



The Sword Review

Fantasy, Science Fiction & More

Currently Inside
"War Child"
by Scott M. Sandridge



www.theswordreview.com

Issue 9, December 2005

War Child

Scott M. Sandridge

"You'll pay for that, you little worm!" a man yelled from somewhere in the back of an alley. The slow speech and over-pronunciation of words gave Korgash a clear sign that the man had a few too many drinks. *Stay out of it. It's none of your business. Let someone else be a hero. You're just here to collect on a favor, remember?*

"Help!" yelled a child's voice in the same alley. The yell was followed by a blunt thud. Along the street Korgash was in, people went about their way while keeping their eyes away from the alley.

Korgash rolled his eyes and groaned. Then he proceeded with a casual walk into the alley, his footsteps more quiet than any of the street urchins that stalked the city streets at night. He waited until the drunk raised his fist for one more punch, then Korgash placed his own hands behind his back and said, "Hard at work earning that coveted Idiot of the Month award, eh?"

The drunk dropped the gaunt-faced kid, turned around while barely keeping his balance, stared at Korgash until his eyes finally focused, then said, "Matter your own minds, half-breed!"

"Isn't that," Korgash asked, smiling to reveal his crooked teeth and large canines, "supposed to be 'Mind your own matters, half-breed'?"

"Yeah," shouted the drunk, "tha's what I said!"

The drunk staggered toward Korgash, his fist raised. His eyes wandered left to right as if trying to determine which blurred image to hit; the green rays of crescent Volki gave the drunk's face a ghoulish

complexion. Korgash caught the punch with his left hand and squeezed. When the bones popped, the drunk fell to his knees.

"See this?" said Korgash, holding his right hand up to reveal the spiked and bladed glove he wore. "This, mead-head, is called an aarik. You know what the word means in Vangaardian?"

"M-my hand," stammered the drunk. His eyes bulged almost out of his head, tears streamed down his face.

"Stop whining and listen, mead-head," said Korgash. "The word means 'Savage Hand'. Unless you want to find out why it's called that, apologize to the kid."

The drunk's mouth gaped open. His eyes rolled upward into his head as his left hand clutched Korgash's fur hide vest. Then he slumped to the ground with a weak moan.

He shook his head and dropped the drunk's crushed hand. "City folk, they should get out in the wilderness more often."

He walked out of the alley and continued down the street. He heard light footsteps behind him. He spun around and said, "Go back home, kid!"

"Can't, sir," said the kid. "I don't have a home."

"Then go get lost!" He turned a corner, heading to the Eagle's Roost inn. The light footsteps continued behind him. Korgash turned back around and said, "Look, kid, it's dangerous wandering around the streets alone."

"I know," the kid said. He looked down at his feet then kicked a pebble before adding, "But I figure the safest place to be is anyplace you're at."

"Don't bet your life on that, kid," Korgash muttered. A growling noise came from the kid's belly. Korgash looked toward the inn then back at the kid. "Fine. Tag along if you want, but you're on your own if you cause any trouble. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Don't call me sir; I'm no noble. Just call me Korgash."

"I'm Bryant."

"Whatever, kid."



The common room of the Eagle's Roost lacked the bustle of a busy inn. Many of Raxon's inhabitants were adapted to nocturnal lifestyles. A necessity in these mountains, for each sunrise brought the Mists back up to the surface. The thick blue-grey vapors obscured visibility and muted sound. Also, some swore the Mists were haunted.

Korgash picked a vacant table off in the south corner then ordered food for him and Bryant, mead for himself and milk for the kid.

The kid proved to have a large appetite, and Korgash wondered more than once if he would be left with enough money for a room. Finally, the kid pushed his plate back and said, "Thank you, sir."

"Already told you, don't call me—"

"Sorry."

He looked at Bryant. Something about the kid's reddish-brown hair, blue-gray eyes, light freckles, the dimples in his cheeks, and the cleft in his chin made Korgash wonder if he had met him before. He asked, "Where's your parents?"

"Mom died in the siege," he said in a matter-of-fact way. His eyes glazed over, and his left hand trembled. He removed his hands from the table and looked down at his plate.

"Where was your dad?"

"First Quaz Militia."

When Bryant looked back up, an image flashed in Korgash's mind, an image of a red-headed gray-eyed man with dimples and a cleft chin. The image disturbed him in ways he had never before known. "I take it he didn't return."

Bryant shook his head.

Korgash purchased a room, and the two went upstairs. He planned to let the kid have the room for the night while he took off to finish his business in this city. He entered, turned to find Bryant standing in the doorway.

"Don't worry kid. I don't bite."

Bryant remained at the doorway, staring at Korgash with a frown on his face. "You knew my dad, didn't you?"

"What makes you think that?" asked Korgash.

"I saw it on your face downstairs," he said. "Were the two of you in the militia together?"

It took a moment for Korgash to answer, "No kid, we weren't."

"Then how do you know him?"

"I only met him once, in the battle at Mt. Voljnore."

"Did you fight beside him?"

Korgash looked down and sighed, saying, "No kid. I fought for the other side."

Bryant's jaws clenched along with his fists. His body trembled. Then he ran off, down the stairs and out of the inn.

Korgash sat down on the bed, removed his aarik, and then rubbed his temples to ease the headache that just surfaced. *Just as well*, he thought, *Last thing I need is some snot-nosed brat following me around. Wouldn't want him to end up like me.*

He lay down and shut his eyes.



