



Goblin Hero (preview)

By Jim C. Hines



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Goblin Hero

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Chapter 1

*"How come goblins never live happily ever after?"
--Jig Dragonslayer*

Jig the goblin was no warrior. His limbs were like blue sticks, his torn ear tended to flop to the side, and his fangs barely stretched up past his upper lips. As a child, he had been relegated to muck duty, hauling caustic sludge through the goblin lair to fill the fire bowls that illuminated the cavern. The putrid, rotting-plant smell of muck would seep into his clothes, his hair, even his skin. And muck duty was far from the worst he had survived. He tried not to think about his time cleaning privies.

His grand quest a year ago hadn't changed him. Well, except for the nightmares about the dragon Straum coming back to eat him, or the Necromancer casting a spell to wither Jig's body until it crumbled to dust, or giant carrion-worms crawling into his bedroll and--

Jig shook his head, trying to banish those images. Suffice it to say, he was still the same nearsighted runt he had been before. But he had emerged from the dragon's lair with one potent gift: the ability to heal various injuries.

Given the nature of goblin life, this made Jig one of the busiest goblins in the lair.

His current patient, a muscular goblin named Braf, was everything a goblin warrior should be. Strong, tall, and dumb . . . even for a goblin. Somehow, Braf had managed to wedge his own right fang deep

inside his left nostril.

Jig shook his head. Braf raised stupidity to new heights, then threw it down to shatter on the earth below.

A dirty rag looped around Braf's jaw held the fang still. Blood and other fluids turned the rag dark blue. Braf gingerly wiped his nose on his wrist, momentarily halting the seepage. He stared at the goo on his hand, then wiped it on his too-tight leather vest.

"Can you fix it?" Braf said, his voice muffled and nasal.

"Don't talk," Jig said. He closed his eyes. *How much longer?*

Tymalous Shadowstar, forgotten god of the Autumn Star, stifled a giggle only Jig could hear. *I'm sorry, I'm doing the best--* The god's voice dissolved into jingling laughter.

Jig had discovered Tymalous Shadowstar during that adventure a year before. Or maybe Shadowstar had discovered Jig. Shadowstar was the one who gave Jig the power to heal the other goblins. What Shadowstar got out of the deal, Jig still wasn't sure. There were days he thought Shadowstar did it purely for his own amusement.

How did he do this to himself, anyway? Shadowstar asked between giggles.

Braf's not exactly the sharpest blade in the armory, Jig said. *But I'm guessing he had help.* Someone had tied those bandages on to Braf's head. Had Braf tried to do it, he probably would have hanged himself.

Goblins. Why did it have to be goblins?

It was a complaint Jig had listened to ever since he discovered the forgotten god. Now was when Jig would traditionally try to defend his people, to point out the things they had accomplished in the past year. Things like achieving a shaky truce with the hobgoblins deeper in the mountain, and sealing off the outer tunnel to protect them from adventurers.

Yet when he looked at Braf, Jig couldn't find it in himself to speak up on behalf of the goblins.

I think I'm ready now, said Shadowstar.

"Good." Jig crossed the small temple, trying to ignore the tile mosaic on the ceiling. Bits of colored glass formed an image of the forgotten god, a tall, pale man dressed in black, with silver bells striping his arms and legs. Sour smoke from the muck lanterns floated around the image, never quite reaching the pale face. That face had a definite smirk, one which hadn't been there earlier in the day.

Jig placed his hand over Braf's nose and tried not to grimace. Goblins had never been known for their attractiveness, and Braf was a

spectacular example of why. Old disease-scars dotted his skin, and his misshapen nose looked a great deal like a pregnant frog who had settled in the center of his face.

Shadowstar started to snicker again. *Now it looks like a frog with a huge yellow fang up its--*

"Hold still," said Jig. He tilted Braf's head back and slipped one finger beneath the bandage as he waited for the magic to start. The flow of Shadowstar's power through Jig's body always made him feel bloated, and he shifted uncomfortably as the magic warmed his hands.

Before he could do anything more, a glowing orange insect landed on his arm and began to creep forward. Jig yanked his hand back. The last thing he needed was for a bug to crawl up Braf's nose. He swatted it, splattering glowing bug goo over his arm, even as two more of the pests buzzed around his head.

