

## **How There Came to be a North Star**

**by Richard T. Sale for Carol, Christmas Eve 1987**

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All children are curious. One night, and it was a cold, still winter night, the huge, sprawling city was getting ready for sleep when, turning a corner, there came a little girl and her older brother, walking past the cozy houses lit up cheerily. They were bundled up against the cold, and noticed the glad light the street lamps shed on the parked cars which glistened and sparkled like gems.

It was almost Christmas and they were full of the expectation of happiness. Inside some houses red and green Christmas lights could be seen, shining like stars, and the little girl was reminded of them and excitedly looked up into the dark bowl of the sky where she spotted a clear, fixed point of light shining far, far away.

“What is that?” she asked her brother.

“A star,” he replied.

She was a clever girl (even though she was very small) and she said she could see other stars and that they looked “like pinpricks in a dark blanket,” which made her brother smile. He said then that this was a special star, that clear, fixed point of light, and as they walked, she alongside him with her face pink in the light of the lamps, her face uplifted to look at him as he talked, he told her this story.

Once long ago, in a mythical kingdom called Mytar, situated far away from Earth above the fluffy, friendly summer clouds, there lived a King who had in his employ a wizard named Mephrites, and a mighty warrior named Zohr.

There was no man more skilled in the arts of war than Zohr was. No man or woman could hurl a stone or a spear farther, who could flail a sword with more force, or shoot an arrow with a keener eye. He had gained his fame at the age of fifteen when a hostile host had besieged the King’s city, and a ferocious, towering giant had killed the best men the King had sent out against him. Zohr had begged and begged to be sent against the enemy champion, but the King declined because Zohr was hardly more than a boy.

Zohr possessed a curved bow of polished wood and hand-feathered arrows that rattled in his leather quiver when he walked. He shot so well with the bow, and his arrows missed so rarely, that common folk thought that a god must have blessed

the bow at the boy's birth. However, Zohr knew only that as an archer he had no equal, and he had one unshakable conviction: against the giant he would win.

Still the King kept declining until a great favorite of his, a very brave fighter by the name of Samos, was slain. The King sank into sadness, slumped on his throne, and looked up to see someone had admitted Zohr, who stood there once again asking to be sent out. Amazed at Zohr's spirit, his joy of battle, his energy of soul, his belief that he would win no matter what, the King gave in.

"Go," he said gloomily. "Triumph." He had no one left to send.

Zohr had come out of the city gates, a sword in his belt, his great bow already in his fist. The sun was bright and beneath the brow of his helmet Zohr blinked. He saw the enemy army drawn up and saw a huge figure detach itself from the rank of warriors. The giant mumbled something and all the hostile soldiers gave a taunting laugh. But Zohr just studied the giant, not taking his eyes from him.

Out the giant came, baring his teeth in a jeer, but Zohr just kept watching. Suddenly the giant frowned, and Zohr reached for an arrow, notched it, pulled the string to his cheek and began to aim. Grimacing, the giant had picked up an enormous stone to hurl at Zohr to crush him flat as a fly. As the giant stood straight, grimacing as he lifted the weight of the boulder overhead, Zohr let go his arrow.

The arrow sank into the giant's eye, and with a strong, surprised cry, the giant toppled over in his armor and died, face down. The kingdom had been saved, and Zohr's name had been great since that day.

He became commander of all the King's forces. Tall, he was handsome, with light-colored hair and large, brown eyes with long lashes. His body was strong, his face honest, his walk full of power, his gestures decisive. Everyone loved him in the kingdom because although he was a warrior, he was gentle at heart and very kind. He was always doing things for people and he always had time to listen to what they told him.

Zohr's popularity with the people was the reason the court wizard, Mephrates, was jealous of him; he hated him and was always trying to get him in trouble with the King.

Mephrites would wait until he was alone with the King and had his ear and would caution the King that Zohr wanted to take his place.

“Look at how popular Zohr is,” said Mephrites, wearing his long black gown.

“Why, he walks around as if he already were the king.”

“Why shouldn’t people love him? He is good,” the King said.

“But if a man acts as though he’s a king, he may feel he really *should* be king,” the wizard said.

“But he doesn’t,” the King said.

This made Mephrites grind and gnash his teeth. For he knew he was not good, but mean. And if Zohr was handsome, fair and tall, Mephrites was not any of these. In fact, his alert face was sallow, and he was very short and had a crooked back.

“But he may already feel that he is better than the king.”

“But he doesn’t,” the King said. He was very practical.

“Which may make him believe he can BECOME a king,” the wizard said with exasperation.

The King cast Mephrites a cold eye. “Are you afraid of him, wizard?”

“No, I am not a king,” the wizard said aloofly.

“Well, I am, and I’m not,” said the King.

