

MONSTER

Damian walked through the forest interior, following the colored lights just ahead. They had been walking for at least half an hour, and a quick glance at his wristwatch proved it. There were a few breaks along the way, none of them very long, usually consisting of everyone sitting together in collective silence. There was certainly an uncomfortable tension between them, but that was bound to happen when worlds collided like this. It wasn't exactly an everyday occurrence.

The mid-afternoon sun beat down from above, yet Damian failed to notice. He was still too intrigued by the creatures following on either side of him, neither standing any taller than his waist. It was unbelievable to witness animals from another world, let alone ones that spoke English.

Ignicoon was small, but moved with purpose. He still didn't seem sure of his task, but he followed along as best he could. He was clearly trying to portray as much confidence in himself as possible, though he didn't hide his fear well. It was alright. Damian felt the exact same way.

Terraleau, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. He seemed to have a care-free attitude that remained impervious to the situation. This was punctuated by the way he walked, making him appear more like a child than anything. He wobbled a bit, holding his arms out to the sides as if for balance. Then again, he was a frog. He probably wasn't built to walk such long distances on solid ground.

Damian was amazed beyond words, mesmerized by what he was experiencing. What was he doing here? How could all this have happened, leading to some epic journey with a red raccoon and oversized frog? It was pretty clear by now that he wasn't dreaming, but that didn't mean his mind hadn't snapped into some far-out hallucination. If he hadn't already gone completely mad, it was only a matter of time.

Damian was thinking so hard that he almost didn't see the others stop ahead of him. He caught his footing just as it was about to come down on Ignicoon's tail. Luckily, the small creature didn't notice, but there was a reason for that. His attention was focused on something else within the trees to their left, something that surprised him, making him oblivious to everything else around. Terraleau was just as distracted, his eyes wide and intrigued by whatever it was that captivated his attention.

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At first, Damian couldn't see what they were looking at. However, when the massive beast altered its position, he caught sight of it, immediately clamping a hand to his mouth. Whatever that thing was, its hideous appearance put Condorne to shame.

The beast was absolutely enormous, resembling a giant, armored cockroach that stood on two thick legs. Its entire body was encased within a large, brown shell with numerous spikes sticking up along its back. Even its pale-yellow stomach was made of thick armor, beginning just beneath its small, black head and extending down to the bottom of its body. The creature had eight legs in total – the two it stood on, and two shorter sets – but its arms were the most terrifying. At the ends of these sat two long, sharp blades, each razor-sharp in appearance. Two ominous, pink eyes kept a careful watch, though luckily its vision was focused on something in the opposite direction.

The creature hadn't seen them yet, and he was thankful for that. With its massive claws and spiked shell, that thing looked ten times more dangerous than Condorne and the cherry-creatures combined. Damian still felt lucky to have survived those encounters, and he didn't feel like doing it again. One swipe from those blades would probably end the chase in an instant. He stared in wonder, wanting to leave this place right now.

He almost jumped ten feet in the air when something tugged lightly on his pant leg. Looking down, he saw Terraleau staring back up at him, a smile stretched across his face. The frog then made a slight gesture, signaling that he had something to say.

"The fairies said we should try to recruit new members for the Rebellion," he whispered into Damian's ear, his quiet voice still sounding too loud at the moment. "Imagine if we could get something like that. We'd be off to a great start!"

Damian looked up. He didn't want to interact with that thing at all, and his expression probably showed it. There was no telling what it was capable of, and there was just something about it that made him feel uneasy. That monster didn't seem friendly in any way.

He looked back down. Terraleau was awaiting a response, but Damian didn't have an answer. He only shrugged his shoulders. What more could he do?

"Something's not right," Ignicoon spoke up from the other side, making Damian jump again. "I've never seen that thing around here before, and I've traveled a lot. I don't like the looks of it. I think we should just keep going and leave it alone."

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Damian glanced up the path and realized that the colored orbs were now getting quite far ahead. He nodded in agreement, but Terraleau was less than convinced. He snorted in protest, frowning as he looked back over at the hulking monster.

“Fine then, I’ll do it,” he exclaimed, shaking his head in disappointment.

With that, Terraleau turned around and made his way through a bush toward the massive beast on the other side. Both Damian and Ignicoon tried to grab him, but they weren’t nearly quick enough. They looked at each other with the same horrified expression. Terraleau was out of reach, on his way toward the hideous monster, and all they could do was watch.

