

Reign of fire

father's Light



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I

Prologue

Crickets whistled from their hiding places. A warm breeze rustled through the leaves and the branches swayed back and forth. A nearby brook breathed a soothing lullaby. A small boy named Korin gazed at the brilliant stars and asked, “What’s out there, Noah?”

“What?” said Tanoah, who was lying in his bedroll nearby.

“It looks like heaven to me,” said Ganner, Korin’s twin brother.

Korin continued: “I mean, if you could just fly straight up into the air—higher than the birds, higher than the moons—all the way out to one of the stars, what would you find?”

Tanoah sighed, then smiled. The boys saw his white teeth outlined by dark skin. “I once met this man, when I was traveling through the Kingdom of Tyraine. And he said that there—out among the stars—there are other worlds, just like this one.”

The stars shone beautifully overhead.

“You mean there’s other people out there—in the stars?” asked Rintar, the younger brother of the twins.

“That’s what he believed,” Tanoah replied.

“Do you believe it?” Korin asked.

After several seconds Tanoah said, “Yes. I do believe it.”

The whistle of crickets had come to a crescendo. Rintar’s eyes were beginning to droop. Just then Ganner piped up, “Tell us about the time father saved you from the goblins!” Rintar lifted his head up and looked at Tanoah, who grinned.

“Okay, but you have to promise to go to sleep as soon as it’s over.”

“We promise,” the three boys said.

“Okay. Well, it was back during the War of Knaimes. Your father and I were in a battle against an army of orcs.”

“And you wanted to surprise attack them around the mountain!” said Rintar.

“Be quiet and let him tell the story,” said Ganner.

“Sariel Blades and I were sent to scout out a trail around the mountain, to see if we could surprise attack the orcs. Well, we were cutting a path through the forest when suddenly we were surrounded by about thirty goblins! We were terrified. Goblins are ferocious. They design their weapons to tear flesh—to cause painful death, not just death.



Their yellow eyes glow in the dark.” Korin glanced at the shadows all around them. “They have pointy teeth,” Tanoah bared his teeth. “And sharp claws.” He raised a hand and, with a *rraar*, clawed at Rintar. Rintar ducked back into his bedroll.

“Can we see your scar?” asked Ganner.

“It’s too dark. I’ll show you in the morning.”

“Keep going,” said Korin.

“So they took us prisoner and marched us to a darker part of the forest. They tied us up to a tree in their camp and left us for two days. And they only gave us a little bit of water. Sariel almost got one of the ropes off once, but they caught him. They beat him and then tied him up tighter. I thought we were going to die. But Sariel never gave up.

“On the second night, a bunch of goblins came holding torches. They stood us up and made us march. They poked us with spears in our backs, so we marched as quick as we could. We went up a really steep mountain. The path wound back and forth till it came to a sort of platform that reached out from the mountain like this.” He made his hand flat and pointed it out, palm upwards.

“They began chanting, and then they prodded us to the very edge. As I got to the edge, I saw how high up we were. The fall would have killed us for sure, but that wasn’t all. There were more goblins below, who were also chanting. They had built a large fire, so we would fall and then burn. I later found out that they were offering us as sacrifices to the fire god Khalana—one of the evil gods. When I saw what was below, I stepped away from the edge. A spear hit me in the back, but I twisted to the side, so it slipped past me. Then a goblin jammed his claws into my back—and that’s how I got the scars. He pushed me forward; it hurt bad. There was no way to resist anymore. I don’t think I’ve ever been so afraid, before or since.”

“And then came father out of the sky!” Rintar shouted.

“Be quiet,” said Ganner.

“Yes, then came your father. And I’ve never seen such a glorious appearance. I glanced up and saw someone in a cloak dropping down from above us—right out of the sky!” With his hands he made a dropping motion. “He landed right next to us. His sword slashed right and left.” Tanoah rolled out of this bed and stood, imitating the motions. The boys rolled over to watch him. “Goblins screeched as they fell. One ran at him with a sort of axe. Your father blocked with a graceful move—like this—and slashed the goblin down! Another came at him from behind. Almost magically, he turned around just in time and made a quick cut. He killed that one too. His sword waved through the air like a magic wand. And he defeated all of them—probably ten or more.”

