



Goblin War (Preview)

by Jim C. Hines



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Goblin War

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Chapter 1

Goblin war drums wouldn't be so bad, Jig decided, if the drummers would only stick to a consistent beat.

He squeezed between a clump of pine trees. Snow spilled from the branches, most of it sliding down the back of his cloak. The rest landed in Jig's left ear.

Jig yelped and poked a claw into his ear, digging out the worst of the snow.

"We should stay quiet," Relka said behind him.

With great effort, Jig restrained himself from stabbing his fellow goblin. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and tried to ignore her.

Relka brushed snow from his back. "Don't you like the cloak I gave you? Why don't you use the hood?" She grabbed the hood before Jig could warn her. A moment later, she was cursing and shoving her singed fingers into the snow.

"Because that's where Smudge rides," Jig said, his annoyance vanishing as quickly as it had come. He grinned as he reached back to stroke his pet fire-spider. Smudge was still warm, but he settled down at Jig's touch.

"But you do like the cloak, don't you? I got it from an adventurer last month." Relka sucked nervously on her lower lip, tugging it between the curved fangs of her lower jaw. She did that a lot around Jig. Between that and the bitter cold, her lips were always cracked and bleeding.

Relka was one of the younger goblins, a kitchen drudge who worked with Golaka the chef. Her fangs were small for a goblin, and her face tended to be sweaty and streaked with soot from the cookfires. She had used an old tunnel cat bone to pin a blanket over her clothes for warmth.

Jig fingered the hole in the front of his cloak. Old blood turned the frayed edges the color of rust where a goblin had gotten in a lucky blow with his spear. Still, even with the hole, at least the cloak was warm. Lavender wasn't exactly Jig's color, and he could have done without the embroidered flowers and vines running along the edges, but he wasn't about to complain. It was *warm*, and even better, the material was highly flame-resistant. Even if it did smell faintly of

blood.

"You hate it, don't you?" Relka slumped. Even her wide, pointed ears sagged.

"It's not bad," Jig said grudgingly. "I like the pockets."

Relka beamed. Before she could speak, Jig quickly asked, "Shouldn't you be taking me to Grell instead of fussing about a cloak?"

Relka squeezed past him, close enough for her necklace to tangle in Jig's sleeve. She tried to tug it free, but only managed to jab Jig's arm.

"Sorry," she mumbled, her face turning a brighter shade of blue.

Her necklace was supposed to symbolize her devotion to Jig's god, Tymalous Shadowstar. Rat bones were lashed together to form a crude starburst. Pieces of a broken kitchen knife formed a lightning bolt, the lower tip of which was currently poking Jig's forearm.

Relka's obsession with Jig and Shadowstar had begun when she tried to stab Jig in the back. Instead, Jig had run her through, leaving her with a nasty belly wound while he led the other goblins off to fight pixies. Relka had crawled away to hide, terrified that Jig would return to finish her off.

Which he might have done, if Tymalous Shadowstar hadn't had this strange obsession with mercy and forgiveness. Also, Relka made really good snake egg omelettes.

Jig clenched his jaw, driving his fangs into his cheeks as he waited for Relka to free her necklace. What was Grell doing outside in the first place, anyway? During a time of battle, a goblin leader traditionally stayed back where it was safe. Especially when it came to enemies like this.

The attack had begun this morning, and from what Jig had heard from the few goblins who limped back to the lair, this was no simple adventuring party.

"Grell?" He tried to speak loudly enough for the aging chief to hear, while at the same time keeping his voice low to avoid attracting any human attention. What emerged could best be described as "quavering."

"She said she was going to take care of the drummers," Relka said.

Oh. Jig felt a moment's sympathy for the goblin drummers. If they had caused Grell to miss her after-lunch nap, she would be even crankier than usual.

The area immediately around the goblin cave was flat, covered in small pine trees. If you walked directly away from the lair, you could go about fifteen paces before tumbling off a steep, rock-strewn dropoff.

The drummers would have taken the left path, which led along the cliffside and up toward the lake. The higher they climbed, the more people they could annoy with their drums.

The trees were denser as they approached the river. Their branches seemed determined to drop snow and needles down the back of his cloak. Trampled snow showed where goblin warriors had stormed through in search of humans to fight.

Pools of blue blood showed exactly where the humans had ambushed them. The bulk of the humans were still farther down the mountainside. They must have sent scouts ahead. It was a smart idea. The scouts could watch to see where the goblins were going, then report back to whoever was in charge. If they got the chance to surprise a few goblins, so much the better.

Jig didn't bother searching for the injured goblins. There were no bodies, which meant they had probably followed typical practice and fled like frightened rats. If Jig were smarter, he would be doing the same.

But where had the humans gone?

Relka hurried past before Jig could stop her. He crouched down, waiting for her to be shot or stabbed.

Nothing happened. She was already climbing up along the riverbank, using the shrubs and small trees to pull herself along the rocks. Jig held his breath and crept after her.