Within no time, Terraleau reached the armored creature. He walked up behind its enormous body, tapping it gently on the back with one of his short, stubby arms. Damian held his breath as the world fell silent around him.

The beast spun around, obviously surprised to see the small creature standing behind it. It examined him for a moment, unsure what to make of this strange newcomer, then noticed Damian and Ignicoon standing on the path a short distance away. A low, hissing noise came from its throat, a sound that made Damian’s hair stand on end. It didn’t seem happy to see them here, and the feeling was more than mutual.

Despite everything, Terraleau remained where he was, oblivious to the danger towering over him. He smiled up at the creature, missing the fact that it was tensing its large, bladed claws at its sides.

“Hello,” he began, his voice innocent and naïve. “We’re on our way to defeat a great evil that wants to take over Elandera. Would you like to help us fight the Kalimai army? We could use all the help we can get.”

The giant cockroach didn’t reply, staring at Terraleau with blank, empty eyes. Did it even understand him? Maybe not every creature on Elandera could talk. Damian wasn’t sure, but the fact that it still hadn’t responded made him even more nervous.

“Terraleau,” he shouted out, desperate to gain the small frog’s attention. “I think you should come back here.”

The cockroach caught Damian’s gaze, and looking into its emotionless eyes made him feel light-headed. There was something seriously wrong with this creature. Terraleau was in far more danger than he realized.

The monster looked back down at Terraleau, and Damian’s heart caught in his throat. As he and Ignicoon watched, it raised its right arm above its head, extending its massive claw high into the air. Understanding struck

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Damian, forcing him into action. If he didn't move now, Terraleau was dead.

He tried to dart forward, but it was too late. With one swift motion, the cockroach brought its bladed claw screaming downward, right in the direction of Terraleau's body. The frog finally realized what was happening, but there was no time to react. Damian shut his eyes, waiting for the blood-curdling scream.

There was a yell, but it wasn't Terraleau. Opening his eyes, he saw a blur of red rush by, moving through the underbrush at full speed. It was Ignicoon. He was headed straight toward his friend a short distance away, but would he get there in time?

Ignicoon pushed off with his back feet, flying through the air. He grabbed hold of Terraleau at the last possible moment, throwing both of them forward with the momentum he carried. Together, they fell to the dirt floor, skidding along the ground amid a thin cloud of dust. The beast's blade completed its descent a split-second later, driving into the hard ground, sending out a powerful shockwave that threw even Damian off balance.

Getting back to his feet, he looked over to see that the cockroach hadn't given up. In fact, it was even more agitated now. It had already raised its bladed claw from the ground, now lumbering over to where Ignicoon and Terraleau rested. Damian yelled for them to get up and run, but they didn't move. They *couldn't* move.

They're hurt, he thought to himself. And that thing was planning to finish them off if they didn't get out of there.

Damian looked around, desperate for something he could use to distract the monster for a few seconds. He needed to buy Ignicoon and Terraleau some time. He wouldn't be able to distract it for long, but hopefully it would be enough for them to escape.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a few stones near the base of a nearby tree. There weren't many of them, but they would have to do. He was out of options, and quickly running out of time. He had to act now, or it would be too late.

The beast towered over Ignicoon and Terraleau like a skyscraper, ready to finish what it started. This time there would be two victims, but that didn't seem to bother it. It was determined to do away with the small creatures one way or another – that is, if Damian couldn't stop it first.

With no more time to lose, he reared his hand back and heaved one of the small stones into the air. It was a perfect throw. With a loud *ping*, it

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collided directly with the creature's head, bouncing off to the ground at its feet.

The cockroach snapped its head up, turning its attention on him for the moment. His plan was working, but Ignicoon and Terraleau needed more time. He had to keep this thing busy a little while longer.

He reared back, releasing a few more stones. However, the creature was ready for it this time, sidestepping them as they fell harmlessly to the ground beside it. Damian was impressed. For something its size, the beast had some decent reflexes.

He reached for another stone, but was shocked to find that he was out. He looked around, but found nothing in sight. He was sure there had been more than that, but apparently he had been mistaken. That was bad – very bad.

Damian's heart skipped a beat when he looked back up. Realizing his dilemma, the cockroach creature forgot about Ignicoon and Terraleau for the moment. It rushed at him instead, hissing loudly with its bladed arms raised in his direction.

He backed up as far as he could, but there was nowhere to go. A thick wall of thorns prevented him from moving in one direction, and the monster was quickly approaching from the other. He could always retreat back into the forest, but he couldn't just leave Ignicoon and Terraleau here to die. He couldn't run away, no matter how terrified he was in the face of this new danger.

