hot metal hissed loudly, and a cloud of steam came up out of the pot. When the blade had cooled, Limper took it out of the water and put it back into the forge fire to reheat. "I'm done with the water," he said. The two guards took the pot to the smithy's front door and emptied it into the street.

Telgir said to them, "There are two doors that lead

out of here, and you two can watch them to make sure Limper doesn't run off. But I don't want you inside while I mix my recipe. It's a secret, and I want it to stay a secret."

After a moment Pretty Boy shrugged, then nodded, and he and the Geshurite went out of the smithy. Telgir shut both the smithy doors. After that he began to mix the urine, radish juice and chopped earthworms in the iron pot. While he was working he said, "I'd better tell you, I put your case before the Council of Hwara and asked them to give you asylum. They said it's impossible this far from Eshgorin to determine the truth of this matter and whether or not the king has the right to your services. For, they said, you may be a slave or a convict or an indentured servant. They say Yagoreb had broken no law here, and we are at peace with Eshgorin and, that being so, they can see no reason to take anything from either Yagoreb or the Eshgrini king."

Limper shrugged. When the sword blade was red hot, he dropped it into the mixture in the pot. Once again the metal sizzled, and steam came out. This time the steam had a horrible smell. Limper grimaced and moved away. When the blade had cooled, Limper took it out of the pot and set it down, the tongs beside it. Then he and Telgir took the pot out back and emptied it into the alley. Pretty Boy was there. Limper said, "You can come back in."

When they got back inside they found Yagoreb and the Eshgrini ambassador there. This time the ambassador had on a brown robe with long panels of red and yellow embroidery sewn on it in front. Yagoreb said, "I'm planning to leave Hwara in two days, and I want

this matter settled one way or the other before then.”

Limper looked at Telgir. “Do you find when you make things for people, they won’t leave you alone?”

Telgir nodded. “I tell them good work takes time; I tell them I do worse work when I’m interrupted ten times a day; but they still come and buzz like flies all about me.”

“These fellows are pretty bad that way,” Limper said. “But the king of Eshgorin was worse.”

“When will the sword be done?” Yagoreb asked.

“Another day, if you leave me alone to work on it,” Limper said. “Come back the day after tomorrow in the morning.”

“All right,” Yagoreb said, and he and the ambassador left.

After they were gone Pretty Boy said, “I don’t think I’d like to be inside your skin when you get back to Eshgorin, and the king reads the report that that ambassador is going to write on you.”

Limper picked up a wine jug and shook it, then took a swallow of wine. “I’ve been working long enough so I know which people it’s safe to be rude to. If that fellow were somebody the king listened to, he’d be in Eshgorin or in one of the great capitals, such as Anyar or Essim.” He picked up a piece of cheese and the heel of a loaf of bread left over from dinner, then walked into the storeroom, sat down on the floor and called, “All right. Lock me up.”

Pretty Boy shut the door and locked it. Nargri came out from behind a bag of charcoal, and Limper gave her the bread and cheese. He drank wine while she ate. When she was done she said, “Do you plan to go back

to Eshgorin?”

“No.”

“Then what do you plan to do?”

“Get out of here.”

“How?” Nargri asked.

After a moment Limper said, “What we did last time worked until Norem Archer used his bow.”

“You want me to bite somebody.”

Limper nodded.

“Who?”

“Pretty Boy or the Geshurite.”

“I’ll bite the Geshurite,” Nargri said. “Pretty Boy looks as if he might have a greasy taste.”

“I’ll work late tomorrow. After dark you come out and get as close to the Geshurite as you can. When I go after Pretty Boy, you go after the Geshurite.”

“What about the third fellow? Who goes after him?”

“It isn’t his quarrel,” Limper said. “He’ll stay out of it.”

“So you say,” Nargri said. “It isn’t much of a plan.”

“The best plans are simple.”

“This one seems simple-minded.”

“I’m going to sleep,” Limper said, and lay down.

He woke the next morning and heard somebody opening the door. He sat up and looked around. Nargri was out of sight. The Geshurite came in. He had a piece of cheese. He said, “Telgir is here, and he’s brought breakfast with him.” He bit into the cheese, then said, his mouth full, “They make cheese like this in Geshur.”

Limper went out and greeted Telgir, got a piece of cheese, then went to the door. The sky was bright and cloudless. The air was cold. Looking west, he could see

the mountains. There was snow on the high peaks. "How long before snow closes the passes?" he asked.