"It sounds like they're near the lake," Relka said. She drew a long, wickedly sharp knife. A cooking knife, from the look of it. Hopefully Golaka didn't know Relka had swiped it.

The drums grew louder as they followed the river back to the lake. Jig started to draw his sword, then thought better of it. Given the rocky, snow-covered terrain, he'd only end up tripping over a rock and impaling himself.

They scrambled on hands and knees to the top of a rise bordering the lake. As Jig pulled himself up, he heard the ripping sound of a dying drum, followed by the squealing sound of a dying goblin. He covered his eyes against the sun's glare. Only the edges of the lake were frozen, and the still water at the center created a second sun, reflecting the light into Jig's eyes and blinding him doubly. The amethyst lenses of his spectacles helped, but any relief they brought was balanced by splotches of melted snow. He wiped his sleeve over the lenses, but that only smeared his vision worse.

A short distance ahead, a human in leather and steel armor stood on the edge of the lake, surrounded by fallen goblins. He wore a green tabard with a picture of a giant four-legged boar standing in front of a tower. The animal appeared almost as large as the tower itself, and it held an enormous sword in one paw.

Humans wore strange clothes.

A dent in the human's helmet suggested the goblins had landed at least one good blow before they fell. Of the four goblin bodies scattered across the snow, only one was still moving.

"Oh no," Jig whispered. The surviving goblin had fallen onto the ice at the lake's edge. She struggled to push herself up on twin canes of yellow-dyed wood. One cane punched through the ice. She fell back with a curse, losing her grip on the cane.

"Come on," said Relka. She started to rise, but Jig dragged her back.

"Humans have weird rules about killing unarmed old women," Jig said.

"Some of them do, at least. Grell will be fine."

This human appeared to be one of the "honorable" ones. He kept his sword ready, but didn't try to stop Grell from crawling to the edge of the lake.

"At least you put a stop to that blasted drumming," Grell said. She took another step and her remaining cane slipped.

The human laughed.

"Oh, think this is funny, do you?" Grell rolled over and slammed her cane into the human's leg.

The cane broke. The human laughed even harder.

Jig shook his head. "It's not a good idea to laugh at Grell."

Grell stabbed the broken end of her cane into the human's thigh, right through the bottom corner of his tabard.

The human staggered back. He reached down with his free hand to rip Grell's cane from his leg.

"We've got to save her!" Relka grabbed Jig's hand and pulled him over the ridge.

They weren't going to make it. With only one cane to support her hunched body, Grell could barely even walk. The human was going to kill her, which would leave the goblins without a chief.

The last time that had happened was close to a year ago, when a hobgoblin named Slash killed the previous chief. The goblins had chosen Jig to take her place.

Jig still had nightmares about his short time as chief. Half of the lair had expected him to solve all of their problems. The other half had been busy plotting to kill him and take his place. Jig wasn't about to let that happen again.

He yanked his sword from its sheath. In the songs and stories, warriors sometimes threw their weapons as a last resort to kill distant enemies. As Relka ran ahead, Jig steadied himself, drew back, and flung his sword as hard as he could.

Either Jig was no warrior, or this wasn't the right kind of weapon for throwing. Probably both. The sword nearly cut off Relka's ear as it spun end over end. She dove into the snow.

The sword curved to the right and bounced harmlessly off a tree, halfway between Jig and the human. A bit of snow sprinkled down from the branches.

Everyone turned to look at Jig . . . who had now thrown away his only weapon.

Relka was busy digging through the snow. She must have dropped her knife when she tried to avoid Jig's sword. Wonderful. With a single throw, Jig had managed to disarm both himself and his companion.

Relka waved at him. "Don't worry! Shadowstar will guide you to victory!"

Jig stared at the limping human. Jig was unarmed, but the human carried enough weapons for three goblins. He switched his sword to his left hand and drew a knife with his right. He flipped the knife, catching it by the blade, and threw.

The knife spun past Jig's head, close enough for him to hear the whirring sound of its passage. With a loud *thunk*, the knife buried itself in a tree trunk.

Right. *Warriors* could throw their weapons. Goblins were better off running away.

Jig turned to run. He leapt over the ridge, skidding and flailing his arms for balance. He managed to run a whole three steps before tripping over a tree root. Rocks scraped his knees and hands, and the impact stole his breath. He pushed himself up. Snow smeared his spectacles, rendering them all but useless. He peered over the top of the frames at the blurry figure of the approaching human, who now carried swords in both hands.

That was simply unfair. Two swords against none? Jig squinted. Was that -? It was! The human was carrying Jig's own sword in his off hand.

"For Shadowstar!" Relka waved her knife as she charged to Jig's defense. It was a typical goblin tactic, with typical results. The human stepped to one side. Relka was running too fast to change direction, but she tried anyway, saving her life in the process. She stumbled, dropping her knife again as she fought to recover her balance. The human's follow-up attack missed, and then Relka was face-first in the snow.