For ten years the wizard tried to poison the King’s mind against Zohr, the warrior. Then one day an evil idea came to the wizard.

It was a Wednesday morning, and the wizard was out in the country strolling along a pleasant road lined with ripening crops. He passed a grove of trees and heard someone humming. The trees had tall, straight trunks, full of strength, and their crowns of leaves had turned gold in the summer sun.

The wizard peeked in and saw the warrior putting on his cloak, his bow, and his quiver. The wizard had magical powers, but he was still new at this magic. Once, mumbling a spell, he had changed some fine trees with wide crowns into gnarled,

squat apple trees whose fruit was always hard and green and never grew ripe enough to eat. In another experiment, he put a spell on an old man's cane but it turned into a snake that had chased him until he had transformed it back to wood. But this time, the wizard was convinced his magic would work, and in a blink, he changed his shape from a dark-robed wizard with a long, tasseled belt, to a tiny black and yellow-striped snake.

The serpent lay in the road like a ribbon, but then suddenly flowed into the tall, feathery, green grass that grew by the roadside, until you could see only a tip of the tail.

Soon the warrior came striding along, his face sun-browned and happy, humming, for twenty-five was no great age, and he had all of his life ahead of him. His feather-crested arrows rattled in the quiver on his back.

From deep in the grass, a pair of mean, small eyes glittered out, watching the figure come closer. Closer and closer the warrior came. As the warrior's leather-clad foot fell on the road, the snake darted out and bit deep, right through the thick leather, sinking its fangs in the heel.

The warrior winced, halted, looked down, thinking he had only stepped on a thistle. He rubbed his heel, balancing on one leg, then shrugged, and walked on, whistling a popular tune he had heard in the market. The soreness vanished.

But terrible days began.

The wound from the snake's bite did not go away but grew worse. Most of all, it smelled. Smells abound in nature. Odors. There is the corpse of the cow in the river, the spoiled egg, the dead mud bank with its expired fish, old unwashed socks. But a poisoned wound smells worse than any of these and people around Zohr began to complain.

Zohr grew shy and irritable because although he knew his foot was no flower, he did not know what to do. On some days the foot was barely noticeable, but on other days it grew sore, swelled and finally burst and ran fluid, and on those days no one wanted to be near him.

Zohr grew desperate. He ate herbs, applied compresses, consulted the leading witches, yet nothing worked. Days passed. No longer did the warrior walk proudly,

sublime in his strength, his friendly head up, eyes dancing. Instead he hobbled painfully, sometimes using a cane he had cut from a piece of a cedar tree.

The wound grew worse.

Finally Zohr's friends came to see the King. The warrior was an offense to the kingdom, they said. The King must act. The King listened, sad and troubled, for he loved Zohr more than the rest of his men. Yet he heard the friends saying that Zohr must live off in some solitary place until his wound had healed. It could not be otherwise, they said. They were crying.

"I will act," the King said, and full of sorrow, he summoned Zohr. A figure appeared at the end of the marble-floored hall. Slowly, very slowly, it shambled forward, painfully crutching ahead on the cane until at last Zohr stood before his King. The friends had all withdrawn.

The warrior started to smile, open and kind, at the King until he read the expression of the King's face. "You look shocked," Zohr said in dismay. He wondered what he looked like.

"You are greatly changed," said the King.

The warrior grew grim and drew himself up and stood very straight even though it hurt to do so. "I will be as I once was," he said.

The King heaved a big sigh and told him what he had to do. The warrior would be provided for, in fact he would have the pick of the kingdom's crops, but until his foot healed, he would have to live on an island off the coast where the sea trades kept the air clean. He would be given food, ale, and he would have help. Here the King gestured towards the black-gowned wizard who stood at the side of the throne. "He will give you special, healing herbs," the King said.

Incredulous, Zohr, when he heard this, flew into a terrific rage. With dark wrath in his face, he shouted: "What are you saying? That you would banish me from my friends? From my troops? From my own city that I helped make safe and great?" He was so angry he made a gesture as if to take out his sword. A courtier near the King came forward a threatening step, hand on the hilt of his sword.

Yet Zohr cried in a rage, "It was I, I, who fluttered the enemies of this kingdom, who scattered their greatest fighters like flustered hens. It was I who killed the

giant, and,” here he darkly eyed the King, “and I could kill you too,” which made the King look up. For he was not a coward and he had a temper too. “Enough,” the King shouted in his great voice, which frightened the tiny pages in their purple capes.

But the warrior was not cowed and shouted back, “I will do as I will do,” in a very great voice as well.

“Enough!” shouted the King in great anger, slowly getting to his feet, but he quickly softened for he saw Zohr had gone very pale, his face white and tense, beads of sweat on his forehead, clutching weakly for his cane.

