



## **Bold as Brass**

**A Forgotten Realms® Story**

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### *Author's Note*

*This story was originally intended for a book called NEVERWINTER NIGHTS. A Forgotten Realms book, it had a unique hook. Seven stories would center around mystic artifacts. Each artifact would be hidden in the NEVERWINTER NIGHTS computer game. By reading the book, the player would get clues as to the whereabouts of nifty Easter Eggs in the game.*

*Cool idea. But the computer company just made the artifacts available for sale in taverns. So "with no reason for the book to exist" (What about the great stories?) it was killed.*

*Their loss. I got the rights back, so here's the story, never seen before. Enjoy.*

## Bold as Brass

"We need to talk, brother."

Odds and Ogham, thought Samir. The last people in Faerun that he wanted to see now crowded his anvil.

Davin and Keggarr were the armorsmith guildmasters for Neverwinter. Davin was lean and coarse, with two gold teeth proclaiming a fight lost years ago. Keggarr had once been powerful, but had grown fat and flabby. Neither had touched an anvil in years. They were too busy "organizing". Samir had no desire to be organized, but his turn had come.

"As you know, Samir," drawled Davin, gold teeth winking, "Neverwinter's becoming famous all over the North for its crafts. These new waterclocks and lamps -"

"I know what we make," interrupted Samir. "Cut to the chase. I've already said, I'm not interested in joining your little scheme."

Things were peacefully slow on a Wednesday afternoon, which is why the two guildmasters had come "recruiting".

Neverwinter proper rose at Samir's left hand, twisted streets and corniced towers and tiny shingled roofs looking much like a clockwork toy itself. Below the city wall, on a flat before fields and forest began, sat the combined marketplace and stockyards. Horses pranced in corrals, a burro turned a cider press, women stitched saddles and giggled. The autumn air was scented with manure and sawdust, apple cider and pumpkin bread and, by Samir's forge, hot metal and rust and smoking linseed oil.

"It's not a scheme," wheezed Keggarr, crossing fat arms over his chest. "We're going to make Neverwinter the grandest armory on the Sword Coast. All we offer is a chance to join our brotherhood and make Neverwinter proud. Make something of yourself too."

"Make myself a slave? Make you two rich?" Samir picked up his chin, though he was a head shorter and slighter than both smiths. With a thatch of hair always falling in his eyes, Samir looked like a muskrat who'd crawled out of the Neverwinter River. Despite butterflies in his belly, Samir's anger rose fit to choke him. "Did the hard hands of your brotherhood break both of Ashon's arms? Did your spirit push Kuri down those stairs that night it rained?"

"Fell things fall to unlucky people," said Davin evenly. "But smiths who come work on our projects -"

"I've got work!" rapped Samir. "You think I idle away the afternoon like you two? Look at that pile!"

The guildmasters glanced at the work to be done. A stew pot with a broken ear. An axe with a cracked face. A militia captain's shin guard with a snapped cinch ring. And more. Davin snorted. "This rubbish belongs in the city midden."

"It's nothing fancy," insisted Samir, "but it's tools people need to work. You know what work is, don't you?"

"We know." Keggar sucked air into his fat frame. "We work hard to improve our lot -"

"Then go to. Leave me be. I'm content."

Picking up his hammer, Samir meant to dismiss them, but the two guildmasters lingered, then glanced around. Other than the saddlemakers, no one paid attention to their discussion. Without asking, Davin plucked a pair of tongs from the loops around Samir's anvil.

"Hoy!" said the smith. "Hands off -"

Fast for a fat man, Keggar grabbed Samir's thatch of unruly hair and yanked. Savagely the smith was whirled around, tipped backward, and craned across his own anvil. When he squawled, Davin caught his tongue with filthy black tongs, cruel iron pinching flesh.

"Enough talk, Samir!" Davin twisted the tongs to make the smith howl.

"You'll work for us on our projects at the wages we specify, or you won't work at all! Got it?"

"And just to make sure ..." Leaving the smith pinned over his anvil, Keggar picked up a bucket of rusty water and doused Samir's portable forge in a whooping geyser of steam. Then he took a hammer to the waiting work, smashing pots and tools and armor and bridles.

Three of the saddlestitchers, friends of Samir's, came creeping to see if they could help, but Davin waved them off. When the destruction was complete, the two guildmasters banged Samir's head on his anvil until he saw stars. Davin hissed, "Pack your paltry irons to our shop before nightfall, Sir Armorsmith. We've got work for you!"

Flopping Samir to the dirt with a kick, the conspirators marched off.

The saddlestitchers helped him rise, twittering like birds. Samir groaned from a swollen tongue and battered head, but was more pained to see his customers' much-needed tools and cookware shattered beyond repair.

"That's vile, Samir! Those bullies can't do that!" Crafters themselves, the women were wroth. "I'd appeal to our aldermen! Or a judge, even! Or the lord himself!"

"That's been tried." Rubbing his

aching head, Samir cast about at his fallen anvil, soggy forge, and scattered tools. "Those two have salted bribes in the highest tiers of the city to push their scheme through. By the time any honest official got around to investigating, it'd be too late ...

"No, I'm afraid there's only one course left me ..."

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Far far away, across distances no human could measure, another armorsmith was equally fretful.

Gisnervi loomed over ten feet tall, weighed a ton, and boasted skin the color of a boiled lobster. He looked thin and corded as wrought iron, and was just as strong. Blunt horns jutted down from his brow and tusks up from his jaw. The only hair on his body was a wispy goatee that he tugged as he worried. He wore a loincloth and singlet of blue-green silk, for it was hot here, and on his chest hung a fretwork wheel, the badge of a brassworker.

Today Gisnervi wished he'd adopted some other profession. He bobbed a cloth-wrapped bundle and almost dropped it.

Past a hanging tapestry, music *tumpa-thumped*. In the throne room the highest-high of the City of Brass watched a troupe of lillends dance.

Waiting in a servant's alcove, Gisnervi peeked through a gap to see the elemental beings artfully weave impossible loops in the air while singing and playing harps. Taking advantage of the high vaulted ceiling, they zipped above and even through the flames of an ever-burning pyre, centerpiece of the hall and symbol of City of Brass, the hub of the Plane of Fire. The lillends' rainbow wings and mermaid tails swooped and soared in perfect time, mesmerizing as their heartbreaking and incomprehensible songs. The audience was several hundred of the city's highest caste, all guests of the Grand Sultan. Lesser sultans, beys, maliks, pashas, emirs and their sprawling families *oohed* and *ahhed* and applauded the clever dancers.

Gisnervi wished the lillends would play all night and sing everyone to sleep. Then he might slip quietly home -

"You! What do you here?"

"Eh?" Gisnervi turned, and backstepped.