"There's no place to run, goblin," the human said. He had faced four goblins, and he wasn't even breathing hard! "Turn around and die like a man."

Now there was a stupid suggestion if Jig had ever heard one. Jig pulled himself to his feet and searched his pockets for weapons. There were at least twenty pockets sewn into the cloak, enough for Jig to carry most of his belongings.

Unfortunately, that was far too many pockets to remember exactly where everything was. He found an old smoked bat wing, an extra pair of socks, some dead wasps he was saving for Smudge . . . hadn't he tucked a knife in here somewhere?

The human twirled both swords. The blades hissed through the air. His hands moved so fast Jig could barely follow, and his swords were all but invisible as they created a web of whirling steel. One limping step at a time the human advanced, bringing those blades closer and closer to Jig.

Jig reached into his hood and grabbed Smudge. For a moment Jig simply stood there, letting the fire-spider's warmth thaw his numb fingers. Then Jig threw him at the human.

Smudge landed on the human's chest and clung there, a blurry spot of

black and red in the middle of the human's tabard. He had landed near the head of the beast embroidered on the tabard, like a tiny smoldering hat.

Unfortunately, the tabard gave no indication of bursting into flames. Either Smudge wasn't as frightened as Jig, or else the poor fire-spider was too cold to generate enough heat.

Well, on the bright side, Jig wouldn't have to worry about the other goblins trying to make him chief again.

The human's scream was so unexpected--and so terrifying--that Jig found himself screaming in response.

Both swords fell to the ground as the human grabbed the edges of his tabard and tugged it away from his body. He shook the tabard faster and faster, trying to shake Smudge free. Jig could have told him not to bother. Each of the fire-spider's legs had tiny hairs, like burrs, that let him cling to almost anything.

The human changed tactics. Still screaming, he dropped to his knees and tried to yank the tabard over his head. Unfortunately, he forgot to remove his helmet first.

Slowly, Jig walked over to retrieve his sword. The human was still trying to rip the tabard off of his helmet when Jig stabbed him.

He wiped his sword as he waited for Smudge to cool. Apparently all of that flapping had been enough to wake Smudge up. The poor spider struggled to climb down off of the human. The meandering path of smoldering spider footprints on the tabard was proof of the Smudge's dizziness.

Jig stared at the dead human, trying to understand his reaction. You'd think he'd never seen a fire-spider before. Smudge wasn't even the biggest specimen Jig had encountered, being only a little larger than Jig's hand.

Humans were weird.

More shouts made Jig jump. He might have killed one human, but there were plenty more running about, and Jig didn't have enough fire-spiders to fight them all. He cocked his head and twitched his good ear. The other ear had been torn in a fight with another goblin, long ago. Still, a single goblin ear still let him hear better than any two-eared human.

From the sound of it, the humans were getting closer.

Jig plucked Smudge from the human and stroked the spider's still-warm thorax before returning him to his hood.

"I knew Shadowstar would bring us victory," Relka said. Blood dripped down her cheek. Her fang had broken the skin when she fell.

"Right," said Jig. "Maybe next time Shadowstar can kill the human, and I'll stay in the lair where it's warm."

#

Grell appeared to be uninjured, judging by the volume of her cursing as she yanked her remaining cane from the ice. Jig grabbed the human's sword and

gave it to her as a substitute. The tip sank deep into the earth, so Jig went back to retrieve the scabbard.

Grell took another step, resting her weight on the sheathed sword. With a grunt of approval, she hobbled over to the human and whacked him with her remaining cane.

"Blasted humans," she said. "Don't they know the dragon's dead? Treasure's all gone."

"What were you doing so far from the lair?" Relka asked.

Jig was more interested in knowing how Grell had made it so far. Grell was the oldest goblin in the lair, with the possible exception of Golaka the chef. But where Golaka had gotten stronger and meaner with age, Grell got smaller and wrinklier, like fruit left out in the sun. Sometimes Jig thought the only thing keeping her going was sheer stubbornness.

Grell began walking toward the lair, wheezing and grunting with each step. "There are too many humans for them to be adventurers. Adventurers are like tunnel cats. A few of them might be able to live and hunt together, but if you add more, they all start biting and clawing and hissing at one another."

Relka cocked her head. "They're not exactly the same, though. When you eat tunnel cats you spend half the time picking fur out of your meal. You don't have that trouble with adventurers. Except dwarves."

Grell jabbed her cane at the human Jig had killed. "There could be a hundred of them. Far too many for us to fight. And a few of the warriors are saying they saw elves."

"That's why you wanted to stop the drumming." Goblins didn't have formalized signals for battle. So long as the drums kept beating, the goblins kept fighting. If the drummers died or ran away, that was the signal for everyone else to do the same.

Jig perked his ears. He only heard one drum now, off to the other side of the lair.

"I sent Trok out to shut that one up." Grell scowled. "Probably should have been more specific about *how* to shut him up."