As he climbed back into his bedroll, he continued: “Then he cut us free of our bands and led us across the side of the mountain to a small cave where we hid. You see, when the goblins that were below didn’t see their human sacrifices falling down, they rushed up there to see what happened. They looked around for a while, but we laid low, and they never found us.

“As it turned out, the orc army had retreated just hours after we had left, and Khotar—I mean your father—had been sent to retrieve us.”

“That’s a good story,” said Korin. Ganner couldn’t keep from grinning.

“If it hadn’t been for your father, I’d be dead right now. And that wasn’t the only time he saved my life...”

“Will you tell us another story?” Ganner pleaded.

"I will, tomorrow night," Tanoah said. "And if you don't go to sleep right now, I won't let you sleep outside anymore." He scrunched his pillow into a more comfortable shape and rested his head.

"Good night," said Ganner.

"Good night," said Rintar.

"Good night, boys," said Tanoah.

The night had gotten very quiet. The faint trickle of the brook was the only sound. "Noah?" Korin asked.

"Yes?" he replied.

"How come you've never told us how father and mother died?"

"I don't know how they died," he said.

II

Home

Korin cut downwards with a wooden blade at his twin's head. Ganner blocked the blow and slashed back. Korin parried and attacked again. They battled on a rotting tree trunk that was suspended over a gully. Rintar climbed up to the end of the trunk. "Okay. Now I'll be the defender," he said. His brothers halted. "You two see if you can get past me to this side."

"Ah, you think you're tough now, huh? Just 'cause you're as tall as us—" said Ganner. "Let me go first."

"No, I got it," Korin said. He looked the rotting bridge at Rintar. Rintar readied his wooden blade and stood firmly in place, prepared to take his identical foes. Korin slashed to one side then the other. Rintar made two quick blocks and took a step back. Korin paused. Rintar looked at his brother's eyes. Korin seemed to stare right through him. He jabbed, then cut downward. Rintar parried and blocked, stepping back again. Ganner stood behind Korin, unable to fight.

Korin looked at the ground behind Rintar. Then in a swift motion he swung his sword leftward, pushing with both hands against Rintar's blade, and jumped for the ground where then end of the trunk rested. He caught the edge, barely keeping himself from sliding into the gully. At the same moment Ganner advanced and Rintar stepped to face him. Korin climbed to stable ground and was about to advance from the rear. Knowing he had only seconds until he was surrounded, Rintar attacked Ganner hard and fast, throwing caution aside—slash, cut, jab. Ganner backed up quickly, made a false step, and tumbled from the log. Rintar immediately turned to face Korin, hearing sticks crack below. Korin had lowered his weapon. "Are you alright?" he yelled.

Ganner lay in a clump of sticks down below. "Uh, yeah. Actually, it's pretty soft. There's a bunch of straw under these branches."

"Is it safe to jump?" Korin asked.

Ganner whacked the sticks and straw with his hand. "Yeah, I think so."

"Coming down," Korin said. His hands and sword lifted into the air as he dropped. For a moment he was suspended in the air. Then his boots sunk into the padding. "Woah—that was blinkin'. Coming, Rintar?"

Without hesitating, Rintar jumped. His cloak flew up behind him, and he crashed down. "That was fun," he said.

"You know what that looked like?" said Ganner. "That was like that old story that Tanoah used to tell us when we'd camp out. You know—how Dad flew down from the sky and saved him?"

Korin chuckled. So did Rintar. "I wonder where Tanoah is, anyway."

"He could be anywhere," Korin said. "It's been—what?—five or six years?"

"I'm going to do it again," Rintar said, crawling out of the tangle. The twins followed. They all jumped several more times, a thrill shooting through their bodies during each fall.