“Ah,” sighed Zohr in great pain.

Suddenly Zohr’s pain cleared and he caught sight of the wizard who was watching with a tiny smirk on his face.

Zohr couldn’t believe it (for the smirk quickly disappeared), but suddenly he understood. His rage returned. “It was you, YOU who did this to me,” he screamed. “You have cursed me!”

The King turned, puzzled, and saw the wizard trying to make his face straight and the King thought he had seen a strange look flit across the wizard’s face. It was so confusing, the King lost his temper – at Zohr. There had been too much shouting and he was tired and needed a nap.

“Enough,” he cried angrily. “Go!”

Zohr hesitated, uncertain. Could the King really mean it? “Go, I command you!”

The warrior hobbled away a few steps, then halted to send both the King and Mephrites a look of terrible anger. Then he went out without looking back.

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The warrior would let no one come near his cave. He slept on a bed of leaves, ate from a wooden bowl, and hung his splendid bow and quiver of arrows on a sapling by the cave’s mouth. He kept his armor and shield in a brass-locked chest. He cut his own wood and made fires at night to keep warm when the rocks in the cave grew cool. (It was not yet winter time when he would sleep cozily in a fur skin on

his bed in the cave.) He hunted his own food, he caught fish, but left the little birds alone, for he loved them and was moved by their songs.

The Queen had urged the King to go and comfort Zohr, but the King was busy and had sent a party of the warrior's old comrades. But so great was Zohr's rage when he saw them that he sent them shaking home, for he had threatened to kill them and had even aimed an arrow at their boat.

In this way he lived for several months until he made friends with a woodcutter who lived in the forest. The woodcutter had heard the warrior singing and had stopped to listen. Curious, he had crept closer, parted the leaves of a tree in a glade and seen Zohr seated in the clearing in the shade of a great tree.

He was polishing his bow. The woodcutter saw the powerful arms, the sinewy muscles of the shoulder, the stooped body.

What amazed and puzzled the woodcutter was the effect that Zohr's song made upon his heart. He was a crude, uncouth, no-nonsense man who did not love music in the least. Yet as Zohr sang, he felt his soul soften, and he began to think of when he had been a young man, and of all the hopes he had had, and how few of them had come to pass, and of the many days he had lived, and how rich his life was even though it was a poor woodcutter's life, a poor and obscure life.

For Zohr was singing, "I was stalwart, strong and young and my life was like a row of candles. Once they burned brightly, full of promise, and made me glad. But now when I look back, instead of warm, lively candles, promising things to come, giving me glad joy, I see nothing but bent, black crooked wicks, stretching back, the many days gone by in pain." And he grieved. Now when he thought of his life, it only made him think of the old burnt candles that no longer shed light.

The woodcutter went home and told his wrinkled wife of the song, and of seeing Zohr sitting there under the tree, and for the first time in many years, as they were both crawling into bed, the woodcutter had kissed her with great tenderness, still made gentle by the song.

One day Zohr caught the woodcutter listening by the edge of the clearing and had almost killed him, thinking him a burglar or robber of some kind. Zohr had dragged the man roughly into the clearing where he could see him, and the trembling woodcutter confessed he only came to hear him sing, making Zohr

frown in puzzlement. "I am sorry I frightened you," Zohr said. "What do you really want?"

"Only to listen," said the woodcutter.

"To me?" Zohr said incredulously.

"But sir, it's beautiful," the woodcutter said humbly, his cap in his hand.

After that, the forest dwellers would sometimes hear Zohr's voice floating across to them on the quiet evening air, and they would stop and listen, and then say with pride, "That's our Zohr," moved, and full of fondness for him.

Often when Zohr came out in the morning from his sleep in the cave he would find a pile of freshly cut wood or a basket of apples, sweet cakes, or other good things.

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The wizard did not like the Queen. He always wore black and once out in the street by a stopped cart, he heard a group of little girls joking that he wore clothes that were the same color as his heart. Hearing this, thirsting for revenge, he instantly created a deep, slippery mud under their feet which ruined their pretty school shoes.

The Queen, who was called Zelia, wore brilliant, colorful gowns, but the wizard not only envied her for that, what he hated her for most was her keenness of mind and the kindness of her heart. The King was not clever. He was good, yes, brave, sound, generous, fearsome in battle but mentally lazy and inclined to believe what he was told, especially if the wizard told him.

In sending the warrior away, the King knew he had done an unjust thing and this harassed his heart, for he always wanted to do the fine, good and generous thing, but in the warrior's case, he knew of no way he could right the wrong.

The King simply knew that the kingdom could not tolerate in it a man who smelled like an ancient running shoe.

The Queen was more shrewd. Why would the foot not heal? She asked, "What if the foot was cursed?" He would shrug.

