
The Abandoned
REINCARNATION
SAGE
Vol. 1
Story by
Miraizin A
Illustrations by
Kiltkaiki
BUILDING A MIGHTY EMPIRE WITH
MONSTERS WITHIN THE MONSTERS' FOREST
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Hanashi MEDIA


Ellency
Balbora
Hereldyne
Arèsa
Delarosa
Belamus


"Hey, you guys—cut it out. You shouldn't force someone to do something they don't want to."
"Then let's all get in together—yeah!"
"Yay!"
"Uuh..."
Delarosa and Navasha hopped in without a second thought, full of energy, while Medello lingered behind, clearly embarrassed as he slipped into the bath.

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Chapter 1

"... Then, I leave the rest to you."

A whisper, barely a breath, escaped the old man's lips, yet it echoed in the vast chamber's oppressive silence. Thirty figures stood frozen, their gazes riveted to the bed at the room's far end. The old man's emaciated form lay almost swallowed up by the mattress, moving only slightly.

His cheeks had hollowed, his pallor a deathly shade that left no doubt about his current predicament. It was evident his end was near, and nothing could help him at this point.

Tears welled up in the eyes of the onlookers as they gazed upon him, each one silently imprinting the image onto their memory and reminiscing about the experiences they had had with him. This was the end for a man who had cast a giant shadow over their lives, one whose immense presence had both guided and, at times, painfully forged them into who they were.

This man had once commanded a thousand spells, a master of all known magic, possessing an encyclopedic mind that held the breadth of the world's knowledge. Far and wide, people revered him, bestowing upon him the title of Great Sage.

If any soul could truly be called a *legend*, it was he. Yet, even legends bowed to the relentless march of time.

Knowing his hour had come, the sage had summoned all his disciples to his side to deliver his final will. Now, as the last words left his lips, he felt his consciousness fading. The relentless pain that had wracked his body for so long was finally receding.

So… it's almost time, he realized.

Even in death's embrace, his spirit remained unshaken, for he knew his fate and what lay ahead. A deeper serenity emanated from

his frail form, far transcending the mere composure of a long and wise life. No, an extraordinary secret underpinned his calm.

After all, even if I die, I'll merely be reborn into my next life… with all my memories intact.

He had cast a unique spell upon himself: *Reincarnation Magic*, a true miracle of arcane science designed to carry his very consciousness beyond the veil of death. The spell was his own creation—forged from a lifetime of accumulated wisdom, and meticulously crafted with a mastery none but he could hope to achieve. No other soul in the world even suspected its existence.

Despite freely bestowing countless other beneficial magics on humanity, he kept this unique creation hidden. The reason was simple: if *Reincarnation Magic* became widespread, the natural order of the world would be thrown into chaos.

Consider a world where countless souls are reborn, each retaining memories from their previous lives. These reincarnated souls would inevitably shatter society's foundations, forever erasing its accumulated heritage.

For years, the sage had wrestled with the ethics of using the spell even for himself, tormented by the question: *Is it right for even me to reincarnate?*

Yet, after a lifetime spent entirely for others—giving of his wisdom, strength, and very being—he permitted himself one final, selfish wish before his passing.

Just this once… let me be a little greedy, he thought.

In truth, he'd never seen his life as the admirable journey others believed it to be.

Despite being praised, celebrated, thanked, and relied upon by nearly everyone, his growing popularity and household name status relentlessly drained his personal time. His days became a blur of endless obligations, and the very concept of rest faded to become an unreachable luxury. Yet, he remained a man of boundless kindness. If someone approached him with a problem only he could solve, he never tried to turn them away or make them feel lesser. He treated

everyone around him equally and showed compassion as much as he could.

Such a life wasn't inherently bad, but he often yearned for a quieter one.

This was his sole motivation for embracing a humble existence in his next life. Perhaps he would spend his days painting, indulging in that long-forgotten hobby, living quietly, far from the world's ceaseless demands.

My rebirth will likely occur in the distant future… far beyond this era. By then, no one will need me anymore. I've taught enough and passed on my knowledge to those who can carry it forward.