The cockroach reached him, wasting no time in its attack. It swung at him with its right blade, making him duck to avoid the object that sailed inches above his head. Not to be outdone, the monster then tried again, this time with the left. Damian rolled to the side, causing another near miss, inciting a loud roar of frustration from his opponent. He was still alive, but he didn't know how much longer he could keep this up. That thing had much more stamina than he did, and easily ten times more strength. This was the mismatch to end all mismatches – David versus Goliath, only in this case Goliath was armed with razor-sharp blades and one heck of a bad temper.

It was then, amid the ducking and dodging, that Damian realized something. It was completely desperate, but might just be crazy enough to work. The creature was large, but its motions were clumsy – certainly not as agile as someone half its size. Behind it lay Ignicoon and Terraleau, still crumpled in a small heap on the ground. The beast didn't leave much room between it and the trees, but it might be enough. He would only have one

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shot at this, and failure meant certain death. His movements would have to be quick and precise, but...

The monster lunged at him, and that was his chance. He had to act now. With a swift motion, Damian curled his body inward, flinging himself down toward the ground. He landed hard, but managed to roll forward, regaining his balance as he sprang back to his feet. A rush of adrenaline washed over him, separating his mind from his body for a moment. He was alive. His plan worked, and he was actually still in one piece. But for how long?

Damian looked back. The creature collided with a large boulder, unable to avoid it with the force of its massive body. The sound of its hard shell cracking the stone was as loud as thunder, but that was all behind him now. Ignicoon and Terraleau were only a few feet away, and he had to seize the opportunity while he still had a chance.

The pair of small creatures still hadn't moved when he finally reached them. Damian made a few attempts to wake them, but it was no use. They were unconscious, and there was no telling how long it would be before they came to.

A furious roar sounded, and Damian didn't need to look back. The beast stomped its feet on the ground, clearly unimpressed by his previous antics. It slashed its blades through the air, cutting clean through a nearby tree with a single swipe. Splinters flew through the air in all directions, some coming far too close for comfort.

That was all he needed to see. Without a second thought, Damian scooped Ignicoon and Terraleau from the forest floor, placing one carefully under each arm. He then took off along the dirt path, away from the massive creature. He didn't even know where the Gem fairies had gotten to, but it didn't matter right now. He just had to focus on avoiding the hideous cockroach creature at all costs.

Damian ran as fast as he could. He could hear it breathing heavily in pursuit, slashing its way through whatever obstacles stood in its way. Whatever that thing was, it sure didn't give up easily, and that was the most terrifying part of all. He had a feeling the beast would hunt him to the end of this world if he didn't find a way to lose it – and fast.

Damian turned a sharp corner, stopping dead in his tracks. An immense cliff rose up in front of him, higher than he could crane his neck to see. The wall was made of solid clay, small shards of stone minerals poking out from within. The cliff extended to both his left and right, creating a barricade that surrounded him on all sides. He couldn't even see where it

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ended, because it ran back through the forest, disappearing within the thick leaves of the dense trees.

Damian took a moment to catch his breath and consider this new predicament. He couldn't climb a slope that size, let alone with two small animals under his arms. He could try, but failure would surely lead to a deadly fall, taking both his life and those of the two small creatures in his possession. That wasn't an option. He had to think of something else.

Damian sighed. He was trapped, stuck within the small gorge he managed to run himself straight into. He had very few options, none of them good. Either he stayed here and waited for the cockroach monster to get him, or he tried scaling this cliff hundreds of feet into the air above him. Neither seemed preferable, but he had no time to spare. The beast was only a few feet behind him. It wouldn't be long before...

A loud hiss sounded. His time was up. Looking back, Damian saw the huge monster standing at the entrance to the forest, its large body blocking any route of escape. It snorted loudly, planting its feet firmly on the ground. He had nowhere left to run, and the creature knew it. It had him at its mercy, caught between the surrounding cliffs. His racing heart felt like it was going to explode in his chest.

Damian backed up as far as he could, crouching down within a small crevice. The ground seemed to shake with every step the beast took toward him, the force jarring shards of stone loose from the clay walls. It was now within striking distance, and Damian slumped down, holding Ignicoon and Terraleau as tightly as he could. He had protected them this long, so he wasn't going to abandon them now.