Again and again, she made the King recite the story of how the snake in the tall grass by the trodden road had been seen to come out and bite the warrior, this story told by a man driving a cart to the market. They searched for the man but discovered that he had died. There was no other witness.

The Queen thought and thought. In the evenings by the flickering light of her candle, the hem of her long gown dragging behind her on the stone floor, she thought and thought. All of a sudden one night, in the middle of her walk, her face lifted and horror and recognition spread over its beauty, and she stood as if she were turned to ice. Because at last she knew. At last she knew how the warrior had gotten his wound.

The next day, in the corridor of the castle, she waited for the wizard. He was striding along, sprightly, quick, adept, whistling an irreverent, spicy jig to himself between his teeth, squinting at the stones beneath his feet.

His eyes narrowed when he saw the old Queen. A band of sunlight made a broad stripe across the flagstone floor where she stood.

They talked. Both were on their guard at first, but then the wizard grew eager to compare his magic powers with the magic powers of the Queen. He felt his were greater. Of course, according to talk in the kingdom, the Queen had done some great things like putting a spell on her husband's sword so that anything that touched it turned to something else: a vicious, disabling blow to it became a blossom or a butterfly. Oh, he had heard the stories, he admitted, but who knew if they were true? People always told stories. But the wizard suspected with annoyance that she had never acknowledged *his* own great powers, and this made the wizard itch.

Today she appeared about to give way to him at last. The Queen had already said that some of his feats like the apple trees were the talk of the kingdom. "Is there nothing you cannot do?" she asked him, with wonderful, warm feeling in her eyes.

He thought a moment. "I can change my being, my outward form," he replied excitedly.

She put her hand to her mouth, lightly, as if in amazement. "You don't believe me," he said, and before she could answer, he had changed himself into a lazy, stolid brown and white cow, grass strings drooling from its mouth.

The Queen liked it, but not overmuch, so Mephrites changed to become a white pussy cat, strutting about with stiff tail upright, a pink button underneath.

At this the Queen clapped both hands with glee, but then, after only a moment, she was seen to pout.

“What is it?” he said.

“But do something really unusual,” the Queen said.

He was too close to obtaining her praise to stop now. He grew excited. “I can do anything,” he said. “I can be anything. Tell me what would delight you and I will do it.”

She shook her head dubiously. “No,” she relented, “it’s too difficult.”

“Nothing is too difficult,” he said excitedly. “Nothing is too difficult. Go ahead.”

“But not even you could do it, as great as you are,” she purred. The wizard, half mad and tireless with his success, said, “But I really can do anything!”

She thought again then said, “Let me see you become...” she hesitated.

“A what? Anything. Tell me,” he cried.

“A worm,” she said. Then, “No, no, an eel...” Then, she said, “No, no...a serpent. That’s it.” She said it as if he could not possibly do it. Inwardly he laughed derisively.

He heaved a superior sigh and, in a blink, there lay on the flagstones a lethal ribbon, a little black and yellow-striped snake.

The Queen suddenly stood straight and her eyes snapped. She lifted her elegant hand with its gold, gleaming rings and passed it quickly over the serpent. Then she extended two elegant, shapely fingers at the snake and intoned:

“No change canst thou make  
to regain thy shape  
until you tell me all you know.

From wizard to viper,  
from bad to worse,  
so shall things remain,  
all fixed and unchanged,  
until I know the secret  
of the warrior's curse."

"The warrior, the warrior," the viper hissed in hatred. He lifted his tiny head and bared his fangs to bite her, but she passed her hand quickly and he bit into the stone and broke a tooth.

"Ow, ow," he said.

"The curse," she said severely.

"Ow," said the snake, but at last he calmed down. "He's proud, Zohr," he said. "That's the secret of the curse. He's well-made like you and like you he is hateful to me," the wizard hissed.

"So you bit him," she said.

"Ow," he said.

"And he will not heal."

"Not until he is humble," the serpent said, and the lethal ribbon emitted a tiny, creaky high-pitched laugh. "Which is like saying he must become another man." There came another surge of tiny, rasping laughter. "It is a greater change than even you can do," the snake gasped, as the tiny laugh rose in pitch.

The Queen stared angrily.

"See if your powers can do that," said the viper and again came the creaking gasp of a laugh.

Clang!

The gleaming sharp-edged blade struck the stone and there were suddenly two snakes wriggling frantically, one with a mouth, the other with a tail.

“No!” cried the Queen and put out her hand to prevent another strike. It was the King who, thinking his wife in danger, had drawn his sword and cut the snake in two.

“Stop,” the Queen cried.

The King, holding his sword ready, looked bewildered. The Queen said to the wizard, “I will make you one serpent, and one serpent you will remain, with no fangs.”