With that final contemplation, his gaze swept over his disciples one more time.

Tears shimmered in their eyes, each struggling against sobs as their revered mentor faded before them.

It's hard to say goodbye, but this is a truth all humans must face. I'm no exception.

Watching the tearful faces of those who had followed him so loyally, the Great Sage offered them one last, gentle smile. Then, slowly, his consciousness began to fade. The faces before him blurred, gradually swallowed by darkness.

After eighty-eight years of unbroken effort, the heart that had sustained him through it all… finally ceased beating.

※※※

"So… the Great Sage has passed on, hasn't he?"

Deep within the shadowed room, a solitary figure draped in black watched the entire event unfold. From an immeasurable distance, he had sensed the precise moment of the sage's death.

"But this isn't the end. Is it?" he muttered, his voice low and laced with sinister intent. "I know. I alone know the truth: you've used a reincarnation spell to carry yourself into another life."

A twisted smile crept across his lips as his words spiraled into a fevered murmur. His eyes gleamed with madness—wild, unhinged, and utterly consumed.

"No one else could have known," he hissed. "But I've watched you more closely than anyone else ever dared, and I know what you've done."

He spat the words with venom, his voice trembling with a manic intensity.

"I can't use that spell," he spat. "Why would I ever rely on a magic you created? No… I'll reach that world by my own means. I have a forbidden art—my personal secret ritual."

He inhaled deeply, a tremor in his tone as his eyes lit with unhinged resolve. With a jerk of his arm, he seized a staff and a small vial filled with a thick, inky-black liquid. Then, without hesitation, he raised the vial to his lips and drank it dry.

The moment the liquid slid down his throat, he doubled over, coughing out a raw, guttural sound. His body trembled, wracked with pain, yet a laugh tore from his chest. It began as a low, breathless chuckle, then grew louder and louder, until it became an echoing cackle that filled the room with madness.

"Great Sage… our feud carries into the next life!" he howled, eyes wide with bloodlust. "Ha ha ha! Oh, I can't wait! I can't wait! This time, I'll be the one to end you! I'll drag you down into the abyss myself! I swear it!"

Laughing like a man possessed by a malevolent entity, he raised his staff high and struck the floor.

Suddenly, a black void bloomed from beneath him, darkness spiraling upward, swallowing his figure whole.

With that, he vanished from the world, now a phantom to all who had once revered him.

※※※

A baby had just been born, but the child made no sound; not a cry, nor even a whimper.

Following the rigorous process of birthing the child, the midwife was tired and pale. The newborn's mother was equally exhausted, her face white with fear. But as they anxiously examined the baby, they found his skin healthy, and his tiny chest rising and falling with steady breaths.

"Sometimes this happens, I suppose," the midwife murmured, astonished, as she gently checked him over.

A trembling sigh of relief escaped the mother's lips, and her eyes softened. "If the baby's all right, then please, let me hold it."

The midwife gave a reassuring nod and carefully handed the child over to her. Cradling it in her arms, the mother gazed lovingly into the newborn's face.

The baby, meanwhile, stared back at her with a grumpy expression.

Looks like it worked, he thought, letting out a silent sigh of relief.

The Great Sage had done it. He had reincarnated—memories and all—into this tiny infant's body.

He had trusted in the magic he'd crafted himself, even though he had had doubts about its effectiveness. He had never used or tested such a spell before in all his years as the Great Sage. Discovering that it had worked brought him genuine comfort.

His newborn eyes drifted around the room, studying the midwife, the woman holding him, and the modest space they were in. Nothing unusual stood out. He hadn't been able to choose where or to whom he'd be born. If he'd ended up in a cruel or chaotic place, there would've been no chance of living the peaceful life he dreamed of.

So far, his new self appeared promising.

"What should we call it? Wait! Is my child a boy or a girl?" the mother asked suddenly, blinking as the thought hit her.

"Ah! Forgive me," the midwife replied with a startled bow. "In my surprise, I forgot to convey to you that he's a boy."