Two efreet seemed puddled from molten bronze, and indeed fire licked from their mouths when they talked. Glowering, forbidding, the awesome figures wore loincloths of hippogriff hide that included the faces and beaks, one yellow-brown, one spotted roan. The hides were the only way to tell them apart, for they were akin as brown-glass

bottles.

"I asked," gurgled the first efreeti like a volcano guttering, "what you do here? Are you some assassin bent on slaughtering the grand sultan's family?"

"What?" Gisnervi's black eyes bulged. Even he, used to hammering hot brass, broke a sweat, for the tiny alcove was overwhelmed by the two bronze efreet, who towered fourteen feet and stretched half as wide. "No, venerable effendi! I - Assassination? Me? I am a humble brassworker! I wait only to present this gift to our lord, or rather Lord Minjan's great-grandson, Prince Pikki -"

"Give it here. We must inspect." The bronze efreeti snatched the bundle from Gisnervi's hands. Unfolding green and gold velvet, he held up a breastplate hardly bigger than a supper dish. It was artfully sculpted to match a boy's chest, with muscles and ribs exaggerated, but too Gisnervi's subtle artistry had captured a cloud across the bosom with a lightning bolt splitting the brisket to the navel. The cuirass shone brilliant as gold from days of hand-polishing, though the bronze efreet's fat thumbs were marring the gloss.

"It's traditional in the grand sultan's family to award a boy-child armor and sword on his seventh

birthday," went on Gisnervi. "Other artisans contribute the helm and sword and greaves, but I was lucky enough to make the breastplate. I can weave in protection from elements, you see. The boy's mother worries about him catching cold. I call it Storm Armor. See the clouds ... Uh, could you not slobber so?"

Ignoring the comment, the first efreet handed the armor to his companion behind, then clapped hands on Gisnervi and spun him around. Whapping hot hands up and down the brassworker's body, the bronze efreet mumbled, "Everyone must be searched. Plots are afoot. One never knows what mischief might befall our beloved grand sultan ..."

Poked and prodded, Gisnervi wondered at this indignity. He'd been searched by palace guards and a finicky djinn when he arrived. Then he'd been plunked in this alcove to wait, for hours, as the grandson's birthday unfolded in stages like a play. When would ...

"All's well. Here's your toy." Whirled back around, the brass breastplate was shoved into Gisnervi's red hands. With no apology, the two behemoths disappeared around a corner.

"Toy?" Cursing under his breath, Gisnervi buffed off fingerprints with the velvet wrapping. "Barbarian behemoths! Why would the palace employ -

"

"Are you ready? It's almost time." A djinni breezed into the alcove. He was tall, bald, proud, and elegantly dressed, but his gold collar marked a slave. He glided to the gap in the tapestry as if floating. "Once the music stops, comes a pause, then a drum and trumpet flourish -"

"I remember, I remember." Grousing, Gisnervi folded the breastplate in the fancy cloth. "Why didn't you warn your ham-handed hulks not to smudge up gifts -"

"Hulks? What are you talking about?" Abruptly the music blared a *tumply-ump-wham-clash*. "It's time! Go!"

Gisnervi was propelled through the gap into the throne room. For the first time, he could see the entire chamber, and gawked. Vast and round as a mountaintop, the room was encircled by high arched windows that overlooked the grandeur of the City of Brass. All around the compass winked onion-domed minarets and reedy towers roofed with facets of polished brass. In tier after tier descended magnificent buildings spun from glass in rainbow colors, or chased with silver like ivy vines, or carved of stone into fretwork delicate as spiderwebs. Beyond the teeming city boiled and bubbled seas and lakes of liquid magma spilled like drops of brass amid a black and gray landscape with its

own stark beauty. The savage landscape was lit by no sun, but rather by the gentle light of a sky white as a hummingbird's throat.

One glimpse was all the brassworker got, for by stepping past the tapestry he became the focus of a thousand eyes waiting for amusement. Sweat popped from Gisnervi's boiled-red brow, and he fought the urge to twiddle his chin beard. Sucking wind, the brassworker paced toward an ornate throne boasting as many tiers as the city it ruled. The Grand Sultan was a towering four-horned efreet with skin like black glass wrapped in gorgeous fabrics, stern and forbidding, though his craggy hand rested gently on the head of his great-grandson. Wiggling in his seat of honor, Prince Pikki positively glowed with honey-colored skin and a giant grin. Beside him were heaped treasures from the richest dynasties of the empire, but the boy already wore his most prized possessions, a brass helmet, greaves, baldric and scabbard, and he held aloft a jeweled scimitar. Behind Pikki sat his beaming mother, guest of honor among the sultans' thirty-four wives. Packed around the room, hundreds of efreet guests in every color of the rainbow watched in silence.

Praying he didn't stumble, Gisnervi marched past the eternal pyre with its hissing white-hot coals and stopped

twenty feet shy of the throne. The brassworker had mentally rehearsed a speech during weeks of burnishing the breastplate, but now under the gaze of hundreds of elite efreets the flowery phrases evaporated from his mind like sweat off an anvil. Gisnervi squeaked, "Bountifulness and Grandboy Sultan, present I the gift present of the Storm Armor!"

With a fumbling flourish, the brassworker whisked off the green and gold cloth and held the breastplate high. Hundreds oohed in appreciation. Pride trilled through Gisnervi's lean frame. Released by his grandsire's hands, Prince Pikki clasped the breastplate, eliciting a laugh from the crowd, then remembered his manners.

"Thank you, masterful armorsmith," piped Pikki, "for this most gracious and glorious gift!"

"You're welcome, your majesty. May the armor protect you both in combat and inclement weather." Gisnervi was thrilled by the prince's praise, for he'd toiled day and night for months to hand-tool the cuirass and enchant its charm. He got another thrill when the boy's mother nodded regally.

Slaves came forward with a ready-made harness. Pikki squirmed with delight as slaves hitched the Storm Armor across the boy's chest, then hung his baldric and resettled his helmet to

perfection.

Finally fully equipped for battle, Pikki swished his scimitar in the air as if beheading a dragon. Laughter and applause answered. Gisnervi stepped back as the boy pranced and danced to cut down imaginary foes, shouting challenges and threats in a fine display.

"My grandson is happy." A rumble like distant thunder shook Gisnervi's bones. The fierce Grand Sultan sported a tiny twinkle in his eye. "We shall remember this favor, brassworker."