Way to go, Damian, he thought to himself. *Great Gem Master you turned out to be. Killed by something you normally would have squashed on the kitchen floor.*

The cockroach was right in front of him now, its breath warm and putrid. He almost gagged at the smell, but managed to swallow it down. Even though his nerves were on the brink of overload, he stared defiantly into its ominous, glowing eyes. It was all over, anyway. What did he have to lose?

The beast reared back, extending its bladed claw once again. On instinct, Damian raised his right arm to shield himself. That was when it all happened again.

It was unexplainable, just like before, coming to him at the last possible second before death. He couldn't control it, but there was no denying its

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power. It left him weak and powerless in its wake, drained and unable to appreciate the effect it had on his savage attacker.

It began in his wrist, a fiery sensation that quickly traveled down toward the palm of his hand. Just as the blade was about to connect with his body, the heat extended outward in an amazing display of fire, catching the beast completely off guard. Damian could only watch as everything happened in front of him, fascinated by this elemental burst, yet powerless to control its aim or intensity.

The cockroach staggered back a few steps, riving in pain. It swung its bladed claw in the air a few times, trying to relieve it of the few stray flames that ignited its skin. It seemed to have forgotten about him for the moment, but Damian barely noticed. He was too busy staring at his bracelet, the crimson illumination of the Ember Gem looking back at him from its place on the silver band.

“Damian!” A voice suddenly called out, snapping him back from his trance. He looked around, but saw no speaker. Still, he knew he couldn’t have been hearing things. Even the cockroach monster had taken notice.

Looking up toward the peak of the cliff, he finally understood. Their bodies were small and rather blurred from his perspective, but he could just make out the group of figures standing at the top. They were dressed in many different colors, having called out to him from a platform far atop the small gorge.

It’s the Gem fairies! Damian thought, excitedly. *They found me!*

But what could they do? They were all the way up there. This beast would easily be done with him, Ignicoon, and Terraleau before they could find their way down here in time. There was no way his body could withstand another of those spontaneous elemental blasts either, so that was out of the question as well. He was far too exhausted.

“Damian, get down!” The voice yelled, this time with authority. “Now!”

He obeyed. What else could he do?

Without warning, a bright-orange fireball appeared out of nowhere, colliding with the creature’s shoulder. It made a crackling sound as it exploded in a spray of embers, leaving a very noticeable mark on its thick, brown shell. The monster shrieked, recoiling in pain, but managed to stand its ground. This was one tough bug.

Enraged, the cockroach snapped its head upward, but not before another fireball made contact, this time with its right leg. A faint steam rose from the wound, the same charred mark left behind like a symbol of its presence.

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The more Damian watched, the more glowing balls rained down from above. They descended faster by the second, more of them hitting the huge beast than not. It didn't seem to know where to move, frantically trying to avoid the fiery projectiles, but failing almost every time.

With its attention distracted, Damian took the opportunity to look up again, and he smiled at what he saw. Talasanna stood on the edge of the cliff, heaving orange fireballs from her hands toward the large creature on the ground below. Of course, it made perfect sense. She was the keeper of the Ember Gem, granting the power of fire. Now, she was using that ability to keep the massive cockroach at bay, though he wondered how long it would last. Did her Gem powers have a limit, like his seemed to? Would she eventually run out of stamina, leaving her too exhausted to continue? If so, what would happen then?

Damian looked over and gave a sigh of relief. The beast had now made its way toward the forest entrance, back to where it originally came from. It seemed to be backing off, and such a thought filled him with more joy than he ever thought possible.

“Go back to where you came from, Invertiblade!” He heard Talasanna yell from above, her voice loud and forceful. “We know you belong to the Kalimai Regime, so tell your leaders that we have a message for them! We will not allow Elandera to be taken from us, not by you or anyone else! Take that as a warning, and make sure they understand it! Now get out of here before we get really mad!”

With that said, one final fireball collided with the monster, hitting it straight in the chest. It shrieked in pain before retreating back into the forest, crashing through trees and anything else in its way. Even when it was out of view, its thundering footsteps could still be heard moving off into the distance.

The rain of fireballs ceased, and the forest fell silent once again. Damian leaned back, focusing on breathing, allowing his pounding heart to settle. Yet again, he somehow managed to survive an attack by some monster straight out of a nightmare. How many times would he have to do that?

You're like a cat, Damian, he joked to himself. Nine lives – two down, seven to go.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, shutting his eyes in utter exhaustion. He wondered if he would ever be able to erase the image of the hideous creature now etched onto the inside of his eyelids.