Good, thought the Great Sage, quietly approving. *That should make things simpler, since I was male in my past life, too.*

Before he could reflect further, a clamor echoed from outside the room as rapid footsteps could be heard thumping against the wooden floor.

Then, the door burst open with a crash.

"Has the baby been born?!" a loud voice boomed as a man stormed into the room. The man had a thick beard and a rugged, imposing face. The sheer panic in his expression made it obvious to the sage who he was.

That must be the father, he guessed, watching the man with calm detachment.

The man wore a finely made and expensive coat. Perhaps a sign of his noble status or some form of high rank.

"Yes, a healthy baby boy," the midwife confirmed with a gentle smile.

"A boy, huh…" the man murmured, his gruff voice low with thought.

"So, let's give him a name," the mother said softly, her eyes already warm with affection. But the father held up a hand.

"Wait. First, we'll measure his innate trait," the father said sharply.

Innate trait? The Great Sage's newborn mind stirred at the term.

He was fully aware of what that meant. Every human was born with a single, unique gift, an inherent aptitude granted at birth: swordsmanship, magic, or alchemy. It could indeed be identified the moment a child was born.

Historically, it was somewhat strange to check one's innate trait before giving them a name.

A little cold, isn't it?

Then, the mother spoke again, hesitantly. "Um… about what we discussed before… Is it too late to take it back?"

"It's not up for discussion. The decision is final," the father replied without even looking at her.

What are they talking about? the Great Sage wondered, a sliver of unease curling in his chest. After taking in a deep breath, he got the answer to his question when his mother spoke up.

"But… if he ends up with a useless trait, you'd throw him away in the Frazes Great Forest? How could we possibly do that?" the mother whispered, her voice trembling.

Throw me away… if I'm born with a useless trait?

The words hit him like a bucket of ice water.

If he remembered correctly, the Frazes Great Forest was a place overrun by monsters—a death sentence for anyone abandoned there. Especially a newborn. No magic. No mobility. No way to speak or defend himself.

A child dumped there wouldn't even survive the night.

He had thought and hoped this was a decent place to be reborn. But clearly, he had been terribly and dangerously mistaken.

Who throws their child away just because of their innate trait?

Yes, it was true that some traits were considered "duds"—difficult to harness, slow to grow, or seen as unremarkable in combat or social standing. And it was certainly harder to forge a life on a path outside one's natural gift. But still, if a person worked hard and remained dedicated and wise, then they could overcome almost anything. The Great Sage had proven that in his previous life. And now, he was beginning to understand that this new world he'd stepped into had a darker undercurrent than he'd expected.

To give up on a child's entire future just because of a so-called "useless" trait—what kind of parent does that? The Great Sage wanted to shout, frustration bubbling beneath the surface.

Unfortunately, in the body of a newborn, all he could do was gurgle out a helpless *ah* or *oooh*.

"It can't be helped," the father said flatly, folding his arms. "In our household, it is an unbroken tradition that the firstborn son must inherit the family name and all that comes with it. We cannot allow a child with a useless trait to take on that role. If he turns out to be one of them, we'll declare him stillborn and leave him in the Frazes Great Forest."

So, I was born into a noble house, the Great Sage thought grimly.

He'd suspected this might happen. Being reborn into a distinguished family sounded ideal at first, but the reality often came with burdens—restrictions, expectations, and in this case, unfavorable conditions. His premonition had been correct.

"But abandoning him in that forest…" The mother's voice cracked as she tightened her grip around her baby. "Couldn't we leave him in a nearby town, at least? He'll die out there."

"If we leave him in town and he survives, he might come back one day, and that could cause complications. Honestly, if he *has* a useless trait, we should end him here and now," the father said coldly. "But even I won't go that far. The forest is the best we can do."

"That's no different from killing him yourself!" the mother cried, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"It's a matter of sentiment, not logic," he replied, as if swatting her words away. "In any case, we'll measure his trait. If it's a good one, then there's no issue."

The Great Sage's mind raced. *If I'm abandoned as a baby, there's nothing I can do. I have no magic, no speech, no mobility.*

Which traits are considered "good" again?

He tried to recall what had been considered desirable in his era.