Jig's skin twitched with every shout and scream. He reached for Grell's elbow to hurry her along, but a rheumy glare made him back down.

"Maybe they're hunting," Relka suggested. "For food, I mean. There hasn't been as much to eat since the snow came. Humans have to eat too."

"Humans don't eat goblins," Jig said. His stomach clenched at the thought of the things they did eat. Dried fruit and porridge and bread. What little meat they ate had all the flavor cooked out of it. Jig had been a prisoner of human adventurers for only a few days, but it had taken close to a month for his stomach to recover.

The last drum fell silent. After a lingering scream, so did the drummer.

Shouts echoed up and down the mountain as the goblins began to retreat.

Jig squeezed through a clump pine trees and waited, holding the branches out of Grell's way. He could see the lair from here. How bad would it be to let the branches slap Grell to the ground so he could scamper to safety? Smudge was already getting restless in his hood. The cloak was relatively fireproof, but the wisps of Jig's hair weren't.

A trio of limping goblins scurried into the lair up ahead. A fourth followed, hopping on one foot. His other leg bled from the thigh, leaving a bright blue path in the muddy snow.

The cave was partially hidden by a fallen pine. A heavy gate had once blocked the way, but that gate had disappeared a few months back. The hobgoblins had stolen it to build a bigger cage for their trained tunnel cats.

The pine tree didn't block anyone out, but it did hide the lair from casual view. The only drawbacks were the brown needles that tangled into your hair, and the sticky sap that covered your clothes, not to mention the overpowering pine smell. The smell had faded with time, but the tree seemed to have an endless supply of brittle needles with which to torment innocent goblins.

Two more warriors disappeared into the lair before Jig and his companions reached the tree. Jig played with one fang and tried not to let his impatience show as Grell hunched to step inside. Her joints popped, and she wheezed with every step.

Jig could hear the humans shouting as they closed in. Grell was right. There were an awful lot of humans out there.

Trok ran past, knocking Jig into the snow as he tried to get into the lair. He didn't make it. As he squeezed past Grell, she dropped her cane and twisted her claws into Trok's ear. With her other hand, she shook her borrowed sword until the scabbard fell free. "Relka, do you know any good recipes for goblin ear?"

"Four," Relka said. "Do you want something spicy?"

"Spicy food puts me on the privy all night." Grell gave up trying to draw the sword. She clubbed Trok's foot with the party sheathed weapon. "Of course, I could put him on privy duty as part of his punishment."

Trok was a big goblin. He wore several layers of fur to make himself look even bigger, despite the fact that all of those furs made him sweat something awful. Trok's glistening face twisted into a sneer.

Grell pinched her claws deeper into his ear, drawing spots of blood. Trok yelped and backed down. He rubbed his ear as he waited for Grell to pass beneath the pine tree.

Neither Jig nor Relka received the same courtesy.

The obsidian walls of the tunnel muted the sounds of battle somewhat as Jig finally scurried into the darkness of the mountain. His eyes struggled to adjust. The warmer air had already painted a film of mist onto his spectacles. But no

goblin who survived through childhood relied on vision alone. Jig could hear Grell grumbling and stomping her feet for warmth up ahead. A quick sniff assured him that Trok wasn't waiting nearby to take his annoyance out on Jig.

Grell's cane and sword tapped the rock as she moved on. From the sound of it, she was limping even worse than usual. The cold had been hard on her, and she had asked Jig and Braf for healing almost every night for the past month. Jig and Braf were the only two goblins "gifted" with Shadowstar's healing magic. That gift meant they both spent much of their time healing everything from cold-dead toes to rock serpent bites to that nasty case of ear-mold Trok had gotten a few months back.

The last glimmers of sunlight faded behind them, replaced by the comforting yellow-green glow of muck lanterns burning in the distance. Jig splashed through puddles of half-melted snow as he followed Relka and Grell through the main tunnel toward the rounded entryway into the temple of Tymalous Shadowstar.

Glass tiles on the ceiling portrayed the pale god looking down at the goblins. As always, Jig's gaze went to the eyes. Sparkling light burned in the center of those black sockets. No matter where you stood, those eyes always seemed to be watching you.

Once, Jig had painted a blindfold over Shadowstar's face. The god had not been pleased.

The temple was the first cave anyone saw after entering the mountainside. Looking back, Jig probably should have put it somewhere a bit more out of the way. Mud and slush covered the floor where goblin warriors had stomped their boots and brushed themselves off as they passed through. Other warriors stood dripping by the small altar in the corner, where poor Braf struggled to heal them as quickly as he could.

Relka touched her necklace. "Make way for Jig Dragonslayer!"

Grell coughed.

"And Grell," Relka added hastily.

The announcement of Jig's arrival didn't have the effect Relka was hoping for. Instead of spreading out to make room for Jig, the goblins split into two smaller swarms, one of which immediately surrounded Jig, the same as they had done with Braf.

