

II winborn Trilogy Lost Scenes

The Gambler's Reward



by J.S. Morin

Note: *This story takes place right at the beginning of Fireburler. I give it a spoiler rating of 0/10. This was the prologue in early versions of the novel, but was removed to help jump right into the main action, and introduce the main characters more quickly.*

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## The Gambler's Reward

They picked the men with the best eyes for sentry duty, or so they claimed. In truth, the commanders picked men who were in their ill graces.

Jodoul Brect marched his way out into the woods carrying his spear, his water skin, and a thick strip of the salted jerky that passed for rations on the expedition. Following close behind him and toting along an identically unappealing dinner was Tod Hellet. The two men had pulled sentry duty—again—and had gotten used to the precise fifty-pace walk from the perimeter of camp to their assigned station.

"Hey, s'not so bad, right?" Tod said, giving Jodoul a playful elbow to the side.

"Clap yer lid, else they'll stick us on sentry another tenday, thinkin' we don't mind," Jodoul shot back in a harsh whisper.

"Leastwise it's us again. I ain't one for sitting a night through with old Haurus again. Creakin' old greybeard near to put me asleep, blathering on about his pigs back home."

"Yeah, I thought Aigrum was going to rat me, the time I asked if he'd got dice or cards on him. Fella's brain is dry as sawdust. Sat the whole night not sayin' a word to me. Not like we really need to watch, watch. It's the goblins what has to watch out for us, right?"

Tod slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled it out clenched around something he did not show to Jodoul. He gave a bit of a shake, and Jodoul did not need to see to know that Tod held a pair of dice.

"I'm still up three month's pay on ya, don't forget," Tod said.

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Unobserved by the two gamblers, Gkt'Lr paused a moment to watch the game, mere paces from where the dice fell. The goblin was clothed in a lightweight black cloth that did well in its job of matching the blackness of the surrounding night. His head was wrapped in a much looser weave of cloth—thin enough that he could see through comfortably—of the same shade of black. His normally scraggly brown hair was slicked into place with mud made from the forest dirt. The mud obscured both the goblin's hair and his odor—for while humans' sense of smell was poor at best, there was no sense leaving such things to chance.

Gkt'Lr watched another roll of the dice and decided the game was not so different from a game of chance his own people played, and one of which he was particularly fond. Given friendlier circumstances, he would have been inclined to join the two humans at their game. As things stood, though, Gkt'Lr had more pressing concerns, as well as a decision to make. He waited and eavesdropped on the humans' conversation. It was a tongue he was familiar with, even though he had difficulty pronouncing it himself.

"That's another eight. See what you can do with it," said one of the humans, grinning. "Told ya Tod, I'm winning back all those wages I owe."

"I'll take the over for three hawks," replied the one called Tod, frowning slightly.

Even one gold hawk was quite a hefty wager for one pass of the dice, if Gkt'Lr remembered Kadrin currency properly. Tod's companion eyed him suspiciously.

"I've just got a feeling on this one," Tod said. "I think I've got a lucky streak coming, Jodoul. I'm due."

Tod accepted the dice from the fellow sentry named Jodoul and gave them a vigorous shake. Jodoul winced at the noise, held a finger to his lips, and gestured toward the sleeping camp. They had been keeping their voices to a whisper so as not to disturb their comrades. Gkt'Lr chuckled silently to himself—gambling on duty was a crime among his people as well.

Tod caught himself and stilled the dice, then tossed them to the forest floor. One rolled under a leaf, and the other showed a five. As Tod reached down to lift the leaf, his companion caught him by the wrist.

“Double the stakes?” Jodoul asked.

“You sure you didn’t see how it landed?”

Jodoul shook his head.

“Okay,” Tod said, “double stakes it is.”

Beneath his head wrap, Gkt’Lr smiled. He liked these two humans; they were risk-takers. His decision made, he quietly slid his dagger out of the sheath at his back. Careful to shield the glare of the polished steel from the main camp, he held the weapon above the heads of the seated soldiers. With the humans’ attention on the result of their game, he caught moonlight on his blade and flashed a quick set of instructions to the rest of the goblin invaders.

“Ha, seven!”

Just as quickly as he had drawn his blade, Gkt’Lr replaced it in its sheath, the two humans none the wiser. Gkt’Lr paused just long enough to observe the second die that had rolled under the leaf, now revealed to show a two, before slipping silently off toward the sleeping camp. These two humans would not feel the blade of the goblin assassin this night. He had other plans for them, and he had no more time to waste watching their game.