"What are they?" Braf asked.

"I don't know. They started showing up a few weeks ago." Jig waved his hands, trying to bat them toward the spider web in the corner of the temple. "And stop talking!"

The bugs drew back. Jig slapped his free hand over Braf's swollen nose.

Slowly, Shadowstar warned.

A hairsbreadth at a time, Jig slid the offending fang out of the nostril. He tried very hard to ignore the fluids that followed, coating Jig's hands with blue slime. He also ignored the feel of the fang moving beneath the nostril, the way the tooth scraped against the bone.

Braf's eyes crossed. The warmth in Jig's hands increased. His fingers felt like swollen tubers, and the orange bugs were circling Braf's head. Jig's arms tingled.

Got it, Shadowstar said.

Jig slid the tip of the fang free, and there was a loud popping sound as the jawbone slipped back into the socket. Jig swung one hand at the bugs. He missed, and the motion splattered blood across Shadowstar's mosaic.

Braf sneezed. He touched his nose, and a broad grin split his blood-crusting face. "Thanks, Jig!"

Blood, spit, and snot had misted Jig's spectacles. He slipped them off and wiped the lenses on his pants. "So how did you do this to yourself?"

"I was on guard duty," Braf said. "My partner bet me I couldn't touch my nose with my fang. When I won the bet, he punched me in the

jaw."

A shining example of the goblin race, Shadowstar commented.

"I guess you showed him," Jig said.

Braf laughed. "Yeah." He scratched his chin and turned to go. As he stooped through the low doorway, he hesitated. "Hey, don't tell anyone I came to you. Some of the other goblins don't like you that much, and I don't want them to--"

"To think you've been coming to the runt for help?" Jig asked, his voice tight. Nearly every goblin had needed Jig's help at one time or another over the past year, but not one wanted to admit it.

"Yeah!" Braf beamed. "That's right. Thanks!" He disappeared down the tunnel before Jig could find anything to throw at him. Some things never changed. No matter how many goblins he healed, no matter how many quests he survived, he was still Jig the scrawny, half-blind runt.

Jig sat down on the altar. A dark, red-spotted fire-spider the size of Jig's hand crept up the side and scurried toward him. Jig straightened his arm so the spider could climb on to the singed leather pad Jig wore strapped to his right shoulder. Fire-spiders grew hot when threatened, and Jig had the burns to prove it. Despite the scars, Smudge still made a better companion than most goblins.

"It's not that bad, really," Jig said. "They can't afford to kill me. Who would fix their wounds?"

He glanced at the blood on his trousers and sighed. Another improvement from a year ago was the quality of Jig's clothes. Jig had spent most of his adult life in a ratty old loincloth so stiff he could have used it for a shield. Now he wore soft gray trousers and a loose black shirt. His old sword hung at his side, and he had his favorite boots on. The leather was bright blue, with red flames painted down the side and white, furry fringe on top.

Most importantly, he had his spectacles. Large, amethyst lenses covered his eyes, letting him see the world as clearly as any goblin, except for his peripheral vision where the lenses didn't quite cover. Steel frames kept them hooked over his pointed ears. They weren't perfect, and the frames irritated his bad ear, which had been torn and scarred in a fight with another goblin. But being able to see the world around him was worth a little pain.

Recently, Shadowstar had suggested another addition to his wardrobe: socks. It had taken a long time to persuade one of the children to weave a pair of cloth tubes, then sew them shut at one end, but the

result was literally a gift from the gods. No more blisters, no more dark blue marks on his legs where the dye from his boots rubbed off, and best of all, his boots didn't smell quite so horrid when he took them off.

"Jig?"

The voice came from the darkness of the tunnels, but Jig recognized it. "What do you want, Veka?"

Veka stepped into the temple, drawing her long black cloak tight around her considerable bulk. Broad-shouldered and thick-limbed, she had sent more than one goblin to Jig with missing teeth or a broken nose.

Veka worked in the distillery, turning rotted fungus, smashed glowworms, and pungent mushrooms into muck. As a result, she always smelled like decomposing plants. Her hands were covered in greenish stains, and the fumes of the muck room had left her eyes bloodshot.