Let's see… magical aptitude, tactical genius, and alchemical talent—those were the big three back in my day. Those traits were widely respected, prized in noble circles and among guilds alike.

Of course, that was decades ago. This era may judge differently… but surely, magic is still seen as valuable. It's so

versatile—combat, construction, daily life. There's no way it's fallen out of favor.

As these thoughts flickered through the Great Sage's mind, preparations began for the test. The process for measuring one's innate trait was simple but precise. It involved taking a small sample of blood and dropping it onto a special object known as an Appraisal Stone. Once the stone came in contact with blood, it would change color to reflect the bearer's natural trait; this would determine whether the child would be cherished or cast aside.

For the record, Appraisal Stones were so expensive that ordinary citizens couldn't afford them.

The father picked up a knife, then reached for the newborn's hand. A sharp sting shot through the Great Sage's tiny finger as the blade sliced his skin.

The man blinked in surprise. "He's not crying?" He sounded genuinely caught off guard, but only for a moment. Without dwelling on it, he pressed the bleeding fingertip over a pale, palm-sized stone he had pulled from his cloak.

The drop of blood sank into the surface. A moment later, the Appraisal Stone shimmered and turned blue.

Blue. That's magic aptitude. I did it. The Great Sage took in a deep breath, feeling a wave of relief wash over him. *That's a hit.*

His relief didn't last.

"Magic trait, huh… That's about as bad as it gets these days," the father muttered, his voice low with bitter disappointment.

What?

For a second, he thought he'd heard something different, but it quickly became clear he hadn't. The mother burst into tears, cradling him desperately. At that instant, the father's face darkened, his expression grim.

Magic is a failure trait? What has happened to this era? Panic churned in the sage's mind. *No… never mind that. If they think it's a useless trait, they're going to abandon me, aren't they?*

If they did that, he surely wouldn't survive the outcome of their actions. The Great Sage couldn't move, speak, or use his magic. In this body, he was completely helpless.

His mother clung to him, refusing to let go, pleading through her tears. But her resistance was short-lived. He was torn from her arms by force.

Wrapped in a rough blanket, he was handed off to a man clad in armor—a knight. He appeared to be a trusted subordinate, and his task was to carry the child to the Frazes Great Forest and leave him there to die.

The father's voice was cold and unwavering as he gave the order. "Tell no one. Strip away your feelings. Fulfill your duty without fail."

The knight bowed his head, then turned on his heel and left without hesitation. He mounted his steed and rode straight for the forest.

What do I do? What can I possibly do? The Great Sage's mind spun, his thoughts racing like wildfire. But no matter how many thoughts ran through his mind, he ended up without a solution to his current predicament.

There's nothing. Nobody. No voice. No magic.

There's nothing I can do.

At the moment, all he could do was leave his fate in the hands of the heavens.

Maybe someone will find me after I'm abandoned. It wasn't impossible, but the odds weren't good either. If they were going to discard him, it would surely be deep in the forest, somewhere no one would ever come to his rescue.

At this point, the only sliver of hope left was the knight's conscience.

The father had clearly trusted the man, but perhaps—just perhaps—even a loyal knight would hesitate at the cruelty of abandoning a helpless infant in monster-infested wilderness.

Clinging to that faint hope, the Great Sage surrendered himself to the flow of events.

It didn't take long to reach the Frazes Great Forest.

The knight rode deep into the woods, his expression unreadable behind his helm. They passed through thick groves and tangled undergrowth, the path narrowing and light thinning. While in the forest, they were attacked by a monster, but the knight swiftly cut it down without acquiring so much as a scratch. He didn't falter or pause.

Eventually, without hesitation, he laid the bundle—the fragile babe wrapped in cloth—at the base of a gnarled old tree. Without a word, he turned and walked away.

So, this is it, the Great Sage thought. *My fate is sealed.*

There were only two possible outcomes: either a monster would find him and end it swiftly, or nothing would happen to him and he'd die of starvation instead.

He'd known this was a possibility from the moment he realized he couldn't choose the circumstances of his rebirth. But still, he had believed and hoped that being born alive, rather than stillborn, meant he might at least survive until the age of five, when his magic would awaken.