*Rapture!* thought Gisnervi, but remembered to bow his head humbly. If he could be appointed an Official Armorer to the Grand Sultan's Court, benefits unbound would flow to his feet! Finally he'd gain the respect and honor he'd slaved for. He could build a fine shop, hire apprentices, custom-fit the greatest warriors of the realm, grow wealthy, marry -

"Ho, djinni, kneel before me!" Watched by hundreds, Prince Pikki stamped around the great hissing pyre, stabbing the air. "Take that, colossus! Surrender your treasure! I, Grand Sultan Pikki, command -"

Abruptly the boy's antics stopped. The room caught its breath. White-faced, stricken as if sick, Pikki touched his breastplate -

- and pitched flat on his face. Consternation. Women wailed, men

shouted, guards raced, the Grand Sultan roared. Trotting to Pikki's side, the court physician felt beneath the boy's jawline and pronounced, "The prince is dead!"

In stunned silence, every eye turned to Gisnervi. Flabbergasted, black eyes bulging, the brassworker raised two skinny arms as he told the room, "But - I didn't -"

"ASSASSIN!" roared a hundred voices.

Djinn and efreet guards cannoned into one another to kill Gisnervi. Slaves in gold collars dreamt of freedom as they plunged headlong to grab the criminal. Mothers, fathers, princes, emirs, and dozens more descended in a wave to tear the brassworker apart for murdering the beloved prince.

Backed against the Grand Sultan's flaming pyre, symbol of the Plane of Fire, Gisnervi took the only escape route possible.

Whirling, he dived headlong into white-hot coals.

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Far away, in a cooler place ...

"Well, things can't much worse, noble ass."

Samir, armorsmith of Neverwinter, knelt on a flat rock to sip from a pond. Beside him, a donkey hung with clanking

panniers slurped noisily with hairy lips. The water was cold and, stained by peat, fruity.

Thirst quenched, Samir cast about. Secluded, the vale was surrounded by pebbly hills stippled with gorse and heath and scruffy trees. Quiet except for the chaff of bluebirds arguing in a red pine. Lonely, because it was far from the beaten path.

"We're lost, Dragonbreath. We verge on The Crag, methinks. Nowhere near Longsaddle. I'd have sworn after Thundertree we followed The Gibdraw, but we must have veered along the Morgur. So here we be. Nothing to eat, only water to drink, late in the season so we'll suffer frost tonight - Eh?"

From beneath the peat-dark water, a slit-eyed slit-nose face squinted up at the armorsmith. And slowly grinned, friendly as a shark.

"*Spirit of the Serpent!*" Samir rocked back on his heels too late.

Claws like fishhooks erupted from the water and snagged Samir's leather apron. Another scaly arm burst free, splashing water in his eyes and snagging his head. Spluttering, trying to wrench loose, Samir saw three craggy forms trailing thick serrated tails explode from the pond and jump on his screaming donkey. Dragonbreath was plunged stumbling into the pond in a tremendous gout of water just as Samir was dragged



in face-first.

Flailing, thrashing, kicking did no good. Samir tried to drag his smithing hammer from his belt, but hands cold as a granite statue's crushed his knuckles. Belatedly Samir conserved his air, though his lungs shrieked already. He dropped like an anchor, sunk as if by krakens into the depths. Through a blur of tea-stained water and red haze, Samir saw the donkey churn bubbles with his furious kicking. The smith wondered which of them would drown first ...

With a shock, Samir's head broke water. Spitting and snorting, he sucked air greedily, but got no rest. Clutched by brawny slimy paws, he was toted through semi-darkness like a chicken to market. Light filtered from cracks high up. The ground was not dirt or stone, but large squares of polished marble thick with dust. Squinting about, Samir glimpsed a vase-shaped column and a dark doorway.

Ruins, he marvelled. Well, why not? The Neverwinter Woods were littered with ancient castles and old temples like the Tower of Twilight, though no one ever found any treasure. Likely he wouldn't find any either, for these ruins were infested by lizardfolk.

Near seven feet, mottled green and brown, with thick lashing tails, the lizards had underslung jaws riddled with snaggle teeth and eyes baleful as a

basilisk's. As they passed through a shaft of dust-moted sunshine, Samir saw his donkey being carried by four stocky warriors. From the way the beast's legs splayed and tongue lolled, the smith knew poor Dragonbreath was dead, either drowned or neck-broke. Trembling, the smith wondered if the donkey were the lucky one.

"I say, friends." Hacking water, Samir tried talking. Certainly he had no other hope. "I didn't know this little vale was your home. I'm sorry if we intruded. Uh, I don't have anything worth your while. You can keep my donkey if you like ..." Lugged through pitch-black corridors and chambers and halls, Samir jabbered like a magpie. If the lizardfolk understood a word, they paid no heed.

Smoky light showed ahead, along with shrill carols and hoots of triumph. Hunters returning home with prey, Samir gulped. He was fetched into a large room lined by more columns and floored by hexagonal flagstones. The soaring ceiling was arched like a cathedral. Light obscured by dust and smoke streamed in at regular intervals, so somewhere up there windows poked free of dirt and brush. Who'd have believed a palace lay buried under these scruffy hills?

Samir was dropped on stone so hard his head rang. A dozen lizardy children,

or hatchlings, scurried to see the captive. Coughing pond water, Samir was prodded, pinched, and hair-yanked by small claws. Then bigger talons brutally shucked his long shirt, belt, leather apron, hammer, pouches, and boots, leaving Samir as naked as the scaly children. Skinny as a skinned rabbit, though his shoulders and forearms were knotty from slinging a hammer, Samir shivered and gasped as webbed toes trod his hands and feet. Bonds of green rawhide were cinched to his wrists and ankles, then he was dragged taut as a drumhead and lashed 'round his body to a thick pole smelling of charcoal. The ominous reek gave Samir a hint of his destination. With lizard offspring capering and croaking, Samir was lugged like a dead deer to a long firepit where flagstones had been pried up. Samir's pole was plunked into two uprights. Lizards raked coals, tossed on kindling and broken tree branches, then blew up flames. In seconds Samir had dried over a crackling, growing fire.

Trying to stifle panic, Samir wriggled against his bonds. No escape there. He squinted through rising smoke around the fire pit, but saw only grinning fanged faces. One big warrior licked his lips with a lolling pink tongue. Praying to an assortment to gods, Samir told each one, "I'm sorry I ran away from Neverwinter! I had no

choice! I couldn't fight the guildmasters! If I'd gotten to Longsaddle and bided my time, maybe Davin and Keggar would fall out like thieves and the guild could get back on its feet ..."

No ghostly voice echoed in his skull, no lightning struck the lizardfolk, no heavenly being descended with a flaming sword on white wings. Samir sneezed as smoke made his nose run. Fire made his naked skin tingle.

"Roasted on a spit over a slow fire," the smith mumbled bitterly. "Food for lick-lipping lizards. My luck. I wish I'd never said things couldn't get worse."