"You didn't cast a binding spell when you healed Braf's nose. How did you do that?" She rapped the end of her staff on the floor for emphasis. Glass beads, bits of metal, and what looked like a mummified finger all clattered against the staff, tied there with scraps of leather and braided hair.

The staff, like her cloak, was part of Veka's obsession with all things magical. An obsession which unfortunately included Jig.

"I don't even know what a binding spell is," Jig said, hopping down from the altar. He walked toward the tunnel and hoped she would move out of his way.

Veka didn't budge. She raised a tight fist and slowly spread her fingers. Faint threads of light formed a dim, fragile web between her fingers. "The binding is the way the wizard taps into the magical powers that surround her. It is the first step of the journey toward--"

At that point, one of the orange bugs landed on Veka's hand. The binding spell flickered out of existence. "Stupid bug!" She smooshed it flat.

"Veka, I can't--"

She didn't let him finish. Scowling, she set her staff against the wall and fished through her clothes. From a pocket within her cloak, she produced a stained, brown book. The cover had been torn off and re sewn, and many of the pages were coming loose from the binding. "Josca says in chapter two that the Hero will find a guide, a mentor to lead them to the path." She waved the book at Jig like a sword. "You're the only goblin who knows anything about magic, and you won't even--"

"Who is Josca?" Jig asked, stepping back.

Veka tapped the cover. Oversized silver letters read, *The Path of*

the Hero (Wizard's ed.), by Josca. "Josca says every Hero follows the same path. Only the details change. I need a mentor. By refusing to teach me magic, you're blocking my way."

Her teeth were bared, and the long lower fangs looked freshly sharpened. Jig took another step back. "Josca should write an edition for goblins. In the first chapter the hero sets out for adventure. In the second, he dies a horrible, painful death."

"You survived." Her scowl turned the words into an accusation.

Heavy footsteps running up the tunnel saved Jig from having to answer. Braf shouldered his way past Veka and said, "I forgot. The chief said she wants to see you. It's about the ogre."

"What ogre?" Jig asked.

"The one who showed up right after my . . . problem," Braf said, with a quick glance at Veka. "He smashed up a few other guards. He said he was looking for the Dragonslayer. The chief said to go right away."

Jig covered one of the muck lanterns and scooped up the other by the handle. Green light reflected from the dark red obsidian of the walls as he followed Braf into the tunnels. The clomp of Veka's staff followed close behind.

"What do you think the ogre wants?" Braf asked.

"I'm more worried about what the chief will do to me for taking so long to answer her." Ever since Kralk took control of the goblins, she had been looking for a way to get rid of Jig. He frowned, thinking about the rest of Braf's story. "Why didn't the other guards come to me for healing?"

"What guards?"

"The ones the ogre injured."

Braf laughed. "When I left, the older goblins were scrubbing what was left of them off the walls."

Jig swallowed and began to run.

#

Two guards stood outside the entrance to the goblin cavern. Firebowls provided a cheerful, yellow-green light. Jig ignored the blue bloodstains on the wall and floor. He flattened his ears as he walked inside. He had been away most of the day, and even the subdued, nervous conversation of five hundred goblins was louder than he was used to.

Smudge shifted restlessly on Jig's shoulder. The heat from the fire-spider's body caused drops of sweat to trickle down Jig's neck. Not that Jig needed the warning.

The ogre was easy to spot. He sat near the back of the cavern,

surrounded by armed goblins. Steel blades and long, wooden spears trembled as the goblins fought to control their fear. For his part, the ogre didn't seem to notice.

Why should he? His leathery green skin was strong enough to turn most attacks, and his hands were as big as Jig's head. He sat on the floor . . . probably because if he stood, his head would scrape the ceiling. His teeth were smaller than goblin fangs, but still sharp enough to sever a limb. He could cut a swathe through the cavern bare-handed. Shadowstar only knew what he could do with the huge, brass-studded club resting across his knees.