For things to turn out like this… Was I wrong to wish for another life? Is this a punishment for my arrogance in reaching too far? For trying to defy the natural cycle and take a second turn at life, alone?

If so… perhaps, this is justice.

With that quiet resignation, the Great Sage closed his eyes. He began to accept his fate and was ready for whatever would happen to him next, the real death that even his magic could not delay forever.

Perhaps this, too, is fate.

Just then—

"Mom! Mom! There's something over here!" A high, rough voice pierced the forest's silence.

Goblin speech? The Great Sage's thoughts, previously numb with resignation, sharpened instantly.

He understood every word. This peculiar language, spoken only by goblins, was utterly incomprehensible to ordinary humans. Yet the Great Sage had always grasped its nuances. His title stemmed not just from his magical prowess, but from a vast knowledge that spanned disciplines, cultures, and languages, encompassing almost every known tongue—and even a few forgotten by time.

"It's a human baby…" one goblin muttered, her tone hushed and wary.

"Huh?! What's a human doing out here? No way!" another squeaked, her voice a mix of shock and genuine concern.

"Abandoned, maybe… Or something happened," the first one conjectured, her tone thoughtful.

They were two female goblins, an adult and a child—likely mother and daughter—distinguishable by their voices and speech patterns.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, a flicker of *hope* ignited within the Great Sage. Until this moment, he had only imagined certain death if discovered by monsters. However, he'd made a critical oversight: he hadn't considered being found by goblins.

These humanoid monsters, typically no larger than a human child, even when fully grown, possessed single horns and reddish skin. Crucially, their temperaments varied wildly; some were gentle and curious, others vicious and cruel. In that regard, they weren't so different from humans.

Still, nearly every goblin interacting with human society had done so through violence. These were the encounters people remembered and feared. For generations, goblins had been universally branded as dangerous beasts.

I remember now… It was in my early thirties, in my previous life, when I first discovered peaceful goblins. Yet even then, they remained hated and hunted. But perhaps things have changed in

this new era? Maybe goblins are seen differently now, the Great Sage thought, with a sliver of hope that a new human-goblin relationship might lead to his salvation.

"Humans are scary, aren't they?" The child goblin's voice, hushed with worry, broke through his thoughts. "My friend told me they'll kill you the moment they set their eyes on you."

The older one paused, then replied softly, "Yeah, that's true."

The Great Sage's heart gave a sudden jolt.

What did she say…?

Her words were a sharp, bitter reminder that cruelty wasn't exclusive to one race, nor kindness to another. And in this world, fear still flowed both ways.

Since not all of them are violent, there should be a law—one I helped create—that prohibits the indiscriminate killing of goblins. Has it been abolished? Or has the truth I uncovered—that some goblins are gentle—simply been forgotten over time?

The Great Sage's thoughts spun in quiet, bitter frustration.

Magic aptitude is considered a useless trait. Goblins are once again feared as monsters. Just what has happened to this era?

He desperately sought answers, but found none.

"So, what do we do with this human?" the younger goblin asked, tilting her head, her tone thick with concern. "If we leave the child here, he's definitely gonna die, right?"

Though their demeanor was free of malice, the Great Sage fully anticipated them leaving him to his fate. After all, what reason did goblins have to go out of their way for a human infant? A pang of regret struck him for not having done more in his past life to disseminate the truth about their kind.

Then, in a voice of simple conviction, the mother goblin declared, "We will help the child."

The Great Sage blinked inwardly, stunned.

Did she say she'd help me?

"Huh? Help him? Why?" the younger goblin asked, her bafflement clear.

"Not all humans are bad," the older goblin replied. "That's what the village elder always says. And if we leave a baby this young out here, he's guaranteed to die. That's just too cruel."

"Yeah… I guess that's true. He's actually kinda cute, huh," the younger goblin added, peeking at the bundle with wide eyes.

With surprising gentleness, the mother goblin scooped the Great Sage into her arms and said gently, "Let's head back to the village."