Samir grit his teeth rather than shriek. If these warriors valued bravery, they might cut him loose. For now, they only poked him, valuing tenderness. A trio of lizards dragged in a tree and broke off branches thick as Samir's leg, then piled them on the fire. As ominous snaps and crackles arose and flames licked at Samir's skin, he screamed. A chorus of grunts and chuckles answered.

This was a horrid death, thought Samir wildly. Fire searing his body, smoke wracking his throat, ashes scouring his eyes, so much pain he screamed again -

- and the earth cracked -  
- and the firepit dropped away.

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This was the last time, thought Gisnervi, he'd dive headlong into a raging inferno.

As he swam through fire, the efreeti imagined he'd sunk through the palace cellars and passed from the City of Brass altogether, because the bed of coals went down and down as if to the bottom of the world. Certainly this ocean of flame must encompass every fire in existence. Gisnervi had swum through red-orange coals for hours. Ashes made his eyes gritty, his nose and ears stuffy, and his mouth foul as a dead crocodile. Now that terror had ebbed, and he was unlikely to be ripped apart by an angry mob, he was bored, and hot, and itchy, and tired of swimming.

Further, Gisnervi was lost. He wasn't even sure he still dwelt on the Plane of Fire. Passing a pair of salamanders, creatures half-efreeti and half-serpent stippled with prickles, he'd asked directions. At home in their element, the selfish beggars just sneered and sailed on. Gisnervi had tried to catch a fire elemental, but it only goggled vacant blue eyes and flitted away like a scrap of parchment. So the brassworker forged on, venturing farther and farther from anywhere he knew.

Heavier even than his arms was his heart, for Gisnervi could never go home. Poor little Pikki had fallen dead after donning Gisnervi's armor, so the brassworker was either banished forever or else condemned to an exquisite death drawn by the Grand Sultan's expert executioners.

As to *why* the dear child dropped dead -

A scream pierced the efreeti's thoughts. Not an elemental's drawn-out wail or a salamander's bark, but an earthly cry. Which meant, Gisnervi reasoned, somewhere close by lay a portal to the Material World. An unpleasant and cold place to visit, he'd heard, but someplace pursuers were unlikely to search. So, tuning pointed ears to the echo of that scream, Gisnervi cavorted like a salmon and swam.

As the efreeti poked free of the firepit, he first thought he'd made a mistake. This plane wasn't just cold, it was frigid. His bald boiled head seemed to skim with ice. Noisy too. Caterwauls and shrieks and grunts trumpeted all around. As the efreet fished for a handhold, he knocked some poles awry. Finally he planted red hands on solid ground and shimmied upward. A solid smack against his chest proved to be stone-tipped spear thrown hard, but the efreet brushed it off like a fly.

Scissoring long legs, Gisnervi dragged free of sucking coals, brushed himself off, then squinted around.

"Hunh." Once his eyes adjusted to the dimness, for he'd stared at yellow-red glares for hours, Gisnervi found little to see. A great hall with an arched ceiling. A few crude oddments littered about. The caved-in firepit. And some dingy grub-like creature obviously spitted for dinner. The efreeti sighed. Of all the dismal pestholes -

Gisnervi startled as the grub spoke. "Greetings, O supreme diety! Welcome to, uh, these ruins! You have saved my miserable life by dousing the fire and chasing off the lizardfolk, so I owe you undying fealty! Gladly will I serve as your slave forever if, uh, you'll only free me of these odious bonds! Truly, I'm a lucky man to witness your arrival, O great one! Long I hope to live to tell my grandchildren and their grandchildren that I bespoke one so magnificent, marvelous, wondrous, kind, sterling, generous-hearted -"

"Cease! You twitter like an yrthak!" The efreeti peered in the gloom at a creature mother-naked and half-cooked. "Who are you?"

"Samir, your servant, O grand one!"

"No, fool. I meant, *what* are you?"

"Oh. A man, merciful master."

"Ah." An idiot, thought Gisnervi.

He'd heard of men. They were always clowns and dolts in efreet legends and tales. Clamping his tusks lest they chatter, Gisnervi hooked a black fingernail under the man's bonds and snipped them like threads. "There. Begone."

"Uh, gladly, munificent one." The human scuttled to a pile of shorn clothes and tackle. Hurriedly he thrust his arms amid rags. A donkey or ass lay there dead, but the efreeti didn't bother to wonder why. He had his own problems.

Gisnervi scuffed at the cooling firepit and found it solid dirt beneath. He'd need a new fire and bed of coals to pass back into the planes-spanning ocean of flame, but then where? He couldn't return home, yet this plane, wherever it was, was too frigid to endure. "You."

"GAAH!" The man called Samir startled so hard a belt and hammer went flying. "Uh, yes? What is your wish, O lofty one?"

Gisnervi frowned. Had this manling no brain? And why had he a death's-head rictus plastered on his stupid face? "Build a fire."

"Yes, your worship. Glad I am to be of service, O miraculous rescuer -"

"Stop blithering or I'll bite your head off!" Gisnervi's rumbling tones shook the walls, but he shivered too. He watched the man scrape charcoal together

and fumble a flint and steel. The creature was hampered because his tattered shirt hung askew. A sleeve dangled from his chest and dragged in the ashes. Really, thought the efreeti, the wretch was hopeless.

Disgusted, and worried about his future in this frigid realm, the efreeti spun a quick circle and spiralled into the air like a dervish. An open window high up showed hills and brush and trees under a wan sky. Ugly, unpromising, and dreadfully cold.

Landing in a flurry of dust, Gisnervi spotted Samir dashing down a dark corridor. With a long bound, the efreet caught up, whirled him through the air, and plunked him back by the fireplace. "Build a fire or I'll use your bones for tinder! I can't believe it's so cold. How do you survive this arctic weather?"

"Uh, our warm season just passed, sire." Samir blew up a cloud of sparks and ash that made him cough. "The - ACK! - countryside will be buried in snow and ice before long."

"Wonderful news." Gisnervi paced by the fire, hands clasped behind his back. Lakes of Lava, he'd perish if he lingered here! Best he crawl back to the Plane of Fire and hide out in some remote region. If he could get word to friends -

"Uh, master." Samir straightened

his ratty clothes with shaking hands. "May I ask, are you a djinni? Because in the old stories, they sometimes grant wishes -"

"DJINNI?" Gisnervi swivelled so fast the man toppled backward. "We keep djinn as slaves! I'm an EFREETI!"

"Ah, of course!" The man grinned like a bleached skull. "I should have known, O noble one, because you're so - red."

"At least, I was an efreet." Agitated, Gisnervi resumed his pacing. "I'm banished now. And an efreeti far from flame might as well be a rast on a rainbow."

"Truly," agreed Samir, obviously without a clue. "Uh, what was your crime?"

"I killed the sultan's favorite grandson."

