

FIREHURLER

Twinborn Chronicles: Awakening



J. S. MORIN

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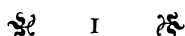
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THE FOREST TRAP

With his breath coming in ragged gasps, the soldier crashed through the forest. He had ceased to hear any sound of pursuit several minutes ago, but he knew they were still coming. In his heavy chain armor, he also knew that the goblins would be able to keep up with him easily; they could afford to be stealthy. Of course, they had little need for stealth, as there were hundreds of goblins in the forests, spreading out to finish off the stragglers.

The screams of his dying comrades still rang in his ears. They were long, agonized cries, as the goblins ignored the mortally wounded to pursue those soldiers still able to run. He was one of those running. Running from the hopeless battle against a foe that had been expecting them. Running to keep from hearing those gut-wrenching screams coming from his own throat. Running with the hope of finding living allies before the goblins got him. Running from the slaughter that he had just witnessed...



The errant soldier was insensible when the sentries dragged

him into camp. It was obvious from his clothes and boots that he was one of their own; each of the common soldiers had been equipped with the same gear from the army quartermaster just before they set out from Korgen. Other than his clothing, though, he had nothing else with him, neither armor nor weapon, nor even any personal effects. He was exhausted, hungry, and nearly mad with fear. The sentries heard him muttering something about goblins—something that sounded urgent.

Though Brannis wanted very much to give the man some space to collect himself and gather his wits, he could hardly reprimand his men for their curiosity; he shared it in full measure. Nearly every man in camp gathered around the fire where the two sentries brought the poor soldier and sat him down. Someone thought to bring the man a blanket, for he was covered in a cold sweat. One of the cooks brought a fresh bowl of quail stew remaining from the night's meal, and the soldier gratefully accepted it with hands still shaking from the aftereffects of what had to be fear.

As the wayward soldier downed a few mouthfuls of the delicious dinner, the rest of Brannis's men waited in respectful silence, taking a cue from their commander. Brannis sat across the fire from the man and watched his eyes. They seemed to clear as he ate, the delirium of a full day of fearful flight no doubt being replaced by the reality of good food and friendly company. The color started to return to the man's pale face as the warmth of the fire and the food in his belly replenished his depleted strength.

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, seeming to remind himself of the reality that he was now relatively safe, the man looked around the assembly of faces that had gathered about him.

"Thanks. I...I need to talk to your commander—whose battalion is this? I've got horrible news."

"I am in command here; these are my men. I am Sir Brannis

Solaran. What is your name, soldier, and how did you come to find us here?"

The man turned to meet Brannis's intent gaze and quickly lowered his eyes to the dirt.

"Jodoul Brect, sir, that's my name. They're gone, sir, all of 'em."

There was a collective feeling of shock among the troops gathered around the fire, and a buzz of discussion started to grow and steadily increase in volume with the passing seconds as Jodoul's declaration hung in the air. Brannis waved one hand in a downward motion, urgently gesturing for his men to quiet down. The poor soldier—Jodoul—had obviously been through some ordeal and had not quite recovered mentally. Being in the eye of a storm of speculation and questioning would do him no good. Still, Brannis needed answers, especially if his suspicions about what Jodoul meant proved to be correct.

"What do you mean? Who is gone?" Brannis asked in a measured tone, trying not to upset Jodoul.

"Gone, dead, all of them. All of Sir Ferren's battalion, dead except for me. The goblins came and there was nothing we could do to stop 'em. They was like evil spirits, sneakin' up in the dark of night and swarmin' over our camp. There was fire fallin' from the trees and the air was filled with steel and screamin'." Jodoul gritted his teeth and squeezed shut his eyes. "I can still hears them, even now. I wish I could have done somethin' to help them, I—"

"How did you get away?" Sir Aric interrupted. "How is it that you managed to be the only one, if it is as you say, and all the others are dead?"

"I think that is enough for now," Brannis said. "Triple the sentries; all men are to carry arms; everyone into your armor, even for sleeping. I know it is uncomfortable but so is a spear tip in your gut, you can be sure. We must be ready for them to attack anytime now."

Brannis watched as his men started off to carry out his orders. He then turned to his knights and Jodoul.

“Let us continue this discussion in private, in the planning tent,” Brannis said. “Iridan, you should join us as well.” Brannis gave a nod to the sorcerer assigned to his battalion.

The planning tent was the only one large enough to accommodate a standing human. It was set up as a meeting place for the knights to lay out their maps and plan strategies without exposing either map or man to the elements. They removed the small table that was normally kept inside the tent, which normally sported a map of their immediate vicinity and set it outside. They then gathered inside, eight knights—the other two were seeing to the tripling of the watch—along with Jodoul and Iridan, seated themselves on the ground. The tent was originally meant to hold eight men standing around a table so ten men seated, even without the table, was rather cramped. But Jodoul was in no condition to stand for any length of time, and they needed to know everything he had seen, so they accommodated his present weakness.