"Why should Jig Dragonslayer provide the healing power of Shadowstar to nonbelievers?" Relka demanded. She wrapped both hands around her bone-and-knife pendant. "How many of you have donned the symbol of-- Ouch." She stuck her finger in her mouth. Apparently, the knife blades on her necklace were still sharp.

"Everyone back to the lair," Grell snapped. "You think those humans are going to stop once they reach the entrance? Go on."

Slowly, the crowd dispersed through the three tunnels on the far side of the temple. All three merged a bit farther on. No doubt there would be further injuries to heal once the goblins reached that junction and fought to go first.

Grell grabbed one goblin as he turned to leave. A bloody gash crossed his scalp. "You don't have pine needles in your hair. How did you manage to get yourself injured without leaving the tunnels?"

"Bat."

"A bat did that to you?"

"No." He pointed to another goblin. "Ruk was trying to hit the bat with his sword, and--"

"I would have got him, too," interrupted Ruk. "But then he flew away."

Grell rubbed her forehead. "Ruk, go up the tunnel and wait by the entrance. Humans don't see well in the dark. They'll be disoriented. Stay there and kill anything that comes in. Anything that's not a goblin, that is."

She smacked him with a cane for good measure.

Ruk left, grinning and jabbing imaginary humans with his sword. Jig watched him go. "Do you really think he'll be able to slow down the humans?"

"Nope," said Grell. "But any idiot who'd slice his own partner is one I won't miss. When he screams, we'll know they've entered the mountain."

#

Despite the imminent attack from the humans, Jig found himself relaxing as he followed Grell deeper into the dark tunnels. The closer he got to home, the more the smell of mucksmoke and Golaka's fried honey-mushrooms overpowered the scent of pine. His boots clapped against the hard stone. He ran one hand over the reddish brown wall, smiling at the familiar rippled feel of the obsidian. The warm air drifting from deep within the mountain helped drive the worst of the numbness from his fingers. Of course, that air also carried the faint smell of hobgoblin cooking, but at least it was warm.

A group of armed goblin warriors crowded near the entrance of the cavern, joking and boasting about what they would do to the humans. These were the same goblins who had shoved past Jig and Grell in their eagerness to flee back to the lair. But now that they were here, every last one shouted tales of triumph and victory, trying to top the rest.

Jig had seen it before. The worst part was that every goblin started to believe what the others were saying. Before long, they would be charging back out of the mountain to prove themselves.

Grell solved the problem by jabbing the closest warriors with a cane. "You three go wait in the temple. Ambush anyone who comes in."

Relka shoved past Jig, clearing a path through the remaining warriors. She raised her voice, so her words echoed through the tunnels. "The high priest of Tymalous Shadowstar has returned!"

From the direction of the hobgoblin lair, a faint voice shouted back, "Shut up, you stupid rat-eaters!"

"Stupid hobgoblins," Relka muttered. "Why aren't they out there fighting the humans too?"

"Because I sent Braf to ask them for help when the humans first arrived," Grell said.

Relka shook her head. "I don't understand."

"The fool went and told them the truth about how many humans and elves we were fighting. The hobgoblin chief told him. . . ." Grell shook her head. "Well, it doesn't matter. Braf's not flexible enough to do it, at any rate."

Jig hunched his shoulders and followed them into the deep cavern the goblins claimed as their home. Inside, goblins scampered about like rats with their tails on fire. A group off to the right traded wagers as to how many goblins would die in the fighting. Others squabbled over the belongings of the dead and the almost-dead. Jig's attention went to a skinny goblin girl near the edge of the cavern. She kept her head bowed as she moved, carefully refilling the muck pits and lighting those that had gone out.

A few years ago, that had been Jig's job. The caustic muck could blister skin, the fumes made the whole cavern spin, and woe unto the careless goblin who let a spark land in his muck pot. Still, as smelly and humiliating as muck duty had been, at least it hadn't involved running out into the snow in the middle of a battle. Or fighting dragons and pixies and ogres. Or trying to avoid Relka and her band of fanatics.

Jig wondered if the muckworker would be willing to trade.

Several of Relka's friends were already crowding around Jig. Like Relka, they wore makeshift necklaces to show their devotion to Tymalous Shadowstar. Most were goblins who had been healed by Jig or Braf in the past. Given how the rest of the lair reacted to their endless praise of Jig and Shadowstar, they tended to need healing fairly often.

"Jig, come with me," Grell snapped. She hobbled through the crowd to one of the few doors in the cavern. Fixing wood to rock was tricky, but Golaka the chef made a paste that could be spread on the walls. The mold that grew on the paste clung equally well to stone and wood, enabling the goblins to erect a few crude doors. The chief's cave was the only one with a lock.

Grell grabbed the door with both hands. Goblins everywhere cringed as the wood screeched over the stone floor. Jig reached out to help, but a glare from Grell stopped him.

"I can open my own door, thank you." Eventually, she managed to slide the door wide enough to slip inside.