"Jig! It's about time you got your scrawny arse down here," shouted Kralk. The lanky goblin chief was smiling, which made Jig nervous. She wore a necklace of jagged malachite spikes and an ill-fitting dwarvish breastplate. Metal spikes adorned the shoulders and . . . chest area . . . of her armor. Kralk collected weapons, rarely carrying the same one two days in a row. Today a nasty-looking morningstar hung from her belt, clanking as she walked toward Jig.

Jig hadn't been around when the last chief died. At the time, he had been around the fifth or sixth stanza of "The Song of Jig," somewhere between fighting the Necromancer and cowering before the dragon. When Jig came back, many of the goblins had encouraged him to take over as chief, a prospect he found as appealing as dancing naked in front of tunnel cats.

Ultimately, three goblins had emerged as potential candidates, ready to fight for control of the lair. The morning of the fight, only one of those three showed up for breakfast. The other two were found curled up near the garbage pit with most of their blood on the outside of their bodies.

Kralk had been trying to get rid of Jig ever since. She never challenged him openly. No, it was always "Jig, could you slay that rock serpent that snuck into the distillery?" or "We need someone to lead a raiding party to steal food from the ogres," or "Golaka is experimenting with a new soup, and she wants someone to taste it."

Naturally, Jig always said no. Each refusal chipped away at his reputation, reinforcing Kralk's power over the goblins and making his life miserable. Why couldn't she see that he wasn't a threat?

The ogre's voice thundered through the cavern, making Jig jump. "This is the Dragonslayer?"

A path opened between Jig and the ogre. Goblins moved away like blood flowing from a wound. Jig reached up to stroke Smudge's

head. The fire-spider was warm, but not hot enough to burn. They weren't in any immediate danger.

For an instant, Jig considered lying. If he said Braf was Jig Dragonslayer, the ogre wouldn't know any better. One look at the grin on Kralk's face shattered that plan.

"I'm Jig," he said. His voice sounded like a child's squeak compared to the ogre's.

"You're the one who killed the dragon Straum?" The ogre picked up his club and made his way toward Jig, keeping his head and shoulders hunched.

Jig glanced at Kralk, then nodded.

"You put a spear through that monster's eye?"

He nodded again.

"You? You're the one they sing that song about, the one--"

"Yes, that's me!" Jig snapped. His momentary anger ebbed as quickly as it had begun, leaving his legs so weak he thought he was going to collapse. *Brilliant*, he thought. *Shout at the ogre. Why not kick him in the groin next?*

The ogre knelt, peering down at Jig, then back at Kralk. "He's like a little goblin doll!"

Jig's claws dug into his palms. Better a toy than a threat. "Braf said you wanted to talk to me."

"That's right." The ogre took another step, putting him almost within arm's reach. Almost within Jig's reach, at least. The ogre could have grabbed Jig by the head and bounced him off the nearest wall without stretching. His green scalp wrinkled into a frown. "We need. . . ." His voice grew quiet, muffling the last word.

"What was that?" Jig asked.

The ogre's face turned a deeper green, almost exactly the same shade as the mold that grew on the privy walls. "Help. We need help."

Jig stared, trying to put the pieces together. He understood the words, but his mind struggled with the idea that ogres would come to goblins for help. What next? The Necromancer returning from the dead to start a flower garden?

"What kind of help?" Jig asked.

"A few months ago, something showed up in Straum's cave and started hunting us. At first we thought it was those hobgoblin types, or maybe you goblins, so we came up and slaughtered a few of you." He gave a sheepish half-shrug. "Sorry about that."

Kralk stepped closer. "You killed far more hobgoblins than

goblins. We considered it a favor."

"Right. So you won't mind doing us a favor in return." The ogre stared at Jig. "Whatever they are, they've got magic on their side. Many of us have already died. Others have been enslaved. They're hunting down those who remain, the families who fled into the deeper tunnels."

Jig had met two wizards in his time. One had been a companion on his quest. The other was the dreaded Necromancer. Both had tried to kill him. To be fair, a number of non-wizards had also tried to kill him, but wizards tended to be much nastier about it.

"We've heard of you," the ogre said. "You've got magic of your own, right?"

Jig knew where this was going, and his mouth was too dry to answer. He managed a weak nod.