"We'd better be getting back," Korin said, resting in the jumbled mess. "Ziel will notice we're gone—and we never finished those planks."

"Korin!" The name echoed amongst the trees. It came from down the hill. Korin cringed. "Oh, rot. I better go." He grabbed his sword and raced down the hill.

Ganner stood up and brushed himself off. He had grown tall, just slightly above average height of a boy his age. He flipped his fingers through his dirty blonde hair, which was too long—ragged about the ears. Straw and sticks floated down after he did. His blue eyes turned toward his younger brother. "We'd better get going," he said. He stretched his arms up and back, then to the sides. He was not muscularly large, but he wasn't scrawny either. He picked up his sword.

Rintar stood up too. He was shorter and smaller than his older brothers, but he still had some growing to do. He didn't bother brushing off, except for running his fingers through his hair. His hair was a little darker than his brothers', and his eyes were green. He followed Ganner down the hill.

Their boots clumped down a well-worn path, and soon a small house came into view. Next to the house was a larger building, built adjacent to the river. A large, wooden wheel rolled as the river moseyed underneath. The screech of a saw cutting lumber echoed from inside the shop and tore the morning stillness. As they walked down the hill, they saw Korin enter the shop. The screech stopped. Soon Korin re-emerged and the screeching resumed.

"Hey, guess what," Korin yelled. "I'm going to the blacksmith's!" His brothers both grinned widely. He didn't stop to talk, but headed toward the stable. Over his shoulder, he added, "You'd better get in there. Ziel's not too happy."

"Hey," Ganner said and trotted toward his twin. "You got the money?"

"Oh yeah."

"And did he give you money for the inn?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to stay there though, right?"

"I said I agreed, didn't I?"

"Okay, 'cause I did it last time. It's only fair."

"I know, I know. But we should have enough now anyways."

"It doesn't matter. We'll use it for something else."

"Okay, okay. But I'm not staying in the tree."

"You chicken."

"It's just not comfortable. And it's my choice. But I gotta get going."

By this time Rintar was near too. "And he may be done with the you-know-whats, too," he said grinning.

Both twins grinned too, but they tried not to show it. "He probably hasn't been working on them. So I'm doubting it," said Ganner.

As the twins started to walk away, Rintar drew his wooden sword and made a cutting motion across the backs of their necks. "Never let your guard down," he said, laughing.

"*You* never..." Ganner said as drew his weapon and made an upward jab and Rintar's ribcage. But Rintar blocked and started to circle around. Korin drew his sword and tried to get behind his younger brother. They playfully taunted each other with whatever insults they could come up with. The game continued for several minutes.

"KORIN!" Ziel came storming from the shop. The boys immediately lowered their weapons—wanting to get to work, but knowing that would look like running. "I swear..."

he said, shaking his head. "You should have been on the road over an hour ago." He walked up to Korin, grabbed him by the arm, and started pulling him toward the stable. With the other hand, he took the wooden sword and hurled it toward the trees. Then he pointed at the remaining two. "If you two aren't in there in about five seconds..." Ziel quit his sentence half way through and just grunted. They hurried toward the shop.

"I told you last night!" Ziel growled.

"Okay, okay, I'm going, I'm *sorry*," said Korin.

Ziel didn't just let go of Korin's arm. He kind of threw it, as if to keep the motion going in the right direction. Korin jogged to the stable. "You *know* that road is dangerous after dark," Ziel barked.

At the stable, Korin saddled his horse—his and Ganner's horse—Ash, threw together some supplies, and was on the road in a matter of minutes.

He rode in a southwestward direction, toward the village of Azelton. The horse pranced down the narrow road. The trees stood high on either side of the trail. The dirt was soft. As they continued onward, the trees became sparser and the grass became thicker. The lush green flowed over the hills and spilled onto the trail. He begrudged the morning's beauty—white clouds smeared across the blueness, birds chirping as if in an argument, a cool wind taking the edge off the sun's rays.