"A month," Telgir said. "Maybe more. Maybe less."

Limper nodded and went back to look at the food Telgir had brought. There was a bowl full of a soft, white, sour-smelling stuff. "What's that?"

"Curdled goat's milk," the Geshurite said "Try it."

"They make that in Geshur, too?" Limper asked.

"Yes. My mother made the best in town. She probably still does, unless she's dead."

Limper looked at Pretty Boy. "Where do you come from? You've never told me."

"Eshgorin," Pretty Boy said. "The part of the city they call the Rat's Hole."

"Is that so?" Limper said. Then he said to Telgir, "I need some wood—good, close-grained hardwood—and the tools to work it, also some cord. Red silk cord, if you can get it."

"I'll have to go out," Telgir said.

Limper nodded, went into the storeroom where the iron and steel were kept and got a bar of iron. When he came back Telgir was gone. Limper got the forge fire going and heated the iron and made the sword's upper and lower guards. Telgir came back early in the afternoon, bringing a piece of cherry wood, wood-working tools, and lunch. By that time Limper was done making the guards. They ate, then Limper sawed off a long narrow piece of wood and carved away its corners till it was a cylinder. He bored through the cylinder's center, so a hole went through it lengthwise. This took him most of the afternoon, and he cut himself a couple of times with the tools he used. "I've never been as

good with wood as with metal,” he said after he’d cut himself the second time. Finally he set the cylinder aside and rebuilt the fire. When the fire was burning well, he fitted the sword’s lower guard onto the tang so it rested on the sword’s shoulders. Then he heated the tang, then fitted the wooden cylinder onto it. The hole through the cylinder was a little too narrow for the tang, and he had to force the cylinder on while the hot metal burnt the wood and made the hole bigger. When the cylinder was all the way on, he put the upper guard onto the tang on top of it, then bent over the part of the tang that came out through the guard and riveted it to the guard. Lastly he wound the red silk cord around the cylinder till the wood was completely hidden. He knotted the cord tightly, laid the sword down on the floor and looked at it. He said, “I don’t think the ambassador will like it. There’s no gold on it anywhere. He seems to me to be the kind of man who thinks that if a thing glitters, it must be well-made.”

“If you want me to, I’ll tell him in my opinion it’s pretty well-made,” Telgir said.

“Thanks,” Limper said. After that he ate supper standing in the smithy’s open door. It was after sunset. The evening star was out, and a half moon. The air was cold and still. After supper he took a file and filed smooth the rough spots on the guards. When he stopped and the smithy was silent, he heard a skittering sound. Pretty Boy said, “What’s that?” and stood up and looked around.

“There,” Telgir said and pointed to a corner.

“That lizard of yours,” Pretty Boy said. “It followed you.”

“So she did.”

Nargri came out of the shadow into the light and blinked her eyes, then went over to where the Geshurite was sitting, half drunk and half asleep. “Call it off,” the Geshurite said. “I don’t like scaly things.”

Nargri leaped up onto the bench beside him and bit his right forearm. The Geshurite yelled. Pretty Boy started to pull his sword out of its scabbard. Limper grabbed up his sword and brought it down on Pretty Boy’s shoulder. He hadn’t sharpened its edges yet. It broke the skin, but it didn’t cut deep. Still Pretty Boy let go of his sword. He grabbed his shoulder, his face going white.

Limper looked to the Geshurite, who was standing up and holding his arm, which was bleeding. Then he looked to Telgir and said, “What do you intend to do?”

“Nothing,” Telgir said. “If I fight you, one of us might be killed, and there are too few good smiths as it is.”

“Then all three of you throw your swords on the floor and get in there,” Limper said and pointed to the storeroom where he’d been kept.

Pretty Boy and the Geshurite looked at one another. The Geshurite shrugged and said, “This is only a job.” He drew his sword and tossed it onto the floor, then went into the storeroom. Pretty Boy followed him. Telgir had no weapon except a small knife, which he threw down. Then he followed Pretty Boy. Limper said, “I’ll be here for a while, working on the sword. If any one of you makes a sound, I’ll kill all of you.”

“You might find that difficult,” Pretty Boy said.

“Do you intend to find out whether or not I can do it?” Limper asked.

“No.”

Limper locked the door, then said to Nargri, “Stay by the door. If you hear anything, tell me.”