"Ah." The man crept to his feet. "Uh, perhaps I should gather more wood. Outside. In the forest. It's just chock full of wood."

"Sit. Feed the fire." Gisnervi's long hand mashed Samir flat. "I never intended to kill the boy. I only gave him a gift. Its presentation was to be my crowning triumph, but it crumbled into the worst nightmare you can imagine ..."

Airing his gloomy thoughts, Gisnervi told the whole story, finishing, " ... No sooner did the poor

child don the breastplate, a minute at most, then he fell dead. Perhaps he grew too excited. Any road, I was branded an assassin and had to flee. I can never return home."

"That is sad," said the man.  
"Strange that you're an armorsmith. I am too."

"Eh?" Gisnervi peered. The oaf didn't look capable of hammering his thumb. "What do you fashion?"

"Oh, I make repairs, mostly. But I had to leave town ..." The man sketched troubles stirred up by two avaricious smiths named Davin and Keggar. " ... So I'm homeless as you are. I was trekking to Longsaddle to set up my forge there, but I got lost and nearly eaten. And if I go home, I'll suffer two broken arms. Or worse."

"It's the same all over." Still cold, Gisnervi picked up a burning brand and stroked it along his skin. Being but a weak cousin of pure elemental fire, the flame gave little heat. "In the City of Brass, artisans suffer merchandise inspectors. If we produce inferior work, we might be sunk headfirst into molten lava or skinned alive or disembowelled so dire gricks can gorge on our organs. Purely as a warning, you understand."

"I understand." Obviously the man was fuddled, but he returned to a niggling point. "You gave a prince a breastplate and he died? I hate to

contradict, sire, but that makes no sense. Unless ... As a sultan's grandson he'd be the target of assassins. Could someone have smeared poison on the armor, or planted a poisoned needle?"

"Don't be an ass!" Gisnervi tossed the burning brand onto the fire. "I fashioned the thing myself. Nine months of hard work. I never let anyone touch it ..."

Samir raised singed eyebrows.  
"Yes?"

"Someone did touch it!" Gisnervi plucked his wispy chin beard. "Two bronze brutes ripped it from my hands to inspect it, or so they claimed. One spun me around to search me while the other held the armor. But it was only a minute or two -"

"That's it!" said Samir. "That's long enough to smear poison -"

"No!" Gisnervi's bark made the human jump. "I polished off the fingerprints! There was nothing smeared on either side or stuck along any edge of the breastplate!"

"A curse then. Or a spell. They'd leave no sign of tampering." Rising, wary, Samir rummaged through some saddlebags hung on the dead donkey. Gisnervi looked up at a clank, wondering if the human dared draw a weapon, but he'd only shifted a sledgehammer and pick onto marble flagstones.

"A curse ..." Gisnervi stared at dancing flames. "That signifies. No one may bring weapons or magicked implements into the palace unless thoroughly inspected by the head djinn. My breastplate was pored over minutely. Yet if someone laid on a curse *after* the inspection, there's hope."

"Hope of what?" The man munched soggy hardtack and watched the shadows.

"A curse isn't like an enchantment. I wove a weather-protection spell into the breastplate, and it took days. Those brutes only had the armor for a moment. If they did lay on a curse, it's thin. It should peel off like a paint spatter. And whatever the curse did might be undone!"

"Well, then, your task is simple." Samir fiddled with the fire. "Get the breastplate and un-magic it."

"Not me." Gisnervi's black eyes gleamed in firelight. "You."

Samir swallowed hardtack wrong and choked. "M-m-me?"

"For certain. Why else did the fates fetch me here to rescue you?"

"I wished for rescue!" chirped Samir. "Isn't that enough?"

"No! You owe me respite! And I can't go back. I'd be identified in a trice." Gisnervi paced back and forth, absorbed in the mechanics of the problem. "But I can dispatch *you* to the City of Brass. Small and puny, you can

skulk free as a mouse. The breastplate can't have gone far. So. You sneak around, steal the breastplate, and return it here. I'll get the curse exorcised, and maybe we'll point out the real assassins! The Grand Sultan might even - eh?"

A rapid pattering carried through the cavern. Gisnervi saw Samir pelting down a corridor, shirt hem flapping like a deer's tail. The giant bellowed, "Come back here, you ungrateful flea-bitten son of a fungus!" Whirling up a dust devil, Gisnervi zipped after the fugitive.

Intent on running, the smith looked over his shoulder rather than ahead. Gisnervi grunted as the human crashed headlong into a scowling lizardman, one of four. The beasts were all shark-tooth mouths and fishhook claws, and they chuckled in croaks as they hoisted Samir like a prize trout. "Helllllllp!"

Ducking to pass under human-sized lintels, the red-skinned giant swept toward the party like a tornado, then flicked a hand. "Begone, troglodytes!"

From Gisnervi's fingertips shot balls of lighting that whacked the lizards in the head, throat, brisket, and legs. The missiles crackled as they hit, scorching scaly hide and raising a stink. Punished, the lizards dropped Samir on his head and frog-hopped off into darkness, serrated tails wig-

wagging behind.

Gisnervi spiralled around the fallen Samir on his cushion of air. Black eyes glared as he tugged on his wispy goatee. "Friend smith, I've saved your life twice. A third meeting with those squatty scaled interlopers will serve you ill."

"Agreed. I'll do whate'er you request." Samir pushed to his feet and dusted his rump. "The fates have willed I shan't see another sunset. What's the difference if I'm eclipsed here or elsewhere?"

"That's the spirit!" Gisnervi clapped the smith's back. "And don't all mortals long to behold the fabled City of Brass?"

"None that I know." Trudging back to the fire, Samir again straightened his shorn clothing. "I'd be content just to see the four walls of my humble home again."

"I too," admitted Gisnervi. "But a few chance chores beckon first. Who knows? Mayhaps we'll both survive this mad venture. Even prosper!"

The human only sighed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"... The Storm Armor will be easy to spot. There's nothing else like it in the City of Brass."

"Undoubtedly," hedged Samir. "Just

how big is this city?"

"Oh, it's big, make no mistake. The largest city on the Plane of Fire, which is the largest plane of all, the sages say. No one's ever counted the entire populace, but the city boasts at least half a million souls."

Samir gasped. "And I'm supposed to find one tiny breastplate?"

"Of course. It's in the highest part of the palace, which is the highest building in the highest part of the city. Now stop wasting breath and prepare yourself."

"We who are about to die ..." muttered Samir. Somehow he couldn't trust a creature ten feet tall, red as a sugar maple in autumn, bald, fanged, and horned, who crawled out of firepits and proposed impossible crusades. Still, as long as this crazy genie lingered, Samir was safe from lizardfolk, so he followed orders and prepared as best he could, if only to make a decent-looking corpse. With his sewing kit he'd stitched the worst rents in his clothes. He'd dried his boots, though the toes now curled. At the giant's behest, he'd stripped the harness off his drowned donkey and slung straps crosswise over his chest to form crude holsters. From each hip hung his sledgehammer and pick. Steel tools would stand Samir in good stead in a city made of brass, claimed the brassworker.