His mind started drifting. He smiled. He thought about the sword fight that morning. And Ziel.

Ziel had always been like that. Like he had a grudge against life or something. *And he never told me last night. I wouldn't forget I was going to Mr. Wugnor's.* He set his hand on the back of the saddle and looked back toward where he had come, then turned back around and kicked Ash in the sides. He picked up the pace.

As he rode, the sun climbed high overhead. Korin patted the horse on the neck, and felt the sweat starting to form. "Ash," Korin said. He was a charcoal-colored horse with white socks. Korin and Ganner had helped Mr. Wugnor out on the morning he was born. They had also, under Mr. Wugnor's supervision, done most of the work in breaking him in. Now he was almost full grown.

Eventually, he came upon a small cottage. A young man, about his same age, was chopping wood in the yard.

"Hello, Therin!" Korin shouted.

"Hello to you, Korin!" came the response. Even from a distance, Therin could tell him from Ganner. They had been friends for years. Therin was an honest kid—something about him made Korin feel privileged to be his friend.

Therin walked to the fence along the roadside. "What brings you to town today?" he asked.

"I'm going to the smithy. He should be finished with some pieces that Ziel needs. And what are you doing?"

"Well, just the usual chores: helping Mom with preparations for winter—stuff like that. She should have some fresh bread ready in a few minutes. Would you like to come inside?"

"Naw. Thanks though. I've got to hurry. You tell your mother hi for me, will you?" She had been like a mother to Korin and his brothers.

"Sure." There was a pause. Korin surveyed the distance ahead. Therin surveyed the ground. "Hey Korin, sometime I'd like to have a talk with you."

"Like now?"

"Just whenever."

"Well, I've got a second. What's the matter?"

Therin thought for a moment. "Have you heard about the Janak raids?"

"You mean those surprise-attacks on that village north of here?"

"Yeah, that's it. Well, a peddler came through the other day; said they're asking for volunteers to help rebuild. I was thinking about going."

Korin wrinkled his brow. "That's good," he said.

"You don't think you or Ganner might want to come with me, do you?"

"Uh, well, I don't know. I think I need to stay and help Ziel out. I could ask Ganner though."

"It would only be for a few months," Therin said.

"Yeah, I know. It's just not a good time for me right now." Korin scratched his earlobe and looked into the sky. "I don't know why you want to go to all that trouble to help them out anyway. Doesn't your mom need your help around here?" he asked.

"Well, yeah, she probably does, but I think she could get by, especially if I work extra hard in the next little while."

Another few seconds passed with no words. Then Korin thought of something to say: "What made the goblins attack, anyways? Kind of weird, don't you think?"

"Maybe someone stirred them up and didn't want to fess up, so the whole village took the blame."

"Could be. I sure hope it's not the beginning of another war."

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe I'll see you on my way back through."

"See ya, Korin," Therin said. He smiled as he waved.

Korin nudged Ash with his heels. "See ya, Therin," he said and rode off.

* * *

The sun had disappeared by the time Korin came over the last hill. The moons reflected in the water of the vast ocean ahead. But clouds were coming inward. He started to descend. He passed the walls of the village, remnants of a time of war. Pale moonlight showed the edges of the houses and shops along the main street: a grocer, a livery, a cooper, a cobbler, and a few others. People passed him on the road. But he tried to act confident, yet he didn't dare to make eye contact. Any of them might have been thieves. Though they probably wouldn't try to get him on a crowded street like this.

But then he turned down a side street—no people. In fact, it seemed too quiet. Normally there would be dogs barking at least. Every few moments Korin looked over his shoulder, and he peered down each alley he came to. Finally he saw a familiar building ahead and let out a sigh. A sign hung above the door. Though the shadows hid the words, he knew what it said: *Wugnor, Blacksmith*. He dismounted and led Ash to the door of a house next to the blacksmith shop. Candle light flickered from behind a window curtain. Korin tapped his knuckles on the wooden door. The silence took over again, and he looked up at the moons. His breath appeared as foggy mist. Then he heard boots clunking inside. He heard a gruff "who is it?" from inside.