“Can’t you finish the sword later?”

“Do as I say,” Limper said. Then he ground edges onto the sword blade. When he was done he looked around the smithy, picked up a coil of rope, a bridle with an iron bit and bronze mountings, a roll of gold wire, two jars of wine, and a large rag.

“Are you taking the whole smithy with you?” Nargri.

“Only what I think I can use.”

She watched him wrap the rag around his sword until it was hard to tell what the sword was, then she said, “There are two scabbards in there.” She pointed at the storeroom door.

“And three men as well, and chances are none of them is feeling friendly toward me. I’m not going in there unless I have to.” There was still some of the red silk cord left. Limper used it to tie the two wine jugs together. Then he took the gold wire and put it inside his shirt. “Come on,” he said. They went outside together, Limper loaded down with the wine jugs, the rope, the sword, and the bridle. Most of the buildings along the street were dark. Here and there light shone out of a second or third story window. The moon was still up. A street or two away men were playing flutes and singing.

“Do you know the way to the wall?” Limper asked.

“Follow me.” Nargri went past a couple of buildings, then into an alley, Limper behind her. The alley was narrow, so narrow in some spots that he had to turn sideways to get through. The air stank, and the ground was soft and slippery under foot. He realized that there

must be windows opening onto the alley out of which people threw refuse. He couldn't see Nargri. It was too dark. He followed the sound she made. She moved quickly. With his bad leg and the load he carried, he had trouble keeping up with her. Twice they came out into a street and crossed it, going into another narrow, foul-smelling alley. When they came out of the third alley they were opposite the city wall. Nargri stopped and said, "What now?"

The wall was forty feet tall, give or take a foot or two, and it was built out of big blocks of stone. The blocks were so carefully fitted together that he could barely make out the lines where they met, though bright moonlight lit the wall.

"There must be stairs somewhere going to the top."

"So you say," Nargri said. "Which way do we go?"

"Away from the gate."

"All right." Nargri turned up the street, and Limper followed her. They passed four or five side streets. Then they came to where a flight of stairs went up the wall. "I suppose," Nargri said, "you want me to go up and look around."

"My mother's going to have a few words to say to you, when she finds out how you've been taking care of me."

"More than a few words, but I'll worry about that later."

Nargri went up the stairs. Limper waited for her in the street. After a while she came back and said, "No one in sight."

He went up the stairs, Nargri a couple of steps ahead of him. At the top of the stairs was a guard walk

that went along the wall a little below the battlemented parapet. He looked out through one of the deep notches in the wall's top and saw fires where a caravan was camped. Beyond the fires he saw the outer wall, and, beyond that, the mountains. He set down his sword and the wine jugs and the bridle. Then he uncoiled the rope and made one end fast around one of the tall blocks of stone that jutted up between the notches.

Nargri said, "Someone is coming."

Limper turned and looked. There was a man coming along the guard walk toward him. The moon was still high enough so he could see the fellow fairly clearly. He wore a helmet and a mail shirt, and he carried a spear. Limper looked around and saw nowhere to hide. It wasn't likely that he could outrun the man. He picked up his sword and waited. The soldier came closer, stopped and said, "What're you doing here?"

"I came up to piss."

"What's wrong with the street?" the soldier asked. "And what's the rope for?"

"I was planning to hang myself afterward. I didn't want to get my pants wet when I did it."

"I think I'd better take you to see my captain."

"Can I take my belongings with me? I was planning to leave them for whoever came along, since I couldn't figure out how to take them with me into the afterlife. But if I'm not going to die, I'll need them."

After a moment the soldier said, "All right." By this time he was close enough to Limper to stick his spear into him. Limper bent, then straightened up quickly. He grabbed the spear shaft with his free hand, stepped forward, and jabbed the rag-wrapped sword into the

soldier's gut. The soldier grunted and bent double. Limper dropped the sword and yanked the spear away from him, then shoved the spear butt into his neck. The soldier stumbled backward. By this time he was having trouble staying on his feet. Limper turned the spear around and said, "Keep quiet."

The soldier had his arms wrapped around his midsection, and he was retching.

"That isn't what I'd call quiet," Nargri said.

The man was bent almost double. Limper brought the spear shaft down across the back of his neck. The man fell forward onto the pavement and lay still. Limper tossed down the spear, saying to Nargri, "Watch him. If he starts stirring, tell me."

"All right," Nargri said.