As an added precaution, Gisnervi



had shucked the fretwork wheel adorning his chest, his guild badge, and fastened it to Samir's chest straps. The giant explained, "Undoubtedly they stripped the breastplate from poor Pikki's body first thing. It will be stashed somewhere under lock and key. The court's enchanters will want to study it. My badge will point you to it, since I fashioned both artifacts."

"If you say so."

Gisnervi fussed with the fire, scraping and puffing and smoothing the coals with his hands. He'd heaped wood for hours until the bed glowed so hot it dried Samir's eyeballs. The smith hung back. He'd suffered enough fire to last ten lifetimes.

Eventually the brassworker clapped his hands. "Ready. All we needs do is douse you with water -"

"Water?" piped Samir. "Why?"

"Protection." Gisnervi picked up a man-high amphora he'd found in the ruins. "Hold still!"

"Wait!" Once again, Samir retreated from the towering efreet. "What does -"

Water cascaded over the smith's head, sousing him to the skin when he'd just gotten dry. Spluttering, rubbing his eyes, he couldn't avoid being picked up like a puppy by the brass-thewed efreet.

"Stop wiggling!" Gisnervi juggled the smith upside-down. "You'll spoil my

aim!"

"Aim?" Clutched high in two red hands, Samir scissored his legs helplessly at the ceiling as the efreet marched to the roaring fire. "What are you shooting -"

Winding up, grunting with effort, Gisnervi slammed Samir with all his might head-first into the fire.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!"

Screaming all the way, Samir saw flashes of yellow-red, then blue-white, then red, orange, and so on, all the colors of fire interlaced by smudgy crinkles of black. Vaguely the smith realized he passed through some otherworldly realm of fire, and so hollered all the louder -

- and grunted as he was vomited out of a blazing inferno.

Landing on a floor with a bone-bruising bounce, Samir skidded for what seemed miles across flagstones of polished brass slippery as glass. Spinning on his back, he glimpsed snatches of a room vast as all outdoors. A ceiling painted with stories from legend whizzed by. Soaring walls were split by tall arched windows that showed onion-dome minarets on towers thin as grass stalks, all pointing to a sky white as a snowstorm. In dizzying snatches, Samir noted that hundreds of people wore white wrapped about their bodies in long strands.

Spinning out of control, warbling in fright, Samir tilted so the heavy pick tucked in his belt suddenly snagged a polished flagstone with an ear-grating SCREEK! The smith gyrated to an abrupt stop, gulping to not be sick all over the opulent floor.

Groaning, Samir staggered to his feet. Once his vision stopped spinning, for the first time he saw the room clearly. And wished he hadn't.

Efreet from nine to nineteen feet tall filled the room like a restless forest. Samir saw skin like black glass, green jade, blue sapphires, some even striped like tigers and zebras. Fur adorned heads and shoulders and chests. Everywhere were exhibited short and long horns, yellow and white tusks, flaming eyeballs and nostrils, and more horrors. A nightmare of monsters. Yet curiously, every silent being was draped in long folds of white looped around waists, shoulders, thighs, even around heads like hoods. Or shrouds.

Gaping, Samir realized invisible hands tugged at his breast. Looking down, he saw Gisnervi's fretwork badge hovered a handspan away from his chest, straining at the straps as if drawn toward a lodestone.

Then Samir saw. The glaring giants clustered around a low coffin surrounded by a kingdom's worth of jewels and metalware and clockwork toys and other

treasures. In the coffin, reposing in state, lay a boy even smaller than Samir. His golden skin was mirrored by a gleaming brass breastplate strapped to his chest.

A funeral wake! babbled Samir. Mourners bedecked in white, the color of a corpse. And I, precious fool, just invaded the deathwatch.

Hundreds of horrific heads craned toward the lone man. Then the voice of an angry ruler bellowed, "A human? Here? Guards! EXTERMINATE HIM!"

Without any plan, only knowing he mustn't stay still, Samir put down his head and ran. He skedaddled across the polished brass flagstones toward his only goal, the coffin. Efreet growled and yelled and roared. Some dodged aside, not wishing to interfere with stampeding guards, all eight-foot Harem Guard Djinn who hated their enslavement and welcomed the chance to rend and tear another being to shreds. As they converged, Samir ducked on wings of panic amid a towering crowd of efreet, a seeming forest of bare legs and feet.

More howls. As the robed and mustachioed harem djinn tried to follow the felon, they were cuffed and whacked by efreet not wishing to be touched by inferiors. As blows and curses rang, Samir stole the opportunity to veer back toward the coffin. Spells began to sizzle about the room, shot by efreet

and djinn alike: pyrotechnics, fireballs, blasts of frost breath, green clouds of gas. In the roiling confusion, Samir ducked and dodged, always pointed in the right direction by the fretwork wheel on his chest.

But Oh, my! The heat! Already Samir gasped for air. The room was hotter than desert stone in summertime at noon. The atmosphere throbbed with heat. If Samir hadn't spent years slaving over a furious forge, he'd have shrivelled like a daisy in a blast furnace.

Panting, skittering left and right willy-nilly, the smith spotted the coffin again, almost within striking distance. Then two glowering guards shut the gap before him. Time, thought Samir, to pull his secret weapon.

As the djinn slid scimitars from scabbards with a sobbing moan, the human smith dragged free his pick. Efreet dived aside as twin bronze blades scythed the air to slice Samir in half. The smith hoisted his heavy steel tool at the same time.

KA-CLANG! Bronze blades shattered on steel, as they always will. The two guards frowned, puzzled, at broken hilts. This being the City of Brass, the djinn had never seen steel before. Or so Samir hoped.

Still, eight-foot guards didn't need weapons to kill one puny human. Dropping their hilts with twin clanks,

they jumped to throttle Samir with bare hands. The smith pulled his second trick. Striking with years of practice, timing the blow just right, Samir slammed the pick hard enough to shatter granite.

Djinn yowled as both their pointed shoes were pinned to the brass floor. Samir wasn't sure if he'd nailed feet or just shoes, but he didn't care. Leaving the pick, he whipped behind a laughing efreeti and raced toward his goal.

Bellows and shrieks echoed as the only human in the City of Brass broke from the crowd. A pair of wicked icicles screamed past Samir's ear, then a spear sizzled by. Two brawny hands grabbed, but Samir evaded, for once glad he was short and slight. Treasure was heaped around the coffin, gifts dedicated to the memory of Prince Pikki. Samir was here to violate the dead, which would likely plunge him in hellfire for a few eternities, but he had no choice. With a clatter and clang the smith scrambled up the pile, leaned into the coffin, latched onto the breastplate, and yanked.