A single muck pit cast a weak green glow over the cluttered space within. A handful of weapons sat beside a batskin mattress filled with dried grasses. Grell

wheezed as she lowered herself onto the bed, a complicated process that involved much grunting and repositioning of her canes. Finally she sat back and pulled a blanket of tunnel cat fur over her body.

"Perhaps Jig Dragonslayer should lead the goblins while you rest?" Relka suggested as she dragged the door shut behind her.

Grell opened her eyes. "And perhaps you'd like me to find a new place to store my cane." She reached to the other side of her mattress and grabbed a clay pot. Jig's nose wrinkled at the smell of stale klak beer. "The dragon take this wind and snow. Every time there's a storm, my joints swell up like leeches on an ogre's backside. And I think I did something to my knee out there on the river."

Jig sat beside the bed. He shoved the blanket back and put one hand on her knee. He could feel the joint grinding as Grell straightened her leg, and her kneecap popped beneath his fingers.

No matter how often Jig healed Grell of one ailment or another, nothing seemed to last. Was Shadowstar's magic failing? The other goblins stayed healed. Well, except for Relka's friends. But when you interrupted a warrior's dinner to sing the praises of Tymalous Shadowstar, you had to expect a plate-sized bruise on your face.

The warmth of Shadowstar's magic flowed through Jig's fingers, driving away the last of the snow's pain as Jig healed Grell's knee.

I can help you fix the damage she did on the ice, but it won't last. Tymalous Shadowstar, forgotten god of the autumn star, sounded strange. His voice was softer than usual.

Why not?

Because she's old, Jig.

But what's doing this to her? Jig glanced around, frowning as he spotted the klak beer. *Is someone poisoning her?*

No, she's just old.

I know. Everyone knew Grell was old. That's why her skin was all wrinkly, and she had to run to the privy four times a night. *But why is she--*

This is what happens when people get old. Their bodies begin to give out. Don't goblins ever die of old age?

Jig shook his head.

Oh. Right.

The tendons twitched beneath Jig's hand, and Grell gasped. She bent her leg, and this time the kneecap stayed where it was.

"That's a little better," Grell said with a sigh.

"Praise Shadowstar."

Jig glanced up at Relka, then bit back a groan. She had taken off her blanket. Her shirt was torn in the middle, revealing the scar where Jig had stabbed and healed her.

In the old days, you would have had hundreds of followers like Relka and her friends, Shadowstar said. Well, not exactly like her. But it's only natural for them to look up to you and Braf.

Can't they look up to us from a distance? Jig asked.

Shadowstar laughed, a sound that always reminded Jig of tiny bells. *Be thankful I'm not asking you and the others to perform the solstice dance.*

What's the solstice dance?

Another jingling laugh. *On the first night of autumn, when my star is highest in the sky, you and the others spread your yearly offerings on a great bonfire. The idea was that the smoke would carry your prayers to the stars. Then you dance from sundown to sunrise to celebrate another year of life.*

Jig wasn't much of a dancer, but that didn't sound too bad.

Did I mention that the high priest dances naked? added Shadowstar.

Goblin war cries erupted from the tunnels. Jig twisted around, his ears perked high. The door muffled the noise somewhat, but it sounded like the humans had reached the temple. He hoped Braf had made it away before the humans arrived.

"That idiot Ruk." Grell crawled off the mattress and rummaged through her pile of weapons. "He was supposed to scream before they killed him."

Smudge was squirming about in Jig's hood. Now that they were inside, the cold didn't suppress the fire-spider's heat. Jig grabbed Smudge and dropped him into a pocket in his cloak, one he had lined with leather. Then he stuck his fingers in his mouth. Smudge wasn't hot enough to blister skin, but he was close.

"Shadowstar will protect us," said Relka. "I am not afraid."

Another scream punctuated her words.

"Like he protected that poor fool?" Grell asked.

"If those goblins had truly believed, Shadowstar would have saved them."

"I miss Veka," Jig mumbled. Veka was a distillery worker with delusions of heroism. She had followed Jig around for a while, just like Relka. Veka had dreamt of learning the secrets of magic in order to become a sorceress and a hero.

Jig thought she was mad, but at least Veka had been useful in a fight. Unfortunately, she had left shortly after the battle with the pixies and the ogres, going out into the world to "pursue her destiny."

Jig had never worried about pursuing his destiny. Generally, destiny pursued him. Then it knocked him down and kicked him a few times for good measure.

This time, it sounded like destiny planned to bully the entire lair. The humans had already reached the main cavern.

In the past, the goblins would have charged into the tunnels two or three at a time, to be killed at the humans' leisure. These days, they had learned to wait and allow intruders to charge into the lair, where they would be surrounded and

outnumbered.

The twang of bowstrings and the shrieks of goblins told Jig how well that tactic was working.

"We should have covered the muck pits," Jig whispered. Humans didn't do well in the dark. Extinguishing the fires might have given the goblins more of an advantage.