"Uh, it's Korin. Paramoure. I was just..."

The door squeaked open. A man stood in the doorway. There was just enough moonlight to show his bushy eyebrows and the mustache that curled back to his sideburns.

"Hey, Mr. Wugnor. I'm sorry it's so late. But I was just wondering if I could put Ash in your barn tonight."

Mr. Wugnor just raised his eyebrows, and his eyes wandered out of focus for a moment—perhaps in disbelief—then landed back on the boy. "Sure, son. And what about you?"

"I was, uh, going to head over to the inn. I, well..." He paused. "I have some business with you in the morning. I'll just pick her up then. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Well, you know where everything is," he said, waving his hand toward the barn.

"I appreciate this a bunch, Mr. Wugnor."

"It's nothing, son. You'd better get going: it's late. I'll see you in the morning." He shut the door.

Korin led Ash to the barn in the back corner of Mr. Wugnor's property. The door squeaked as it rolled to the side. It was darker in the barn, but Korin knew his way around. He unsaddled Ash and put him in a stall on the right. Another black horse poked his head out of the next stall. Korin smiled and rubbed his hand on the horse's nose. "Hi, Tricks." The horse whinnied. "I brought your son home." He reached up and ruffled her mane.

The boy stepped over to some straw in one corner and kicked it back into a taller pile. He put on a heavier cloak that was in the saddlebags. Then he went to the barn door and shut it from the inside. The barn was almost pitch-black, except for the moonbeams falling through a few small windows and the knot-holes in the walls. Korin sat down in the straw and leaned against the wall under a window. His head hit the sharp end of a nail that barely protruded from the wall. "Ouch," he said, rubbing his hand against the pain. He turned to look at the perpetrator and noticed a knot-hole close by. He closed one eye and peered outside. The barn was next to a road—or more of an alleyway. On the other side stood another barn or shack of some sort—it looked old, abandoned. There was a stack of boards, rope, broken pots, and other odds and ends that also seemed to have been abandoned ages ago. Korin looked at the shape of the pile—a dark shadow—until it started to take the shape of a goblin. He scooted over a bit and laid his head back against the wall. In front of him was another dark shape—a piece of machinery, maybe farm equipment, hunched over, baring its teeth, not breathing. He closed his eyes.

* * *

Korin woke up suddenly. The dark shape still crouched in front of him. He listened but heard nothing. No crickets. No dogs. Nothing.

Then he thought he heard a voice.

He held his breath and waited. There were voices, two men talking. And they were coming closer.

"Aye, but mum's the word."

"I don't believe it. Sariel Blades?" The voices were gravelly.

"Shhh. Aye, Sariel Blades. Shhh."

In a lower tone: "You mean he's really in Rockbridge?"

"Aye, he's there alright. And there's rumors of rebellion."

Korin began to repeat the word in his mind: *Rockbridge, Rockbridge, Rockbridge*. He didn't want to forget it. He looked to the side and saw the moonlight coming through the knot-hole. He slowly leaned over and put one eye up to the hole. Two men were moseying down the alleyway, coming toward him. He could only see their outlines, their faces hidden in the shadows of their hats.

"Rebellion?"

"Aye."

"But we're talking treason. Death."

"Aye. But shhhhhh." Then a sharp whisper said, "Did you hear that?" One man looked toward Korin's eye. Korin jerked his head back from the hole, and the straw crackled beneath him. His heart pounded against his ribs.

He heard the flap of something leather, rummaging, and steps coming toward him.

“Didn’t you hear...?” The voice was right next to the window. Then a shadow covered the moonlight. Korin held his breath.

The other figure said, “It’s a barn, ya clod. You going to murder a horse?”