The straps were tough. Grunting, the smith yanked again. Djinn guards and efreet citizens wailed in horror as poor Prince Pikki was jerked to a sitting position and shaken like a dice cup.

"Lords of eternity," gasped Samir, "even the dead conspire against me!"

No use tugging, and guards charged from all directions. Whipping out his belt knife, Samir sliced the straps. Handsome honey-colored Prince Pikki flopped back on his satin pillows and cushions as if suddenly sleepy. Samir clutched the breastplate against his chest and -

- felt a sickening lurch. The coffin rested on sawhorses or braces draped with a tapestry. Samir's rabid jiggling and jerking had tilted the coffin. Screams rang through the vast hall as, with an ominous creak, the coffin slid off the braces, slithered down the pile of cascading treasures, and crashed to the floor. Prince Pikki, late and most beloved son of the City of Brass, was unceremoniously dumped on his face to roll like a rag doll. Samir just managed to jump clear before the coffin struck the floor and split along all its seams.

Samir was hardly safe. Still clutching the breastplate, he cast about wildly for some way to flee and found none. Many efreets recoiled in terror as if Samir were some vile demon summoned to defile and mock the dead. Other guests were simply frozen in shock or else boiled in rage. Djinn guards didn't know what to do. Such an audacious attack in the palace's throne room was beyond their ken, and if Samir could stop two stalwart djinn with a single

blow of a magic weapon, he could wither others to cinders, or worse. And with all the shouting and screaming, it was impossible to hear orders.

Save one. Standing astride his multi-tiered throne, His Most Excellent and Bountiful Lord Minjan, Grand Sultan of the City of Brass in the Plane of Fire, bellowed like a bull facing slaughter. "Kill him! Rend him! All of you, every subject and every slave, *tear that infernal imp to shreds or suffer the same fate!*"

The command galvanized the room. As if in a dream, Samir saw every hand rise to crush him, every eye spurt fire to immolate him, every foot stamp forward to stomp him flat.

Time, he thought, for his second and last secret weapon.

Juggling the brass breastplate, Samir ripped loose his sledgehammer. With everyone an enemy, he needn't decide where to strike. Hefting the heavy hammer by the end of the handle, he shouted and spun a circle. Steel banged knees, battered knuckles, shattered a brass belt buckle, spanked off Prince Pikki's sullied coffin, slammed aside a brass scimitar - and punched a tiny space through which Samir glimpsed daylight. Clutching brass and steel, he slid on his knees and squirted under the sawhorse that had supported the coffin. Skittering to his feet, he

ran, flailing the steel hammer hysterically left and right and behind. Two guards jumped in his way, this time with brass shields cast with hideous medusa designs. With the strength of a madman, Samir flung the sledgehammer. One shield shattered and the other was knocked awry. Hammerless, Samir squirted between them.

Amazed that he thought so coolly while gibbering in panic, Samir realized he had no plan for returning to the Material Plane. He'd hoped grabbing the breastplate would magically whisk him away home, but no magic wind scooped him up. Perhaps he should plunge back into the pyre, which seemed suicide. Any road, he had only one clear path. Ahead, below a tall arched window, yawned a gap in the floor, obviously the head of a stairwell. Maybe Samir could vault downstairs and hide in the kitchens or elsewhere, a human rat cowering between the walls of this giant-infested palace. It was worth a try, so he raced on.

Slipping and sliding as if on ice, with hundreds of heavy feet pounding at his heels, Samir jumped for the stairwell - and discovered no stairs.

Of course, reasoned a distant part of Samir's mind. Efreet and djinn could fly on those little dust devils. He'd seen Gisnervi do it. So why, in their homeland, would they need stairs? A square hole in the floor would suffice.

But not for humans.

Screaming, Samir dropped twenty feet or more. Likely he would have died had not the floors been so highly polished. As it was, falling at an angle, he skipped like a stone across waves, bouncing painfully a time or two. He'd almost congratulated himself on his miraculous escape -

- when he bounced one more time right out a window.

Squawling, the smith got a brief eagle-eye view of the City of Brass spread beyond his boot toes. Spires, minarets, intricate buildings spun of glass and stone and metal, soaring bridges and more all beckoned - like hungry teeth set to gobble him up when he splatted hundreds of feet below.

Clawing air desperately, the hand of the blacksmith snagged a window cornice at the last second. After swinging free for a heartstopping eternity, Samir jerked to a halt and slammed on his back. Still clutching the breastplate, and testing delicately with his toes, he found he'd crashed on a stepped tier four feet wide. Drawing his toes back gingerly, trying to breath around a heart pounding fit to burst, Samir crabbed backwards and huddled against the building, tight as a coat of paint.

His situation, Samir soon decided, hadn't improved much. Better he'd

splattered or been impaled on a minaret far far below, because any moment he'd be hauled back inside and minced by horny multi-hued hands. At least he wouldn't suffer long, he thought dolefully.

With shouts of triumph, djinn slaves and efreet discovered the offender. With wind whistling around his ears, barely able to open his eyes, Samir saw efreet lean from nearby windows. More peered from the throne room above. Djinn harem slaves hopped out and floated light as thistledown to Samir's left and right. Two efreet even hovered in empty air lest he dive for freedom straight down. One by one, the denizens of the City of Brass folded brawny arms across their breasts and glowered at the loneliest human on the Plane of Fire.

"Father Sky and Mother Earth," gibbered Samir, "my only prayer is that, when they're done with me, some shred of my soul finds its way home, lest I remain an unwanted ghost baking in this hot air until eternity crumbles!"

Done praying, Samir closed his eyes and waited for whatever fate dealt.

The answer was totally unexpected.

"Wait!" called a young voice from above. "Don't hurt him! I'm all right!"

Cracking an eyelid, Samir peeked. Hanging from a window right above beamed Prince Pikki, hale and hearty and

grinning.

\* \* \* \* \*

"... Thus are you pardoned of all sins, human and efreeti both, and free to go with our blessing."

The magnificent voice of Grand Sultan Lord Mingan pounded Samir's ears and rumbled against his breastbone, yet he grinned just as widely as Prince Pikki. Beside him, red-skinned Gisnervi smiled too, showing teeth like pickets in a fence. The Storm Armor shone in his hands.