"Come on." Relka grabbed Jig's arm and tugged him toward the door. She had her knife ready. "The goblins need their champion!"

"What am I supposed to do?" He pressed his ear to the door. The clank of armor and the clash of weapons had already spread. He heard shouts from the back of the cavern, where goblins were no doubt fighting one another in their eagerness to escape down the garbage crack that led to the lower tunnels.

"What do you think you're doing?" From the opposite side of the cavern, Golaka's outraged shriek was loud enough to make Jig flinch back from the door. A loud clank followed, as if an enormous stirring spoon had dented a soldier's helmet.

"Focus your efforts on that one!" A human's voice. Male, with a slightly nasal tone to it. "Form a line and drive the rest of these vermin back!"

"Clear room for the archers!" This voice was female. At least, Jig thought it was. With humans, it could be hard to tell. They all sounded a lot alike, probably because of those tiny mouths and teeth.

An arrow punched through the door in front of Jig's nose. He leapt back so fast his head hit the wall.

"Jig, open the door."

"What?" Jig stared at Grell. How much klak beer had she drunk since they returned?

Grell pulled her blanket up to her chin and settled back. "We face them now and find out what they want, or else we wait until they've slaughtered every last goblin in the lair."

"I like waiting," Jig mumbled.

"Open the door, or else when we get out of this, I'll tell Golaka you've been stealing her fried rat tails."

"So you're the one!" Relka whispered.

"No!" Jig's toes curled in his boots at the thought of the last goblin Golaka had caught stealing her treats. Golaka had turned his ears into a spice pouch. "I mean, it was only a few. Smudge likes them, and--"

The loudest crash yet made the door shiver. Golaka must have flung one of her cauldrons at the attackers.

Grell bared her yellow teeth. "Enough of this. Relka, go tell Golaka--"

Jig shoved the door open a crack. Then another shout from the humans pushed any thought of Golaka from his mind.

"We have the spoon!"

"Oh no," Jig whispered. He peeked past the edge of the door.

The humans stood in a half-circle in front of the main entrance. Another group battled Golaka and the other goblins near the kitchen. A ring of humans lay groaning at her feet. Skewers, forks, and other utensils protruded from their bodies.

One of the humans ran back toward the entrance, waving an oversized stirring spoon above his head. Several others shot arrows to stop the goblins from pursuing. One arrow rang as it ricocheted off the iron lid Golaka held in one hand. Another hit her in the arm. More arrows drove her back into the kitchen. Humans with spears pursued, keeping their weapons extended to break any counterattack.

"Where is your chief?" That was the female voice. She stood near the entrance. A tight ring of soldiers blocked her from sight.

The goblins backed away. Seeing Golaka driven to retreat had taken much of the fight out of them. Several pointed toward Jig.

"Him?" The human sounded skeptical.

"No!" Jig yelled. "Not me, her!" He shoved the door wider and pointed to Grell.

Whatever the woman tried to say was overpowered by screams from the kitchen. Spears clattered to the ground as the humans stumbled out, covered in steaming lizard-fish pudding.

"Forget the chef," the woman shouted. She and about twenty soldiers shoved their way toward Grell's cave.

Jig scurried out of the way as soldiers stepped into the room. One of them smirked as he studied the goblins. "Nothing to worry about, highness. A runt, a girl, and an old woman."

The woman entered next. She was shorter than the others. Her tabard was black, as was the embroidered crest of that odd beast. Jig could barely see the shine of the thread. The hardened leather of her armor was black as well, reminding Jig of the shine of the lake deeper in the tunnels.

Her sword was thin and sharp, with a blackened guard like a metal basket that covered her entire hand. Even the gem that shone in its pommel was black. Her boots, her belt, her gloves, even her hair . . . it was as if someone had spilled nighttime all over her.

A round helmet--black, of course--left her pale face bare, and something about that sweaty expression seemed familiar.

She glanced at Jig and Relka, then turned to Grell. "I'm supposed to believe one of you leads these monsters?"

"That's right," said Grell. "And you're in charge of this mob?"

"My brother and I, yes. I am Genevieve, daughter of--"

"I don't care." Grell tossed her blanket to one side. In her hands she held a

small, cocked crossbow. Before anyone could react, she pulled the trigger. The bolt flew into the woman's neck . . .

. . . and dropped to the ground. A small drop of blood welled up on Genevieve's neck where the point had--barely--penetrated the skin. The blood was surprisingly colorful against her pale skin.

Grell flung the crossbow to the ground. "Stupid, worthless piece of hobgoblin garbage."

One of the soldiers leapt to the bed and pressed a knife to Grell's throat. Another kicked Jig to the ground for good measure. Relka got the same treatment on the other side of the cave.

"Easy there," said Grell. "Cut my throat and you'll never find the antidote."

"Antidote?" Genevieve touched her neck and stared at the smear of blood on her glove.