Kralk's smile grew. Smudge responded to that smile with enough heat to sear the leather shoulder pad. Tiny threads of smoke rose from beneath his feet. Interesting that the goblin chief frightened him more than the ogre. Jig had always known Smudge was smart.

"What do you say, Jig?" asked Kralk.

Jig took a step back. There had to be a way out of this. He whirled and pointed at Veka. "What about her? She can cast a binding spell, and she *wants* to be a hero."

The closest goblins started to laugh, either at Jig's cowardice or at the idea of smelly, overweight Veka as a hero. As for Veka herself, she flashed a grin nearly as wicked as Kralk's own. "Sorry, Jig. If you had taught me magic, I might be powerful enough to help. But I guess you'll have to do this on your own."

"But--"

"This is your path, Jig Dragonslayer, not mine." Veka tapped her staff on the floor, rattling the beads and bones. "A Hero must make her own path. To quote the valiant Duke Hoffman, who transformed himself to rescue the mermaid Liriara, 'I have chosen my way, and it is the way of the squid.'"

The ogre stared. "What's she talking about? What's a squid?"

Say yes. Shadowstar's voice was calm and firm.

Jig's was not. "What?" He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the rest of the cavern so he could concentrate on Tymalous Shadowstar. *You want me to say yes?*

I can't see everything that's happening, but I can tell you this much. Something about your ogre friend feels wrong. There's a residue of some sort, almost a magical shadow. Whatever's happening down there,

it's dangerous. You have a choice, Jig Dragonslayer. You can go with the ogre and discover what's happening, or you can wait for the problem to come to you.

Waiting sounds good. Shadowstar didn't answer. Jig sighed. The god always meant business when he used Jig's full name. *What do you expect me to do? They're ogres! If they can't fight this thing, how am I--*

You've fought dragons and wizards and adventurers, and you survived. Veka is peculiar, even for a goblin, but she's also correct. A hero is the one who finds a way.

Kralk is trying to get me killed! She--

Or you can refuse. Tell the ogre no, and see how he reacts.

Right. Jig looked at the ogre. "I'll go," he muttered.

"Excellent!" The ogre slapped him on the shoulder, knocking him to the ground. "Whoops. Sorry about that. I forget how fragile you bugs are. Nothing broken, I hope?" He grabbed Jig's arm and hauled him upright.

Jig stepped back, testing his arm. Fortunately, the ogre hadn't struck the shoulder where Smudge was perched. The fire-spider was crouched into a hot ball, staring at the ogre. Slowly, Smudge extended his legs. With a burst of speed, Smudge raced down Jig's chest and burrowed into a pouch on his belt, leaving a trail of smoking dots down Jig's shirt.

"Take Braf along for protection," said Kralk, sneering.

"Whoever's hunting the ogres might not have heard 'The Song of Jig'. They might mistake you for a stunted coward and rip you apart before you have the chance to tell them of your great deeds."

Jig glanced at Braf, who was busy picking the scabs on his nose. He couldn't decide if bringing Braf would improve his chances of survival or make them worse. Braf grimaced and stretched his jaw, using the tip of his fang to scratch inside his freshly-healed nostril. Definitely worse.

"Someone else volunteered to accompany you," Kralk added.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," said a goblin from the back of the cave, in a voice so old it creaked.

Kralk grinned again. "Jig will certainly need a nursemaid to look after him."

Goblins snickered as Grell made her way through the group to join Jig. If there was any goblin who would be of less use than Braf, it was Grell.

The canes she used to support her weight were smooth sticks, dyed dark yellow with hobgoblin blood. Grell was older than any goblin

Jig knew, with the possible exception of Golaka the chef. But where Golaka had gotten bigger and meaner with age, Grell had shrunk until she was almost as small as Jig himself. Her face reminded Jig of wrinkled, rotten fruit. Grell had worked in the nursery for as long as Jig could remember, and generations of teething goblin babies had covered her hands and forearms in scars. Dark stains covered her sleeveless shirt. Jig tried not to think about the origins of those stains.