A lot had happened in a few hours. Examined by the court physician, Prince Pikki was pronounced fully restored in body and soul. The latter diagnosis was especially important. The curse laid upon Gisnervi's breastplate at the last moment had proven fairly mild, as the brassworker guessed, so only sucked a portion of the prince's essence into the virgin metal. Sniffing the breastplate for traces of the curse, clever viziers had scryed out the twin bronze brutes and wrung out the plot. With the boy seeming dead, in such a hot environment he would quickly be entombed with his ancestors - later to be disinterred, kidnapped, revived, and ransomed for a fortune. What foiled the plot, the Grand Sultan made clear, was Samir's ripping the cursed breastplate off the boy's

body. Once Samir explained his presence, Gisnervi was summoned home by two messenger djinns.

Just like that, Samir and Gisnervi were heroes.

Standing before the throne, surrounded by hordes of smiling citizens, with the plucky prince by their side, the two basked in the glory of their unplanned valor. Then Prince Pikki piped, "May I have my armor back?"

A hush descended. The Grand Sultan's volcanic face flushed in momentary anger, then unclouded. The ruler patted his grandson's tiny head, but pointed a finger thick as a rolled rug at Gisnervi. "Brassworker, we know you toiled long and hard to create the Storm Armor. But sight of the artifact stirs unpleasant memories. We charge you to fashion new armor for Pikki's eighth birthday, not just a breastplate, but a full suit or armor befitting his new status as a warrior. As for that once-cursed cuirass, take it elsewhere."

So saying, the Grand Sultan struck his hands together like a thunderclap.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ears ringing, Samir and Gisnervi peered around. They stood again in the dark dank ruins under the wilds near the Neverwinter Woods. Samir's eyes bugged. "That was quick."

"One reason why he's Grand Sultan." Gisnervi tugged his chin beard as he cast about. "Likely the lizards won't be back. Best I leave the armor here. I can always return for it later, after the stories die down or grow muddled."

Tilting the breastplate, Gisnervi passed his great red hands over the intricate surface. A finger lingered on the artfully etched storm cloud and lightning bolt. Briefly a golden shimmer flickered across the brass.

"What's that?" asked Samir. "Magic?"

"Just a cantrip. If anyone touches the armor, I'll know. Let's put it ... here." Searching, the efreet set the armor in a crack in the wall where two building blocks had shifted.

"It's a shame to tuck it away to oblivion," said Samir. "It really is a masterpiece, the most beautiful armor I've ever beheld."

Oddly, Gisnervi laughed. "That's what we smiths like to hear most, isn't it, simple praise for our hard work? But how often are we denied it? No matter. I'll have a proper workshop near the palace soon, with apprentices and journeymen and more forges than I can oversee, likely. I'll craft armor for princes and sultans such as never before seen!"

"Wish I could say the same," said Samir. "I can't sail home to glory

because of two rat-greedy guildmasters. I just wish -"

"Wishes come from djinn, not efreet." Gisnervi dusted his long red hands. "Still, I may be able to help. Show me the way."

Scooping up the smith like a child, the efreet hummed some weird tune that sent them both rising in the air on a minor tornado. Spiralling up to the arched ceiling, Gisnervi and Samir whirled out a square window into twilight. Above the brushy hill and shining pond they buzzed like a dragonfly and its prey. As Samir stuttered directions, Gisnervi zipped along the evening sky, so high the armorsmith thought they'd brush winking stars. In minutes, the smoking volcano that some called the Mariners' Mark and others Mount Moonstone whisked by underneath. So went the Neverwinter Woods, until before them rolled the Sea of Swords glittering in moonlight. As Samir babbled, Gisnervi arced toward the ground like a shooting star. City walls, stately elms, tidy gardens and the hand-hewn towers of the Temple of Tyr rushed by Samir's feet, then the two landed light as milkweed fluff in a crooked street before a two-story building not far from the Dolphin Bridge where cascades babbled and sang.

"This is the place." The two had agreed what to do. Clutching the

smithing hammer shoved in his belt, Samir pushed open a double door. "I'll call."

The smith's guild was rough-cut lumber stacked on a stone foundation, but homey and warm with a huge central fireplace. As the day drew to a close, smiths and journeymen and other townsfolk crowded the bar, though the atmosphere was moody and glum. A few folk nodded civilly to Samir as he strode the length of the room. Many marvelled as he marched to the hall's far corner.

The guildmasters Davin and Keggar occupied their favorite table, where they did more business than in the guild offices on the balcony circling above. Davin was lean and Keggar was fat, and both were smug as they plotted over foaming mugs and a chalkboard with names tallied in two columns. Glancing up, they scowled at Samir. Davin said, "Finally came to your senses, eh?"

"No." Flushed with pent-up anger, Samir drew his smith's hammer and smashed it square on the chalkboard so shards flew in all directions.

For a second, neither guildmaster could believe what they saw. Then both scrambled from their chairs mouthing curses. Samir stalled by levelling his hammer at their red-veined noses.

"You two rascals," Samir announced to the room, "have pushed Neverwinter's



smiths around long enough! From this day hence, you two will step down and return to your anvils! We'll vote in new guildmasters, not your cronies or toadies, and then we smiths will *work on what we will as we please!*"

Stunned silence. A few smiths murmured approval, then more joined in, and soon cheers rang to the rafters. Yet the roars of approval died as Davin and Keggar braced small Samir from two sides.

"And you," sneered Davin, "will enforce this new rule?"

"Not I," said Samir evenly. "My friend. GISNERVI!"

The front doors were too low for the efreet to enter, so he simply ripped off the front of the guildhall. Wood shrieked and stone tumbled as the wall was yanked free and tossed aside with a tremendous crunch and clatter. The ten-foot boiled-red efreet stormed inside to stand behind his human friend.

Spectators mashed themselves against the bar and walls and stayed very still. Keggar gibbered in fright. Davin wet his breeches.

Flames shimmered from his eyes and mouth as the efreet told the terrified guildmasters, "I, Gisnervi, Royal Armorer to His Most Excellent and Bountiful Lord Minjan, Grand Sultan of the City of Brass in the Plane of Fire, stand in Samir's debt, so he enjoys my

protection. You two do not. Consider stepping down as guildmasters. Better yet, relocate a hundred leagues down the coast. Because if ever I hear you raised a finger or whispered a word against my companion -"

No use talking. Davin ran screaming out the shorn front of the guildhall. Keggar fainted and flopped to the floor.

Smiling, Gisnervi caught his human friend with a curious cross-armed double handshake. "I go. Thank you again, little human. You have proved yourself bold as brass this day, and all men shall know it."

"Farewell." Samir dropped his hands. "Gisnervi, I feared you when we first met, but now find you the dearest friend one could imagine!"

Laughing loud and long, the smiling efreet spread red arms, rose on a whirling column of wind, and plunged into the roaring fire.

"'Bold as brass and all men shall know it?' What did that mean?" Puzzled, Samir rubbed his chin. Something winked like gold.

Looking down, the armorsmith laughed. His fingernails were pure brass.

END