Korgash opened his eyes and found himself in a dimly lit room surrounded by pitch-black shadow. The single source of light came from a candle set inside a fanged humanoid skull with a sloping forehead. In front of the candle a crystal rested in its three-legged silver holder. The crystal refracted the dim light into a pale rainbow spectrum that made the light more disturbing than the flitting shadows.

A gray-robed figure sat behind the skull, legs crossed, arms folded, head bowed. The robe's hood kept the figure's face concealed. Its voice was masculine, but hoarse and wheezing. "Hail, friend."

"Save your greetings, Seer," said Korgash. He looked down at his right hand and found his aarik missing. He figured the dagger in his wrist sheath and the two in his boots were likewise missing. "Send me back."

"What makes you think you're not where you were?" asked the Seer.

"I'm in no mood for this, you old—"

"Temper, temper; do not force me to do something drastic."

Korgash repressed his urge to gulp. "What do you want?"

"Answer me this question," said the Seer. "What is the difference between you and me?"

"You're joking, right?"

The Seer waited.

Korgash rolled his eyes, let out a sigh, and then said, "I'm younger, stronger, faster, and prettier."

The Seer continued to wait.

"Fine," said Korgash, holding up his hands, "you tell me."

"When I look in the mirror, I know what I will see," said the Seer. His head rose, and the shadow under the hood fled from the light to reveal a

pale, withered face. No pupils could be seen in his milk-white eyes. "Can you say the same?"



Korgash awoke on his bed at the inn. The red rays of Taurus in its half phase showed through the window, bathing the room in a dark, hellish light. But the red that clouded over his vision was the deep dark red of rage.

By the time he recovered from the Berserker Curse in his Vangaardian blood, the entire room was trashed; the windowpane ripped out, the window reduced to shattered shards of glass, all furniture broken and scattered. The door hung off one hinge, and the innkeeper lay curled up in one corner whimpering, "P-p-please don't hurt me."

"Curse that wizard!" Korgash yelled at no one in particular as he shook his fist in the air and stalked back and forth across the room. "Why does he always torment me? Why's he always in my head?"

"Hear me Seer! I'm not one of your pawns that you can pull around like puppets on a string! I do what I want, understand? No one manipulates me; no one!"

Somehow the innkeeper gathered enough courage to get up and run out of the room, screaming, "Madness! He has the Madness!"

Madness? I wish, Korgash thought. He had first met the Seer soon after the Great War had ended, and the old wizard had been haunting his dreams since. According to the old fables, the Seer only appeared to great heroes to advise them on their path, but Korgash had met enough heroes to know he wasn't one. There were other, darker tales about the Seer as well. He wondered which were true, if any of them.

He found his aarik lying amidst the shards of glass. In the shards, he saw his shattered image bathed in the red haze of Taurus: the image of a monster, a monster that made orphans out of children.

And he did not do so to defend his own people or even for survival; that, at least, was a part of the natural order. Nor could he use high ideals as an excuse, for he had none. Nor did he do it for money; though, he was paid well. No, he did it because it was all he knew since his days of slavery in Vangaard's arenas.

How many orphans had he created? How many orphans were created by those under his command, on his orders? How many children had he condemned to the same fate he had been condemned to on the night his mother had been murdered?

"What now, Seer?" he asked.

No reply came. He didn't expect one to; it wasn't the Seer's way.

He decided that the first thing he needed was to leave before the Constabulary arrived, so he put on his aarik and left the inn.



It wasn't hard to find the kid; though he proved to be good at hiding, he wasn't good enough to hide from a skilled hunter. He found Bryant asleep in some bushes that made up a small garden. He sat and waited for the kid to wake up.

When Bryant's eyes opened, Korgash said the two most difficult words he had ever tried to say, "I'm sorry."

Bryant rubbed his eyes, blinked a few times. His face kept a frown the whole time. "Why?"

"I fought for one side. He fought for the other. These things happen, kid."

"Why did you fight for the other side?"

"They paid me to. At the time I didn't care which side I was on. I thought I had freedom."

"And now?"

Korgash shook his head, saying, "Don't know, kid. But one thing I do know is I'm not about to let you die on the streets."

"What do you mean?"

"I know some folk here, good honest folk," said Korgash. He stood up and held out his hand. "They lost a son a couple years back, and I hunted down the killer for them. They were too poor to pay my fee, so they owe me a favor."

Bryant sat and stared at him for a moment then asked, "So, I'm to take their son's place?"

"Something like that," said Korgash. "Best offer I can make, kid. Take it or leave it."

As the silver moon, Shilak, rose full, Bryant took Korgash's hand and smiled.



Copyright 2005, *Scott M. Sandridge*

Scott M. Sandridge is a part-time writer and full-time janitor, hoping to remove "Janitor" from his title. He learned how to write through hard work, trial-and-error, and the occasional writers' workshops. His first short story appeared in "The Sword Review," and he writes reviews for "Tangent Online".



Cover: "Stained Glass Sword"
Copyright 2005, *Melinda S. Reynolds*

Melinda S. Reynolds is a self-taught artist and writer; drawing came first, writing second. Her favorite genres are fantasy and sci-fi because of the depth of imagination. Melinda has contributed numerous illustrations and covers to *The Sword Review*.



The Sword Review is a publication of Double-Edged Publishing, Inc. It is available at www.theswordreview.com and updates are published weekly.

The Sword Review (ISSN 1556-5416)
9618 Misty Brook Cove, Cordova, Tennessee 38016

For more information visit www.theswordreview.com. Scott M. Sandridge's "War Child" and Melinda S. Reynolds's "Stained Glass Sword" appear as part of Issue 9, December 2005.



www.theswordreview.com