"Are you sure?" Jig asked. "It will be dangerous. The ogres--"

"Ogres, ha!" Grell said. One whiff of her breath made the rotten fruit comparison much more apt. One of her yellowed fangs was broken near the gums, and the smell of decay made Jig want to gag. "Spend a week with twenty-three goblin babies and another nine toddlers, then we'll talk about danger."

"But--"

Grell jabbed the end of one cane into Jig's chest. "Listen, boy. If I spend one more day with those monsters, either I'm going to kill them, or more likely, they're going to kill me. I refuse to die buried in sniveling, crying brats. Kralk agreed to give me a break from nursery duty if I went with you and this green-skinned clod, so I'm going. Understand?"

"What about the nursery?" Jig asked desperately. "Who's going to take over?"

"Rival's still in there, but you're right. Without help, they'll probably overpower her pretty quickly." Grell turned toward the kitchens. "Hey, Golaka. Send one of your drudges over to help watch the brats!" To Jig, she added, "That should work. They can always threaten to barbeque the older ones if they get out of line."

Golaka peered out of the doorway. Sweat made her round face shine. She waved her stirring spoon in the air, spraying droplets of gravy over the nearest goblins. "My helpers are all busy mashing worms for dinner."

"I only want one. And your worm pudding tastes like week-old vomit anyway," Grell shouted back.

Jig cringed. He could see other goblins creeping out of the way, as far from Golaka as they could get. On the bright side, maybe he wouldn't have to take Grell along after all.

Golaka shook her spoon at Grell. "Last one who complained about my cooking got his tongue ripped out. The taste didn't bother him at all after that."

"Pah," said Grell. "Just send over whatever idiot overspiced the snake meat the other night. One day dealing with teething goblin babies,

and they'll work twice as hard once they're back safe in your kitchen."

Golaka's spoon stopped in mid-shake. The rage on her face slowly melted away, and she began to chuckle. "I like that." She spun and headed back to the kitchen. "Hey, Pallik. Stop licking the hammer and get over here. I've got a new job for you!"

Jig turned to the ogre, who had watched the entire exchange with an increasingly skeptical expression.

"Come on," said Jig. *Before anyone else volunteers to "help."*

#

The laughter of the other goblins followed them out of the lair, stopping abruptly when the ogre spun around and snarled. The silence drew a faint smile from Jig. His goblin companions might be worse than useless, but he could get used to having an ogre along.

Jig studied the two goblins. "What is that supposed to be?" he asked, staring at the object in Braf's hand.

"A weapon, I think," said Braf. "I traded a hobgoblin for it a few days ago."

The so-called weapon was the length of Jig's leg. A thick wooden shaft ended in a brass hook, wide enough to catch someone's neck. The other end was barbed and pointed.

"Do you know how to use it?" Jig asked.

"I wanted to name it, first. I was going to call it a hooker."

Jig cringed.

"But that didn't sound right," Braf went on, rotating the weapon and testing the point on his other hand. "I thought about calling it a goblin-stick, because I'm a goblin. But I think I'm going to name it a hook-tooth, because it's sharp like a tooth, only the other end is hooked, see?"

Standing behind Jig, the ogre snickered. He could probably snap Braf's hook-tooth with one hand.

"I wish I could remember where I put my shield, though," Braf continued. "I had it at dinner last night, because I used it as a plate, and I remember Mellok kept stealing my fried bat wings."

Grell's wrinkled face tightened with disgust. Shifting her balance, she raised her cane and slammed it into Braf's back, making a loud *thunk*.

Braf hardly budged, but his face lit up. He craned his neck and patted the edge of the shield, still strapped to his back. "Thanks, Grell!"

Jig turned to the ogre. "What's your name?"

"Walland Wallandson the Fourth."

"The fourth what?" asked Braf.

"The fourth Walland Wallandson."

Braf stared. "Couldn't the other ogres come up with enough names?" He seemed oblivious to the glare Grell shot him, so she slapped the back of his head.

"It's my father's name," said Walland. He flexed his fingers, and his knuckles popped with the sound of cracking bones. "He was Walland Wallandson the Third. His father was the Second, and my great-grandfather was Walland Wallandson the First. Your name is your legacy. Your family is everything. Anyone who mocks the Wallandson name had best prepare for a long, painful death." That last was said with a glare at Braf.