Then silence. But Korin could hear breathing coming from the darkened window just above his head.

“Alright then,” came the whisper. “But we shouldn’t be talking about this here.”

The sound of footsteps moved away.

Much quieter he heard, “Are you going?”

“No. We set sail at dawn.” Then the voices grew dim. After that he only heard mumbles, and then silence. He breathed in deeply, silently, again and again.

He listened to the stillness for a long time. It was all around him, but sleep was nowhere near. He repeated the word again, *Rockbridge*. An hour later, he dared to roll over and do some pushups to help him warm up. He finally dozed off late in the night.

* * *

A rooster crowed nearby, and Korin awoke with a start. He lifted his head and shook it, then patted his face. He could feel the lines in his skin from lying face down. He stood and brushed the straw off his cloak and out of his hair. Then he walked to the trough and splashed water on his face. “Yuck,” he said, and wiped it off with his sleeve. He slid open the barn door just a crack and peeked out. He could already hear Mr. Wugnor pounding on metal in his shop. The sky was overcast, but he judged that it was at least a half hour past dawn. Korin went out a smaller door at the back of the barn. He found himself in the same alley he’d seen the men in last night. It didn’t look so frightening in the day. He took a moment to look for tracks, but the road was hard and well worn. He wasn’t planning on following them anyway.

He circled around at a distance so that he could approach the blacksmith shop from the other direction. It stood with the front on a main road. The sign hung over the door, swinging with the breeze. Korin could see Mr. Wugnor inside as he approached. He knocked on the doorframe, and said, “Hullo, Mr. Wugnor.”

“Hi, lad,” was the reply. “Come on in.”

The room was warm. Smoke rose from a glowing fire that drenched the room red and orange. The blacksmith leaned over an anvil, gripping a piece of metal in his leather gloves, and beating it with a hammer. White sparks flew into the air. He dipped the metal piece into a bucket of water and set it down. “How are things today?”

“I’m good,” Korin replied

“And I suppose you’d be wantin’ those machine-pieces, eh?” he said as he brushed his hands together.

“That’s why I’m here.”

Mr. Wugnor went to a barrel at the back of the room and heaved out several metal pieces—a black cog and some brackets. “It’s a fine piece of work. Turned out better than I hoped. It should work just fine for old Ziel. That’ll be twenty dins.”

Korin reached into a pouch that was hanging from his shoulder.

“How is old Ziel doing anyways? I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“He’s doing well.” Korin pulled out a few coins and reached them out toward the smith. “Here you go,” he said.

“Thank you.” Mr. Wugnor took the coins. “Well, it was nice to see you again,” he said and turned back to his work.

“I was just wondering, too, about the swords we had asked you about,” Korin said.

“Swords?” Mr. Wugnor creased his brow. “Swords. Oh, yes, the swords. I almost forgot,” he said, concealing a grin. Mr. Wugnor walked to the back of the room again, and reached into a barrel. “Here they are.” He reached down and pulled up three shining blades. Korin didn’t know what to say, but his smile didn’t wait for his mind to catch up.

Mr. Wugnor handed him one of them. “I etched a different rune in each of them: the first letter of each of your names.”

Korin looked at the rune on the blade next to the hilt. “Is it the ‘ga’ or the ‘ka?’” (in the ancient language those two runes are the same, only they’re upside down from each other).

“Well, you see, you hold the blade downward like this. This one’s the ‘ga’ rune.” Korin did not know if Mr. Wugnor could tell him apart from his brother. This did not help his wondering. “Here, get a feel for it,” said Mr. Wugnor.

Korin lifted the blade and twirled it around. He made a few cuts and jabs. “It’s so light.”

“Yes. I learned to make that alloy from a goblin; quite the gentleman, really. You see, you’ve got to temper it so that the edge is just as firm as can be, but the rest of the blade has to be more flexible, so as your sword won’t shatter in combat.”

“It’s a fine blade,” Korin said.