Over the next several minutes, Brannis and the others came to understand the scope of the enemy they were facing. Jodoul’s account was quite thorough in its description of the carnage and the strange happenings resulting from goblin magic. Jodoul, though, left out his own actions around the time of the battle, Brannis noticed. There was something in the way he avoided such mention that made Brannis suspect the man had not acquitted himself well; Sir Aric most likely had the right tack in questioning why he was the one who survived, but Brannis had more immediate concerns than potential cowardice in the face of the enemy.

The goblins were now no doubt aware of their location—that much was easily inferred from Jodoul’s account of how they hounded him like a game hare. The only matter remaining unsettled was when they would arrive in force. If the goblins knew they were here, the campfires would only be of aid to the

human army, for goblins tended on the whole to see much better in low lighting than their human counterparts. Dousing the fires would not serve to hide them but rather help to hide their small foes from them.

“Iridan, bring up a fog in and around camp,” Brannis ordered his friend.

Iridan nodded, then half-closed his eyes and began to chant, “*Zoina emintari koactu fununar,*” at the same time sweeping his hands back and forth in front of him, palms downward, in a close approximation of a swimming motion. He repeated the chant and continued to gesture. A fine wispieness coalesced in the air about his fingers, growing into a light fog and drifting to the ground. Within moments, the fog had spread throughout most of the campsite and was growing both thicker and deeper by the moment. Brannis, who knew the chant at least as well as did Iridan, caught himself silently mouthing the words in time with the chant. He could almost imagine that it was his own powers creating the fog in response to his own chant. As he watched the ever-growing fog, his better sense grabbed hold of his daydreaming and shook it aside.

“Umm, Iridan, stop before you get it chest-high—your chest, not mine—because we still want to be able to see where we are walking. I just want to make it higher than the goblins can see over.”

Iridan was nearly a foot shorter than Brannis, so the admonition was not an idle one. Brannis wanted to be sure that his men had every advantage he could manage to find.



Iridan finished the spell, satisfied that the human soldiers would still be able to see over the thick bank of fog that now obscured the campsite. It was a simple enough spell and had hardly tasked his strength at all. He glanced around, trying to think of anything else he could do to help prepare for the

expected attack. Remembering the wolves, he whistled to summon them to his side. A few seconds later, he felt hot breath on his legs and heard their panting. So effective was the fog cloud that he could not even see the animals, though they were right in front of him.

Hoping that the wolves' sense of smell would serve them well enough to navigate in the blinding fog, Iridan gestured for the wolves to move out into the surrounding woods. It was a command he had taught them so would aid in the search for game. He hoped that the wolves would not make too strong a distinction between deer and goblins as far as acceptable prey was concerned. He was not too worried, though—the creatures seemed to be quite territorial. Had his magic not deluded them into thinking of humans as part of their pack, he was sure the wolves would have attacked the soldiers already.

Iridan wracked his mind thinking what else he might be able to accomplish before the battle started but could not come up with any more ideas. He looked around, hoping to catch sight of Brannis or one of the other knights to see if one of them might have need of him. He was carefully picking his way across camp toward Brannis's tent when he heard a pained yelp from the woods to the east. Iridan winced at the sounds of a struggle: growling, snarling, a rustling of the underbrush, and finally nothing but a few whimpers that quickly died out.



They had been waiting for hours. After the goblins had killed their wolves, Brannis had expected that they would attack the encampment soon, while they might still gain some surprise. But there sat Brannis and his knights, with Iridan as well, still waiting. Reluctantly, Brannis had ordered the men to try to get some rest, and there had already been two changes of the sentries. Few could sleep, though, knowing that their enemy was lying in wait, preparing to attack at any moment. Sleeping

in chain armor was difficult enough without it also serving as a reminder of the imminent attack.

Brannis finally gave in and decided to try to get what sleep he could while he still possessed a choice in the matter. His eyelids were drifting lower by the minute, and it was taking a conscious effort to hold them up. He left Sir Lugren on watch, and he would be in command for the first few moments of battle should the enemy attack while Sir Brannis slept.



Iridan watched as his friend pillowed his head on a bundled bedroll and tried to sleep wearing plate armor, right in the middle of the camp with the rest of the knights. Even as he saw Brannis grimace in discomfort as he tried to find a position where his armor did not push at him awkwardly, he envied his friend. For his part, Iridan was planning to stay awake as long as it took, for if his magic was a few seconds too late when battle was joined, he might never join it at all. Goblins were cunning, and they would likely make an early target of the humans' only sorcerer. Iridan meditated to try to get at least some rest without fully giving in to his body's demands for slumber. Getting up to renew the fog as the fires slowly burned it away also helped to keep his mind alert. The channeling of aether might drain the body, but there was something about it that invigorated the mind—something not entirely unlike the effect of jumping into a body of cold water. The effect was quite temporary, but Iridan needed whatever aid he might find in keeping awake.

The other knights drew lots to determine who slept and who would keep watch. They did it for form's sake mostly, since there was little sleep to be had that night in any event. Every cricket, every toad, every breeze might have concealed the sound of approaching goblins. It was more a matter of who would take watch standing and who would lie awake on the

ground. As Iridan mused on the curious arrangement, he heard a slight throaty rasping. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he recognized the sound of snoring. Brannis, at least, had found a way to get to sleep.



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