“Anything, anything, as long as I can continue to live,” Mephrites said.

“But you must answer one question first,” said the Queen. The snake said, “Anything.”

“How can the warrior change and become another man?”

The snake said, “Only by suffering.” He said it in a very little voice.

The Queen’s face became hard, bitter, angry, and she started to signal the King to bring down the sword.

There were two pieces already.

“I am telling the truth!” came the high-pitched shriek. “He must be lonely and sad and full of thoughts, and one day his pain will make him great again.”

“How, how will this happen?” pressed the old Queen.

“I don’t know,” the snake wailed. “I don’t know. But I have spoken the truth. And you must keep your word.”

The Queen knew the truth when it was told. “You are become One.” The head and the tail were joined in a blink. The wizard wriggled carefully, experimentally.

“You are spared,” said the Queen, “but you are banished.”

And so it was. A great crowd of gaily-dressed people, hurling insults and taunts, thickly lined the roadsides the day a small serpent was let out of the high, heavy

palace gates and watched it as it slowly headed for the tall grass where its tail drew out of sight.

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Years passed. The woodcutter had died, the Queen had died, the King was old and very sick, but the warrior had a new companion. The forest people spoke more freely to him now and were not frightened, but no one lived with him except his new friend.

The warrior had been stacking wood for his cooking fire and had seen something like a rope lying coiled there except the rope had moved and then, of all wonders, it had spoken! Skillfully, it had wriggled and writhed out of the shadows into the sun that fell on the clearing by the cave.

The warrior was delighted to have a serpent that could talk. The serpent was not frightened of him either, for it had said one day, "Your foot smells."

Even the forest people never said this, and the warrior liked the snake's boldness.

"Yes," he said. "It is so."

"Does your nose run?"

The warrior thought. "Why, yes, when I have taken cold."

"And your foot smells."

"Yes."

"If your foot smells and your nose runs, then you have been built upside down," the snake said, laughing with a creaky, high-pitched laugh. The warrior thought this silly, but he laughed all the same, his face reddening.

It was a novelty for him to feel silly.

The warrior picked up the little creature and felt the place where its body had once been cut in two. Instinctively, he was concerned and touched and said, "Why, you have suffered a bad hurt."

The snake only said, “No, no, it is nothing,” uneasily, for it wanted very much to talk of something else.

But the warrior would not be put off. He examined the creature with patient, comforting attention to see if he could ease the scar but saw the cut was old. He then let the viper lie in his lap, and he itched the serpent’s tummy and started to sing in a low, soothing voice, and the snake, once it had stopped giggling from being tickled (for it was not used to its tummy being touched), simply lay there, not moving, and the old wizard, listening to the warrior’s song, felt a wonderful contentment and restfulness, a sense of being safe and warm and cared for, that he had never felt before. He grew drowsy, and slowly closed his eyes, awakened once with fright when the warrior moved, but the rubbing of his tummy continued, and he closed his eyes again.

There was a magic power in the way the warrior sang and the old wizard knew it. The two were inseparable.

The serpent smuggled himself aboard boats that arrived from the mainland, eager to keep abreast of any news, the changes at court, the condition of the old King. Or he would wait until picnickers came and would crouch in the bottom of their boats among the crates and wicker baskets or hide out of sight under the seats, and, within a few days, would return to tell the warrior all he had heard and seen.

One day the viper left and didn’t return for two days. When he came back, he wriggled off a boat that had been pulled up through the breakers and onto the beach, and hastily flowed like a ribbon into the clearing, out of breath and greatly excited.

“The King is coming to see you!” he told Zhor.

The warrior put down a piece of meat he was about to roast on a fire blazing briskly among a pile of stones, looking at the wizard who was talking breathlessly.

It seemed that the kingdom was in peril. It depended for its water on a single, sacred spring set in a copse of great trees.

From that spring, water for people was piped to fountains, or it ran downhill to ditches to water the fields rich with crops, or it was used to fill buckets and urns for use in people’s houses. But somehow the King’s enemies had poisoned the spring,

and if no one made it clean, the whole kingdom would perish and pass away. Already many people were sick.

“You can do it,” said the serpent.

“Do what?” asked the warrior. He had taken up his rod again to roast his meat.

“You can cure the spring. The King is looking for a hero to make the spring clean. That could be you, I know it,” said the viper.

“How? I know nothing of springs or pools. Only of fighting,” said the warrior, adding sadly, “Or I once knew, at least.”

“You can do it by your song,” said the wizard.

“Ridiculous,” said Zohr, turning the bit of wild boar in the crackling flames. The aroma was wonderfully rich.

“You can, why don’t you listen to me,” said the viper, twining itself around Zohr’s forearm holding the rod.