"I keep that little toy by my bed to discourage younger goblins who think they should be chief," Grell said.

The soldiers stepped aside as Genevieve approached the bed. One slipped out of the cave and ran back toward the tunnels.

Genevieve leveled her blade at Grell's chest. "Give it to me, goblin."

"Tell your people to retreat and leave us alone," Grell said.

Jig glanced at the floor where Grell's crossbow bolt had fallen. With everyone's attention on Grell, he could snatch that bolt and plunge it into Genevieve's back.

And then what? Killing a goblin chief led to chaos. Half of the goblins turned on one another, eager to take the chief's place, while the rest fled to avoid getting drawn into the brawl. But humans weren't like that. They had things like discipline and loyalty, not to mention enough weapons to kill every goblin still in the lair. Killing their leader wouldn't stop them; it would only make them angrier.

"The antidote," Genevieve said. "Or I'll cut off your ears."

"Don't give it to her!" shouted Relka, earning another kick.

Grell sighed and pointed to a small box.

Genevieve grabbed it and wiped crumbs from the top. Inside was a wooden tube, plugged with wax.

Jig had never seen Grell give up that easily. Actually, he had never seen Grell give up at all. He stared at Grell, but her face was pure, wrinkly innocence.

Genevieve uncapped the tube and poured the cloudy liquid down her throat. She coughed and wiped her lips on her wrist. "What a foul concoction."

"So I've been told," Grell said. "I thought about mixing blackberry juice to mask the taste of the poison, but--"

"The taste of the what?" Genevieve stared at the empty tube.

"Poison. That's a mix of rock serpent venom and lizard-fish blood."

Relka snickered.

"You said that was an antidote to the poisoned bolt," Genevieve said.

"Poisoned bolt." Grell rolled her eyes. "You think I'd risk poisoned weapons with this lot?" She lay back and adjusted her blanket. "Call off your army."

"I'll not bargain with goblins."

Grell shrugged. "What about a wager? I'm betting the rock serpent venom will paralyze you before the lizard-fish blood starts to burn holes in your stomach."

"I'll bet a week's worth of dessert that the lizard-fish blood hits first," Relka said brightly.

"Fetch my brother," Genevieve said. "Tell him I've been poisoned, and--"

"Not to worry." The other human leader was already pushing his way into the cave, followed by a pair of elf archers.

Unlike Genevieve, this human wore elven armor: thin scales of magically hardened wood, each one polished until it gleamed like metal. "What's the trouble, Genevieve? Did the goblins turn out to be too much for you? You're not trained for such things, sister. It's as I was telling father."

Genevieve sounded bored. "If you'll recall, goblin treachery got the best of Barius, too. And he used to thrash you with ease. Tell me Theodore, how many times did you run to mother, crying because Barius had made you clean out the stables with your bare hands, or--"

"Enough," snapped Theodore. His face was bright red, and he looked like he had completely forgotten about the goblins.

Jig was barely listening. He should have learned by now. No matter how dark and dire the situation, things could always get worse. And they usually did.

No wonder they had known about Golaka's spoon. Prince Barius Wendelson had been one of the adventurers who came to the mountain two years ago in search of the Rod of Creation. He and his fellows had killed the rest of Jig's patrol and dragged Jig deep into the mountain as an unwilling guide.

"Aye, enough indeed." A hefty, black-haired dwarf stepped into the cave. "Let's be getting that garbage out of your sister's blood before I have to go back and tell her folks how a goblin finished off their only daughter."

Jig pressed himself back against the cave wall. *I don't suppose your magic can make me invisible?* he prayed.

The dwarf glanced at the goblins as he moved toward Genevieve. He whirled back around, his mouth round with shock. "Jig?"

I'm afraid not, said Shadowstar.

Jig's shoulders slumped. "Hello, Darnak."

Read more in **Goblin War**, coming in March of 2008.

Pre-order from [Amazon](#), [B&N.com](#), [Mysterious Galaxy](#), or your local bookseller.

Author's Note:

There you have it, the first chapter of the final (for now) book in the goblin trilogy.

It's strange to be finished with poor Jig and his companions. That little goblin has come a long way since I started writing *Goblin Quest* back in 2000. Three books with DAW, as well as translations into French, German, Polish, Czech, and Russian. Four short stories, with a possible fifth on the way for Smudge the fire-spider. That's a lot of goblins, and I've loved almost every minute of it.

But enough sentiment. I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek at *Goblin War*. Please feel free to share this preview with anyone you think might get a smile out of Jig and his misadventures.

If you're curious what I'm working on next, stop by <http://www.jimchines.com> to learn about *The Stepsister Scheme*, the first book in a new series about a trio of butt-kicking fairy-tale princesses.

My deepest thanks to all of you who have read and enjoyed the goblin books. And who knows . . . I'm going to be busy with the princess books for a while, but Jig may still have a few dragons to slay someday. . . .

Jim C. Hines
December, 2007