“Aye. Why, with a blade like that you could slash down a Saboan wizard.”

Korin laughed. “Now you’re starting to sound like Ziel.”

“And I suppose you’re friendly towards them? Just you wait. Someday you’ll stand toe to toe with one, and fear will overcome you. And you’ll be lucky if you make it away alive... and luckier still if you don’t have their evil spell cast on you. Turn your eyes to white globs of ice. And your heart will be cold too. And you’ll obey every word they command.”

Korin chuckled again. “No, I’m not friendly towards them. I just wonder why some people say good things about them.”

“It’s ‘cause of their curses. Once you’re under their spell, there’s no snapping out of it. And if you’re not careful, lad, they’ll cast their spell on you.”

Korin put his hand on his pouch. “So how much was it again?”

“Eighty. Eighty for the three of them.” Korin reached into his pocket, and counted out the coins. He and his brothers had worked for a long time to earn those coins. But he didn’t hesitate. Really, swords like these should have cost twice as much. With a grin, he dropped the coins into Mr. Wugnor’s hand.

“And how much will it cost for you to keep it a secret from Ziel?”

“Ah, that’s right. Ziel never was much for war, was he?”

“No, not too much.”

“Well, son, your secret’s safe with me. I enjoy your visits too much to do that.”

“Thanks, Mr. Wugnor,” Korin said sincerely. “We owe you.”

When Korin left, he wrapped the swords in his cloak and strapped the bundle onto the back of the saddle. On his way out of town, he stopped by the trading post to pick up a few more things that Ziel needed. Then he set out for home.

A short distance down the road, he saw a man riding just ahead of him, going the same direction. The man had a lot of gear. He noticed a lute strapped to the saddlebags.

Korin nudged Ash to go faster, and he soon overtook the stranger.

“Greetings,” Korin said.

The stranger turned and looked at him. “Hello,” he said.

“You’re a minstrel?” Korin asked.

“I am. My name is Torgin, minstrel and luthier. I’ve traveled this land far and wide.”

“Then you must know a lot of exciting stories?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Did you ever run into a Saboan wizard?”

“I happen to know one of the highest ranking Knights in the order.”

“You’re friendly with the Saboan Knights then?”

“I can’t say that I’m friendly with all of them, but this one helped me get out of an awful scrape once.”

“What happened?”

“Well, it’s a long story. Someday I’ll write a song about it. Hey, I could sing you a song that one of them taught me.”

“Do you know where Rockbridge is?”

“You know there’s been trouble up there—what with that new governor and all?”

“I hadn’t heard. Is it far away?”

“Well, have you ever been to the Everan Gulch?”

“I think so. Isn’t it somewhere north of here?”

“More to the northeast. It’s quite a long journey. Who will you be going with?”

“My brothers.”

“Well, I must warn you to be cautious. The wilderness in that land is dangerous—especially to the inexperienced. And I can’t say I’m comfortable with the rest of those knights—those wizards. So just be careful. Don’t you have someone older you could go with?”

“Uh, yeah, of course.”

“Good. See that you do.”

They were approaching a crossroads. A pole displayed three signs, one pointing down each direction of the road.

“I guess this is where we part,” Korin said.

“Yes, it’s been a pleasure talking to you.”

“So where will your travels take you next?”

“I’ll head further south and west to the sea. I have heard tales of many adventures on the sea, and it is time this bard sang of them.”

“I wish you luck.”

“And to you too,” the minstrel replied. Soon Korin was some distance down the fork toward his home and the minstrel down the road to the south. The minstrel turned and said, “Boy, I never got your name.”

“It’s Korin—Paramoure.” He raised his hand high in the air. The minstrel waved back. Korin turned and rode eastward.

It was a long journey back, but he enjoyed it. He was excited to show his brothers the swords and to tell them what he had heard about Sariel Blades.

By the time he arrived home, the evening sun was changing the sky orange and purple. First he stashed the swords in the shed. He gave a shout, expecting his brothers to be somewhere outside, but received no answer.