“I will fix you your frog for supper,” said Zohr.

“You can,” screamed the snake. For the old wizard knew the magic healing he had heard in the warrior’s songs, how sweet, pure and piercing they were, how surely they went to the heart, how wonderful over the years his singing had become. If only the old King did not stir up Zohr’s pride.

At that moment they heard a commotion. A party of boats was steering through the breakers by the beach. Then they heard voices of men, shouts, calls, sounds of footsteps approaching. With visions of going home dancing in his head, the serpent said, “I must leave you for the moment,” afraid the King would disclose him to the warrior and afraid he would be killed.

The old King, accompanied by his armored knights, appeared at the rim of the clearing. The warrior and his sovereign stared at each other. It had been years.

“You have gotten old,” said Zohr.

“As have you,” said the King.

Zohr said nothing, eyeing the knights that accompanied the King. He had once been ruddy and strong as they were.

“How is your foot?” asked the King.

“It comes and goes,” said Zohr. “Sometimes there is much pain. But I change the bandages often.” He realized then he had wanted to please the King and frowned darkly.

“I am told you have magic,” the King said.

“What magic?” Zohr asked, disconcerted.

The King looked uneasy. “In your song.”

Zohr blinked, puzzled. “I simply sing. There is no magic in that. I sing because I am alone, or to please my friend,” and he looked for the snake who was out of sight in the tall grass.

“If you have magic it is needed now,” said the King. “Nothing green grows in the kingdom. The crops rot. The trees wither and turn brown. The apples never grow ripe but stay hard as stones. The spring on whose water we live has soured and stinks and is covered in places by green scum. Many people are sick.”

“What has that to do with me?” asked Zohr.

“I am asking your help,” the King said.

“In other words, you need me to come and save the kingdom,” Zohr said sarcastically. Underneath a stick in the grass, the serpent wished he still had hands to put over his ears. “No, no,” he was thinking. He wanted to go home.

“I am ordering you to do so, if you can,” said the King. He was now on his authority, threatening with his power to punish.

“Why should I save the kingdom?” Zohr said defiantly. “I am not allowed to live in it.”

“This place does smell, my Lord,” said one of the King’s knights. Zohr turned and looked at the man who was young, muscular, eager to fight. There stood his past.

The old warrior stared at the younger man. He would be fun to fight, Zohr thought.

“You would win great glory,” the wrinkled King said.

Zohr’s face turned hard and bitter. “I won great glory; it brought me here,” he said.

“Great riches, then,” said the King impatiently.

“To spend on what? Go away,” the warrior said rudely.

The King was offended. “So you would rather remain here and sing,” he taunted.

The serpent writhed in anguish, thinking, “Be wise, be wise.”

But the warrior only said, “I would.”

The King grew ugly. First, as a King, he was not used to being refused and he didn’t like the novelty of it in the least. He also had a bad conscience for he could remember the times his wife had said to him, “Go and see Zohr. Surely he’s been cured of his pride. Surely he needs your encouragement.” But the King had always been too busy. He never came.

Because he was ashamed of this, he grew cruel.

“So you like to sing,” the King said scornfully.

“Yes.”

The King made a mocking laugh. “You are disgusting and diseased. How can you sing? What have you to sing of?” He looked at his knights who, seeing his look, started to laugh at Zohr.

The warrior only frowned sadly. “Because I am not healthy, am I not allowed to rejoice that there is health? Because I have no strength, am I not permitted to praise vigor and force? Am I not to be glad there are good and encouraging things to be seen in the world?”

No, no, no, thought the serpent under the stick in the feathery, tall grass. He uncoiled, thinking he could go and talk to the King and then remembered where and what he was and lay still.

“You should sing of what you are – an eyesore,” said the King.

This stung Zohr, who took a pace towards the King. A knight, the one who had spoken, placed his hand upon his sword hilt.

Then Zohr sighed. “I sing because I try to forget what I am with my songs,” he said.

The old King drew his own sword and waved the sharp point under the warrior’s nose.

“You used to have fighting spirit, but instead now you escape.” He was only trying to rouse the warrior’s pluck and have him return with him.

But Zohr didn’t notice the sword point. His eyes held a sad dream.

“I praise good things in my songs so that my songs will cause them not to be forgotten,” he said. “It’s not an escape.”

“People would remember anyway,” the King scoffed, for he believed this himself.

“But perhaps not in the same way,” said the warrior. “Perhaps not as sharply or clearly.”

“So you are still proud after all,” the King mocked. “Perhaps you should remember what your life has become and keep silent.”

“Then what use would I have?”

“What use do you have now? Who listens to you? Peasants, woodcutters. Face it, friend – yours is a useless life.” He still held the sword, but his words were much more cutting than any thrust.