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*Crrrrrack!* The sound woke Sir Ferren from his slumber, only to be followed seconds later by the frightened shouts of his men. Long winters of experience had Ferren’s hand reaching for his sword even before he began to sort out what was going on. Outside his small tent, the pounding footfalls of his men told of frantic activity, and an ominous creaking sounded altogether too familiar to the old knight’s ears.

Clad in only his tunic and breeches, Sir Ferren scrambled out of his tent as fast as his worn old body would allow, just in time to see the branches of a falling tree burst into flames. Ferren was momentarily frozen in panic as he realized the tree was headed right for his tent.

“Commander, look out, sir!”

A sudden impact carried Sir Ferren from his feet as one of his conscripts tackled him from behind. Dazed by his impact with the ground, it took Ferren a moment to realize he had been knocked just out of reach of a tree trunk that had nearly ended his illustrious career.

*Well, there will be a promotion for at least one soldier this day,* he thought, proud that one of his men had risked his life to save his own.

With that thought, Sir Ferren grimaced as his mind caught up with everything that was going on. Swallowing back a rising bile, he turned and looked back at the ruined corpse of the man who had saved him. The man’s chest man been crushed.

*What was his name? Shouren ... Chouren? Something like that. Pindes will know, and I will make sure his family is well taken care of, personally.*

Two knights rushed over to help Sir Ferren to his feet as he surveyed the scene. Men were rushing about, trying to find as many water skins as they could to douse the flames, but the job was just too large. The flaming branches had taken down a number of tents and likely a fair number of their occupants as well. Sir Ferren looked up into the clear night sky and ruled out the chance that lightning had caused the blaze.

“Pindes, report!” Sir Ferren called out across the campsite.

“Sir, one of the sentries reports seeing a lone goblin, most likely a sorcerer, running from camp! We are guessing he caused both the fire and the felling of the tree in the first place,” Sir Pindes yelled back over the roar of the flames.

*A goblin sorcerer got that close to camp and did this? What is Kelurian doing?* Ferren’s heart sank into his stomach as he guessed the answer to his own question.

“Where is our sorcerer—Kelurian?” Ferren shouted.

One of the younger knights poked his head into the imperial sorcerer’s tent, only to draw back out immediately, looking pale. “He is inside, sir ... dead.”

Sir Ferren strode over and threw open the tent flap. Only long service in the fields of battle gave his stomach the fortitude required to keep him from retching. The ground inside was soaked in blood, most of

which seemed to have come from the sorcerer's garishly slashed throat. The man's chest had also been cut open, and a charred, shriveled piece of meat lying next to the dead man's left hand had most likely been his heart.

It was that last bit that put the pieces together in Sir Ferren's mind. In the Inner Circle's briefing to the three commanders before the expedition set out, they had described this very scene as a sure sign of a goblin assassin. The burning of the heart was part of a bit of ritualistic magic that all goblin assassins were apparently trained in. It destroyed the Source of the sorcerer, the part of a creature's being that produced aether, and by doing so eliminated the possibility of using magic to gain insight into the dead man's last moments. It was a needless precaution, since the Kadrin Empire had strictly outlawed necromancy centuries ago as an aberration of nature, but it was an unmistakable sign that goblins had done this.

"Forget the fire! Armor up and grab your weapons, men! Prepare for battle!" Sir Ferren's voice rose over the ruckus of the frantic firefighting effort.

He had grabbed one of his rod-like goblin-fighting swords before his tent had been crushed, but his other sword and all of his armor were still trapped underneath the tree. Well, he was not about to take the armor from any of the men killed by the ambush, and he would never think to order one of his knights to relinquish his own armor. Sir Ferren sighed. It seemed he was destined to die in his nightclothes.

A rustling of bushes and leaves, and the snapping of small twigs cut Sir Ferren's musings short. The goblin attack was far less subtle than their initial incursions into the human campsite had been but was no less sudden. The goblins burst through the tree line and into the campsite at a full run, breaking stride only briefly as each one threw a small dagger at one of the unarmored soldiers.

"Shields and spears, men, form a line. Now!" Sir Pindes yelled, rallying the men into formation as the enemy approached.

It was too late now, though, Ferren knew; anyone who had not managed to armor himself was going to have to do without, or they would all be slaughtered. None of the knights had managed to get into more than a breastplate, leaving legs and arms exposed. Many of the common soldiers had managed to pull their chain shirts over their heads and grab a helmet, but not enough to form an unbroken line of armored men.