Limper tugged at the rope to make sure it was securely fastened to the block of stone and tossed the free end of the rope over the wall. Then he went to the soldier and rolled him over onto his back, unbuckled his sword belt and tugged it out from under him. He buckled the belt on. "I ought to kill him. If there are any gods listening who care about human life, remember I didn't stick a sword into this fellow. You can reward me by letting me get out of here." While he spoke he unwrapped his sword, then pulled the soldier's sword from its scabbard, tossed it down and put his sword into the scabbard. The scabbard was a little too short and too wide, so he tore off a piece of the rag he'd wrapped around his sword and wedged it into the scabbard to hold his sword in place.

The soldier groaned and stirred. Limper swore and tore the rag into two pieces. He used one to tie the sol-

dier's hands behind his back and the other to gag him. Then he pulled the soldier's kilt down around his ankles and used it to tie his legs together. After that Limper picked up Nargri and set her on top of the parapet, then picked up the bridle and the wine jugs and hung them around his neck. "As soon as I'm down, you follow me," he said to Nargri. "And watch the soldier meanwhile." He pulled himself up onto the parapet, got hold of the rope and went down it hand over hand. It wasn't easy to do. His arms were still sore from the work in the smithy, and the wine jugs kept bumping against his chest. The cord they hung on cut into the back of his neck. He could hear the soft jingle of the bridle's bit, along with the harsh sound his breath made. When he got to the end of the rope he was still several feet from the ground. "Why do these things happen to me?" he asked. He hung at the rope's end for a moment or two, then let go and dropped the rest of the way. When he hit the ground he stumbled and fell. He swore, then felt the wine jugs to make sure they were unbroken. After that he stood up. Above him Nargri said, "There isn't any more rope, Limper."

He looked up. He could barely see her, a black spot swinging back and forth overhead. "Drop. I'll catch you."

"All right," she said and dropped. She landed across his right shoulder, started to slide off and dug in her claws.

"Let go," he said loudly and grabbed her. She pulled out her claws. He set her down and rubbed his shoulder. "It's lucky for you I promised your mother that I'd see you came to no harm." He took the piece of cloth out

of the scabbard so he could pull out his sword if he had to, then started away from the wall. Nargri followed him.

The ground sloped down slightly. It had been grazed bare by caravan animals, and there were shallow gullies every ten or twenty feet, dry at this time of year. A couple of times he almost stepped into a gully before he saw it and stopped. Ahead of him and to his left he saw campfires, men lying close by them, amid piles of trade goods. He went to the right, making a wide circle around the campfires, moving as quickly as he was able. The wind changed, and a horse whinnied. A man standing by one of the piles of trade goods turned and looked around. Limper stopped and stood still till the man turned away, then he went on. The gate was ahead of him, lit by torches, two soldiers standing in front of it, leaning on their spears. The doors were twice as tall as a man, made of wood bound with iron, with a thick, iron-bound bar across them, keeping them shut.

Nargri said softly, "It seems to me it would've been a better idea to escape during the day. The gates are open then."

"You may be right," Limper said. "Well, we're going to have to get through somehow. I shouldn't take the time to get a horse, but I'm going to. I don't like being on foot when I'm being chased. You stay here." He set the wine jugs down and went back to where he'd seen horses tethered, a short distance from one of the groups of campfires. When he got close he stopped and looked till he saw the man guarding them. He was sitting on a bale of hay, his spear leaning against the bale. He'd taken his helmet off. He was scratching his head and doing a thorough job of it. Limper circled till the horses

were between him and the guard, then walked up to the horses, going slowly so he didn't startle them. They turned their heads to look at him, and a couple of them moved uneasily. Limper said softly and gently, "There's nothing to worry about. Don't give me away." He picked out a horse and let it get a good look at him, so it knew he wasn't anything a horse might be afraid of, then he squatted down and untied its tether. When he stood up the horse snorted and jerked its head back. Limper said softly, "I'm not going to hurt you, you idiot" After that he led the horse away from the other horses. When he got a short distance from the herd, he stopped and looked back at the man guarding the horses. He'd finished scratching his head by this time. Now he had his head tilted back, and he was scratching his beard with both hands. Limper grinned and led the horse on.