The warrior began blinking rapidly. “Ah, sire,” he said, “you have done me a great hurt. To know that no one hears.”

And as if squeezed out by great pressure, a single tear welled up and fell from the warrior’s eye and landed on the King’s sword blade. Immediately it beaded on the blade bewitched by the Queen long ago, and it fell as a diamond to the ground. One of the knights quickly bent and picked it up, amazed.

“I shall sing all the same,” the warrior said with a gentle, sad determined face. “I shall sing in the hope that one day someone may need to hear of all that is great,

good, glorious. One day their ear may seek my song and I must make certain, you see, that it is there for them to find.”

Soon after the disgruntled King and his party left. As they boarded the boats, the knight handed the diamond tear to the King whose face was dark and discontented. His eyes brightened at the sight of the gem. “Yes,” he said “I will want that for the hilt of my sword.”

But the kingdom was still cursed and he had not liked the way he had behaved.

Weeks passed and the serpent returned from the mainland cast down. “He has hired another wizard,” he said.

The warrior was putting sticks on a crackling blaze.

“Well, then all will be well,” said Zohr. “The wizard will cure the spring and we shall be as we were before.” He smiled sadly.

“I don’t believe in wizards,” said the serpent.

“Why? I do. Why?” asked Zohr.

The serpent sighed. “I knew one once; they have limitations,” he said and was quiet.

But he began to work on the warrior. It was true, wizards weren’t gods; they could make a mistake, but what if this one the King had hired could really work wonders? Shouldn’t they go and see them? The whole city would turn out to greet the wonder worker and no one would recognize Zohr. They would freshly bind up his foot. “The King did not forbid you to return,” said the serpent.

He was homesick, you see.

He kept up his arguments and at last the warrior agreed, simply out of impatience. The viper went and got them a boat, rowed by one of the foresters taking his family to market on the mainland. The warrior boarded the boat clad in a dull looking cloak, holding his cane. He had left his bow and quiver back in the cave.

The serpent sat up on the warrior’s shoulder, looking out as the boat made its way over a vast, glittering heaving sheet of water which was the sea. Then they saw the

city in the distance, its towers uneven like the pipes of Pan. The serpent coiled itself tightly around Zohr's wrist, greatly excited.

"Isn't this grand? A great city. Oh, a wonderful city," he enthused.

All the warrior could think of was how cool it would be back near his cave in the shade of the pine woods. The sunlight would be lying hot and still in the clearing and butterflies would fill the air like pretty paper scraps, and the other insects would hum their songs.

The party beached the boat on the shore and the warrior began to hobble slowly along the sand with his cane. At last they reached the road.

The sky was a perfect blue, empty of clouds except for a single fleecy one that lay a big puff far to the east. The city streets flocked with their crowds of people, some on foot, others in wagons or carts, the rich in handsome chariots drawn by spirited trace horses. All wore happy faces and were dressed in bright-colored clothes. All were exhilarated wanting to see the wizard the King had hired, the one who would heal the land's sickness. The new wizard was giving a speech. It was too far away to hear.

A joyous hum of voices rose from the crowds as they thronged past going to the ceremony.

Zohr started after them. Hobbling with his cane, he tried hard to keep up, but the crowds kept growing thin, fewer people passed, and out of breath, in great pain, he said to the snake, "Must we see this wizard, oh, little friend of mine?"

The snake, wrapped around his wrist, saw that Zohr had to rest. He was disappointed, even annoyed, but he said, "Oh, he is only a wizard after all. He will be there. We can rest."

"For my foot has begun to throb," said Zohr, his face very pale.

Disappointed, the snake said, "Oh, yes, let's rest then."

They looked about them. The road stretched away, bordered by houses and trees. Before them stood rugged gates of gray rock. Slowly they went inside the rocks and spotted a bench of heavy wood by the side of a broad path bordered by

drooping trees, their leaves stunted by lack of rain and the poisoning of the water of the spring.

“Oh,” said the warrior, wincing as he sat down. He massaged his lower leg. “I’m afraid we will miss...” he made a face as he worked his sore leg, the one the wounded foot was on. “Oh, that feels so much better,” he said. Then, “I’m afraid we will miss...oh, that feels good.”

“You were saying,” said the serpent drily, wrapped like a bracelet around Zohr’s wrist.

“I was saying, I’m afraid my cursed foot will force us to miss the wizard’s triumphal entry. Where are we?”

“We probably will,” said the serpent.

Zohr felt a failure. “Then my friend, I’m sorry, but I cannot do all I would have myself do.” He was in pain.

Around them, a few people, hurrying and chatting happily, strode past them and out the gates to the street.

“It’s all right,” said the serpent. “I am a bit tired of wizards.”