The goblin daggers tore into the human defenders, laying open an arm here, a cheek there, a few biting fatally into a vital area. The goblins swarmed in, spear tips leading. As rank after rank of goblin soldiers burst into the clearing, it became clear that this was no mere scouting party that had ambushed the expedition, but a full-scale assault force.

A high-pitched chattering overwhelmed the noise of the battle and the roar of the burning tree as a goblin shouted out something in its own language. A second later, the air itself seemed to explode as a plume of flame from the back of the goblin ranks arced over the combatants. The head-high flames had the humans instinctively raising their wooden shields to fend off the conflagration. The thick wood did not catch fire immediately, but then, that was not the intent of the attack. With their shields up in the air and their attention caught by the primal fear of fire, the human force was in no position to defend as the goblin front line crashed into them. The rout was on.

The human force, backed against a burning tree, half armored and with no sorcerer to help defend against the goblins' spells, was no match for the well-prepared contingent that had invaded their camp. With no hope of victory presenting itself, the human fighters bolted for the forest. There was no shout to rally, no rebukes for cowardice directed at those taking flight. There was no one to give them.

Sir Ferren had taken three daggers in the initial assault and lay bleeding his last moments away next to the corpse of Sir Pindes, who had died trying to put himself in between his commander and the incoming missiles. The other knights of the expeditionary had fallen quickly and easily, their half-donned armor both marking their importance and doing too little to save them.

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The sound of the massacre had faded into the distance, and Jodoul slowed down to catch his breath. Feeling like a coward, he dropped his spear and took off his helmet—a thin shell of steel, battered into roughly the shape of his head. Then he pulled the chain shirt over his head and dropped it in a pile at his feet. It felt good to get the weight of it off his shoulders, almost good enough to drown out the guilty feeling of

deserting his dying friends and comrades, for not dying a good soldier's death like he was supposed to. But he remembered the screams, the blood, the smell ...

He picked up his spear and set off again at a jog. He hoped that the goblins had given up on him—that he had gotten far enough away that they did not feel like chasing him anymore. If his legs would have gone along with it, he would have broken into a run, but they would not. His lungs burned, and his muscles felt wobbly, but he felt a need to push on and put as much distance as he could between himself and the site of his army's demise before his body gave out completely and he collapsed of exhaustion.

Near his breaking point, Jodoul leaned against an oak tree, panting. It seemed as good a place as any to rest and to hopefully see one more day after this one. Just as he was getting ready to slump to the ground and give in to the exhaustion that had been trying to claim him, he heard a twig snap.

Turning, he saw a goblin with one of those razor-sharp spears, still dark with blood, not ten paces behind him. Its sickly greenish face was twisted in a wicked grin. The goblin spat out a string of words in its chattering, gibberish language that meant nothing to the frightened Jodoul but which sounded distinctly threatening. Jodoul screamed and ran, all thought of fatigue immediately evaporating in the presence of a mortal need to run away.

Had he been thinking more rationally, something would have struck him as odd. He might have realized that the goblin probably needed to put most of its weight on that twig to snap it as loudly as it had been. He ought to have wondered why the goblin had made no move to attack him, when it was clearly not the least bit tired from having caught up to him. Instead, Jodoul put his head down and ran, his only thoughts those of self-preservation.

Unlike its owner, Jodoul's spear bravely held its ground, still leaning against the oak tree where it was abandoned ...

Jodoul managed to push on until shortly before dawn before he collapsed, getting a few hours of much-needed rest before the morning calls of the birds woke him. Getting his bearings by the early morning sun, he set out at a brisk pace, heading the same direction of the previous night's run, as best as he could figure it. He was tired to the core of his being. His muscles still ached from the exertion of his escape and from dehydration. His arm was a little numb from having slept with his weight on it on the hard forest dirt. Shaking the circulation back into his arm, he tried to focus on finding one of the other armies of the expeditionary force, which was probably his best chance of making it out of the forest alive.

All throughout the day, Jodoul kept to his course through Kelvie Forest. He rested only once, when he found a small stream and stopped to end his thirst. He would have liked to take some of the fresh, clear water with him, but his water skin was rather a long walk back into goblin-held territory. He settled for drinking his fill and then moved on.

By nightfall, he was nearly ready to fall asleep on his feet. When he saw the pinpoint of light through the forest, at first he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He walked toward the light until he recognized it as a campfire. Nearly crying out for joy, Jodoul broke into a run, hope making his stumbling feet nimble again. He did not care if the campfire belonged to one of the other Kadrin armies, a group of bandits, or even a band of ogres at this point. So long as they were not goblins, he did not care.

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