"Seems awfully inefficient," said Grell. "All those ogres taking care of their own offspring. How do you find time for anything else?"

Walland shrugged. "They don't stay young forever." He turned to Jig. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Are we going?"

Jig had forgotten he was supposed to be in charge of the other goblins. "Right. Sorry." He raised his lantern, then hesitated. Going first meant leaving two goblins and an ogre at his back. Walland probably wouldn't do anything, not if he really wanted Jig's help. But the other two, well, they were goblins. Worse, Kralk must have talked to both of them before Jig even arrived.

"What's wrong?" Braf asked.

It wasn't that Jig didn't trust them. He trusted them to behave like goblins. "I'm wondering which one of you has orders to kill me."

He hoped his bluntness would startle the guilty one into confessing. Instead, Braf and Grell glanced at one another, then at the floor. Neither one would meet Jig's eyes.

Jig was in trouble. "Braf?"

Braf scratched his nose. "Kralk said she'd chop me up and toss me in Golaka's stewpot if you came back alive. She thinks you want to kill her and take her place."

"Why, so the entire lair can plot my death instead of just you two?" Jig asked, his voice pitched higher than normal. Borderline hysteria had that effect on him. "What about you?" he asked, turning to Grell. "What did she promise you?"

"She said if I killed you, she'd make sure I never have to work in that miserable, foul-smelling nursery again."

"You can't do that," Braf protested, raising his hook-tooth. "Kralk

told *me* to kill him."

Jig's hand brushed the handle of his sword. From this angle, he could probably stab Grell in the back, but Braf was out of reach. Besides, Tymalous Shadowstar frowned on stabbing people in the back. Jig had never understood that, but he knew better than to argue the point.

Walland snorted and stepped past Jig, giving Braf a light shove that sent him bouncing off the wall. Braf landed on his backside, nearly impaling himself on his own weapon. "Trustworthy lot, you goblins," said Walland.

Jig didn't answer. Despite common belief, the goblin language did include a word for trust. It was derived from the word for trustworthy, which in the goblin tongue, was the same as the word for dead.

Jig stared at the ogre's leathery face, hoping he wasn't about to make a mistake. "Walland came to us for help," he said. "He asked for me. For Jig Dragonslayer." He narrowed his eyes and tried to look menacing as he turned to the other goblins. "I imagine he'd be very unhappy if something happened to me before we could help him."

Braf stood up, rubbing his behind. "I'm not afraid of some ogre," he said, lowering Jig's estimate of his intelligence even further. But he tucked his hook-tooth through the shield on his back and made no move to attack.

"Grell?" Jig asked.

Grell shrugged. "The way I figure it, there's a good chance you'll get yourself killed down there and save me the trouble."

"Fine." Knowing she was probably right gave Jig a sick feeling in his gut, like he had eaten something that wasn't quite dead yet. His only consolation, as he raised the lantern and set off down the tunnel, was that whatever killed him would no doubt kill the other goblins as well.

Author's Note:

I hope you've enjoyed this sneak peek at *Goblin Hero*. Please feel free to share it with anyone you think might appreciate poor Jig and his adventures.

If you feel moved to order a copy of the book, I'd encourage you to support your local bookstores. *Goblin Hero* will be available in May of 2007. You can also pre-order online, at [Amazon](#) or [Barnes & Noble](#).

Thanks for reading!

Jim C. Hines
January, 2007

Advance Praise for *Goblin Hero*:

"In GOBLIN HERO, as in GOBLIN QUEST, Hines recognizes that wisdom is most often common-sense and that mouthing off to the big guy with the sword is a very bad idea."

-Tanya Huff, Author of *Smoke and Ashes*

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"The problem with surviving your first book -- your first great adventure -- is that someone thinks you're now a Hero, and can be sent on a second adventure, even greater and funnier than the first. Jim C. Hines gives us another side-splitting, inspiring tale of Jig the runt, Jig the most unpopular goblin in the lair. . . . I loved this book. It has the Path of the Hero, lots of goblins who never live happily ever after, and much wry fun. Highly recommended!"

-Ed Greenwood, Author of *Elminster: the Making of a Mage*