“I once had an enemy who was a wizard,” Zohr said.

The viper felt it wise not to answer. Besides, the sun was hot and, lying lazily, like an unfurled ribbon enjoying the sun, he felt sleepy. He blinked sleepily.

“Come on,” a mother said irritably, dragging a little girl along roughly by the hand before them on the path.

“At what place are we?” asked the warrior.

The snake lay lazily, eyes closing in sleep. “Is it not familiar?”

Suddenly the serpent felt himself lifted up.

“I must take a look at this place,” the warrior said, getting unsteadily to his feet. He clutched at his cane. “I have lost everything but curiosity.”

The snake was cross at being woken up. “What about the wizard. I thought we were going to see him.”

“Hang the wizard,” said Zohr. In the distance, the faint roar of a crowd went up.

“But we are missing it all,” said the serpent. He had always liked important events.

“Yes, but ahead, what is that?” Zohr said.

They saw it then. The sun beat down. The bare rocks emitted heat. No shade gave shelter or relief. Steps had been cut in the rocks to make a stairway that led down. At the bottom was a scummy, shrunken green pool.

“He will have to be some wizard,” said the serpent, staring down.

Zohr gave a start. “You mean this is the pool? We are at the place?”

“You have never been here?” said the serpent.

“Never,” said Zohr.

Grunting, leaning his weight on his cane, he started down the steep steps. It was very hard work. At the bottom, both simply stared. The water was ringed by wilted reeds and stunted flowers with dead, hanging heads.

The warrior knelt down, looked at the dull, green reflecting water and recoiled. An old man’s face had looked back out at his. He peered in again, and again the pool repeated him. It was true: it was himself.

“You do not like what you see?” said the serpent drily.

Except the warrior did not answer, but only began to sing softly, gently, as if to himself. “How the years have passed...how the time has passed, and every expectation of mine has come out wrong,” the warrior sang.

Great feeling entered his old pain-ridden face, and the snake looked at him with admiration, feeling sorry for the wrong he had done this man. Yet the warrior only sang of how, as a young man, he had often dreamed of the famous works he would do, how he would benefit the kingdom, love what was good, give all the energy of his soul to doing what deserved people’s praise.

He had hoped to struggle, perform, exalt, but above all, display indomitable manliness and yet in every expectation had proved to be mistaken.

A scattering of people who had been passing through the park on their way to the distant roaring crowds had stopped to listen, but the warrior didn't notice. He was singing more richly, more poignantly now. Was it all vain efforts? Had it all been empty dreams?

Suddenly as he sang, that tired, old, careworn face was lit up by a glad, quiet light, for he had ceased his grieving and was singing, "Seize the moment of happiness, love and be loved, but love what is good."

More people joined the standing hedge of listeners.

"Seize the moment of happiness," he sang, and a tear of his rolled off his nose and struck the green, dead pool, making a spreading circle on the surface of the water. The warrior's face shone, and he sang of the ripe fig, how appetizingly it gaped open just before it fell to rot. Or how a ripe, dark olive, just before it decays, takes on a black, glossy delicious look. And there were the heads of flowers nodding and bobbing beneath the weight of bumble bees, and the bending ears of corn, and the lions' eyebrows and the foam that flows at the mouth of wild boars.

Did they not delight because they came in the course of nature?

The fresh rain fading from the stone road, the autumn leaves lying fallen like bent stars, the chestnut woods on the high hills...

And he sang on, sang and sang, sang with all the force of his heart, with all his soul, with all his pain and disappointment, with all the force of his failure, praising a world full of wonders.

And when he came to himself, before and around him stood an immense crowd, and he realized he was standing upright, without his cane, accompanied by a wizened old man in a ragged cloak, the old wizard.

And the green, shrunken, poisoned spring now reflected a deep, perfect, vibrantly blue sky. The pool was pure.

The old King ordered the crowd to be quiet, and the rustling people grew calm. The King came forward and introduced the warrior to Mephrites, and pointed to

the pool and explained what had happened. The new worker of wonders the King had hired stood downcast. At first Zohr was puzzled, but again the King explained and embraced him, saying, "Be at peace, rejoice. For you will have rest, reward, recognition, our great citizen."

For the pool was clean. The foot was cured. The wizard was himself.

And the warrior, having cleansed the spring, lived in great honor to an old age accompanied by the wizard, his constant companion.

And when the warrior died, the aged King took the sword with the diamond teardrop in its hilt and drove it into the mound at the head of Zohr's grave and declared the place sacred and full of honor.

That was the story that the brother told the little girl on that Christmas Eve. And both of them stood and watched the gleaming of that diamond, the North Star, shining clear and sharp in the winter sky, shining then as it shines even to this day.

And so, may peace be with us all, even to this day.

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