He stopped a little way from Nargri, upwind so the smell of Nargri wouldn't startle the horse, then put the bridle he'd brought along on the horse. After that he tied the horse to a bare-branched bush. "Now keep quiet," he said to it. He went back to where Nargri was and said, "Get as close as you can to the soldiers without them seeing you. When I'm close enough to them to go after one of them, you come in after the other."

"I'm getting tired of biting people," Nargri said.

Limper picked up the wine jugs and slung them over one shoulder, then went back and got the horse, leading it toward the gate. When he was close enough so the torches lit him, the soldiers straightened up and got better grips on their spears. One of them called, "Who's there?"

Limper stopped and said, "My name's Heshkya, if

that tells you anything. Does either one of you want to buy a horse?"

The soldier who'd spoken before said, "That's not much of a horse."

Limper unplugged one of the wine jugs and drank out of it. Then he looked the horse over. "I've seen better, but I've seen worse, too."

"What happened to your saddle?" the second soldier asked.

"I won this fellow in a dice game. Somebody else won the saddle. I thought if I sold the horse, I'd have enough money for a night on the town. The first day out of here, everybody's going to be stumbling along, moaning and groaning and saying what a wonderful time he'd had in Hwara. I don't want to have to lie about it." He took another drink.

The first soldier said, "If you aren't going to share that, go away. I'm not going to stand here and watch you drink while my tongue shrivels in my mouth."

Limper came closer, leading the horse, and swung the jugs down onto the ground. He untied them and gave one jug to one of the soldiers, keeping the other jug for himself. The soldiers drank. Then the first soldier said, "You came in with one of the caravans?"

Limper nodded. "And I'll go out with it, unless I can find another job, which doesn't seem likely."

The first soldier shook his head. "There's no work here these days."

The second soldier, who had the wine jug and was drinking out of it, looked to one side, "What in hell is that?" Wine spilled out of the jug onto the soldier's shirt. He swore and looked down. Limper glanced over

and saw Nargri running toward them, then swung the jug he held into the first soldier's face. The jug broke. The soldier stumbled back. Limper turned, starting to pull out his sword. The second soldier had dropped the jug and got ahold of his spear. He was holding it so it was pointing at Limper's gut. Limper stepped back, lifting his hand away from his sword hilt. "I surrender."

Nargri got to the soldier. She jumped onto the soldier's leg and dug in her claws. The soldier yelled, let go of his spear and grabbed at Nargri with both hands. She bit one hand, and he yelled again. Limper pulled out his sword. "Shut up or I'll kill you." He saw something moving to one side and looked toward it. It was the first soldier, stumbling toward him. His face was covered with wine and blood. He had dropped his spear, and he was trying to get his sword out of its scabbard. Limper said, "Stop that." The soldier stopped and stood still. Limper looked at the second soldier. He was beating at Nargri with one hand and trying to pull out his sword with the other hand.

Limper said, "Let go of that sword, and the two of you get the gate open."

The second soldier let go of his sword hilt. "Get this thing off me."

"Off him, Nargri."

Nargri dropped onto the ground. The soldier turned and kicked her. She tumbled over, then got up and said in the language of the dragons, "Kill him, Limper."

Limper said to the soldiers, "Open the gate."

They looked at one another, and then shrugged. The second soldier said, "I think we'll have to do it, but the captain isn't going to be happy with us." They slid the

bar back and pulled the door open.

Someone up on the wall yelled, "What's going on down there?"

Limper got up onto the horse as fast as he could, then leaned down, grabbed Nargri, and kicked the horse. It started toward the gate. One of the soldiers started to shut the door he held, then looked at Limper coming toward him and ran off, shouting. The other soldier jumped back out of the way. Limper went past him through the gate. Now he rode between stone walls, his head bent low so he wouldn't hit the gate ceiling. He heard shouts behind him. He felt Nargri digging her claws into his pants, scratching his legs. Limper kicked the horse again. It lengthened its stride, carrying him out of the gate. There were no torches there. In a moment or two he was in the dark. Behind him on the wall an alarm horn bellowed,

A short way beyond the gate he slowed the horse. Alarm horns still sounded on the wall but, as far as he could tell, no one was following him. "Do you hear anyone coming?" he asked Nargri.

"No."

The night was moonless by this time, and so dark that it was hard for him to see the road. He kept the horse to a walk. When dawn came he turned the horse off the road into the hills, going north. Nargri had been sleeping while he held onto her. She woke up and said, "I'm hungry,"

"I knew I'd forgotten something," Limper said. "I didn't bring any food."



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