He quickly tied Ash to a fence near the stables and rushed to the house. “Ganner,” he said as he entered the door.

Rintar was lying on the couch with his leg bound in a splint. Ziel was leaning on a chair, tying a binding at the top of a crutch. Ganner sat at the end of the couch. “What happened?” Korin asked.

“These boys were playing those war games again, and Rintar fell and hurt his leg.”

“Is it bad?” Korin asked. Rintar closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“I’m not sure,” said Ziel. “It could be. He’ll definitely be off it for a while.”

Ganner looked up at Korin as if waiting to hear something.

"I bought the parts you were wanting," Korin said, to Ziel, but looking at Ganner. "Wanna come see them?"

Ganner and Ziel stood up and walked out with Korin, leaving Rintar lying on the couch with his eyes closed.

They went to the horse, and Ziel pulled a leather glove off his right hand so that he could untie the saddlebags. The setting sun gave off enough light for Korin to notice the burn marks from an old wound on Ziel's palm. Then he stole a glance at the scar across his face. Ziel set the saddlebags on the ground and started to look over each of the machine parts. "I want to thank you two for your help today." They pursed their lips and nodded, but didn't say anything. Ziel patted the horse, then pulled his glove back on. "I just want you three to be responsible. I won't be here to look after you forever. Someday you're going to have to make good choices without me telling you." There was more silence.

"So is Rintar going to be okay?" Korin asked.

"I think so," said Ziel. "I sure hope so. I guess only time will tell." There was a moment of silence. "I guess I'll go check on him," he said and started toward the house.

Ganner had a smile on his face.

"What?" Korin asked.

"Did you get them?"

"Well, he said that we didn't have enough."

"What?!" Ganner whined. "I don't believe this."

"Well, I'm just kidding. They're in the shed over there," he said smiling.

Together they hurried to the shed. Inside, Korin pulled out the bundle. Ganner's smile got bigger. He grabbed one of the handles and drew the sword from its makeshift sheath. He took a few swings.

"That one's mine," Korin said and handed Ganner the one with the 'ga' rune. "You hold them like this," he added, pointing the blade down.

Ganner continued to smile. He held the blade up to the window and looked at the rune closely. Then he looked at the smoothly crafted hilt. "I like it," he said.

"There's something else though, too. You're not going to believe it," Korin said. "I slept in Mr. Wugnor's barn last night. And at around the stroke of midnight, two creepy men walked by. The way they talked sounded like pirates."

"Come on now."

"I told you you wouldn't believe me. But I mean it. And that's not even the main thing. They were talking about murder and rebellion. And then they said that Sariel Blades is in a place called Rockbridge."

"No." But Korin nodded his head and looked his brother in the eye. "You're serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious."

"All right!" Ganner yelled, grinning.

Korin didn't smile. "Well, it's a clue, but I don't think it does us any good. We can't leave till Rintar gets healed up. And by that time, it's likely he won't still be in the same place."

"We go without him. We have to. We can't miss an opportunity like this."

"Well we can't just take off."

"Korin, if we don't leave now, we may miss this forever. This could be our only chance."

* * *

When Rintar awoke in the morning his leg was sore. He had not slept well.

He rolled onto his side, careful not to let his leg move much. The crutches Ziel had made were lying next to his bed on the floor. So were his knife and a half-carved stick. He frowned: he hadn't been whittling anything recently.

He reached down and grabbed his knife and the stick. He thought about carving a chain—his brothers had each carved one. He would probably have the time over the next few days...

Then he noticed a piece of paper that was carefully rolled and stuffed into a notch on one side of the stick. He used his knife to slip it out. It read:

Kintar, sorry about your leg. And sorry we had to leave you behind. We have gone to visit a friend. We will be back in a couple of weeks. Tell Ziel we are sorry, but it was urgent.

Ganner

Korin

p. S. Look in the old shed where we used to keep the shovels.