"Okay!" the younger goblin chirped, beginning to walk toward her home with her mother and the newly rescued human child.

Are they actually helping me? Then… I'm not out of luck, after all, the Great Sage thought, a cautious relief swelling in his chest.

The mother goblin mused aloud, her voice tinged with uncertainty, "I said we'd help the child, but others in the village might not agree. And truly, I've got no idea how to raise a human child."

Her words struck like a pebble in calm water.

So, there is still a trapdoor somewhere, he thought, a familiar unease creeping back into his chest.

Yet it turned out his worries were misplaced, for the outcome defied his expectations. To his quiet astonishment, upon their arrival, the village goblins were startled, but not hostile. When the mother explained the situation, not a single voice of protest arose.

"Well, I mean… just because he's human doesn't mean we should leave him to die," one goblin muttered. At that statement, silence reigned. No argument. No violence. No exile.

For the first time since his rebirth, a profound sense of belonging settled within the Great Sage.

Maybe… I was born in the right place, after all.

In the end, the mother goblin carried the infant to the village elder to ask for his judgment. This elder, an older goblin, bore a face intricately mapped with deep wrinkles, his frame hunched with the weight of years and accumulated wisdom.

"If you're willing to take full responsibility for raising the child, then I see no reason to object," he stated, his voice rasping yet

calm. It was clear that the goblin who had rescued the Great Sage held significant trust within the community, especially given the elder's immediate acceptance of her petition.

"Just one matter," the mother goblin said, raising her brow. "Are there any among us who truly understand how to raise a human?"

The elder scratched at his chin with a clawed hand, thinking.

"I believe they are not so different from us. Human infants require milk, just as goblins do. While I cannot guarantee the sufficiency of ours, no other method comes to mind."

"Milk, huh? Then, I'll just feed it mine," the mother said with a shrug, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

G-Goblin milk…? The Great Sage's thoughts faltered for a moment. *Wait, hold on. One of my disciples, in my previous life, was obsessed with goblin biology… Didn't he give me a paper once?*

He riffled through his memory as fast as his newborn mind could manage.

Yes, in his research, he discovered that goblin milk is almost identical in composition to human milk. If that was accurate, then I should be fine.

With that, the sage's concern was assuaged. Admittedly, he still wasn't *thrilled* about the idea of drinking goblin milk, but such trivialities as pride and squeamishness were irrelevant now. Survival demanded pragmatic acceptance. This humble, and perhaps crude, settlement now represented life itself.

"More importantly," the elder said, shifting his gaze to the infant wrapped in cloth, "Arèsa, has the child been given a name yet?"

"Name, huh…" she mused aloud. "Not yet."

"Then, give him one. He deserves that much," the elder said gently.

"You're right… Let's see… What should it be…?" she murmured, cradling the baby closer as her expression softened with affection.

Arèsa, the Great Sage noted quietly. *So that's her name.*

She began to think, her eyes narrowing in contemplation.

The Sage, of course, had borne a name in his former life—one chosen by his parents, imbued with meaning and dignity. But he had already resolved that this new existence would be a fresh journey. His old name belonged to the past; this second life demanded a new identity and path.

"Me! Me! I have an idea!" the little goblin shouted, raising her hand with a proud grin.

"What is it now?" the elder asked, raising a brow as the child goblin bounced on her toes.

"Because he's so tiny, we should call him Beanie! It's cute, right?" she chirped proudly.

What kind of a name is that?! the Great Sage balked, his inner voice more flustered than it had been in centuries.

"Delarosa…" the elder sighed, rubbing his temples. "Humans may start small, but they grow far larger than we do. And more importantly, that name is far too silly. I will let that pass, but I won't accept the name."

"Ugh!" Delarosa groaned, arms flopping at her sides in exaggerated disappointment.

The Great Sage let out a small sigh of relief. *So that's her name—Delarosa. I'll have to remember that.*

Then, Arèsa's eyes lit up with inspiration. "I've thought of something. How about Belamus?"

"Ohh… quite the grand name," the elder murmured, stroking his beard with thoughtful interest. "Why that one?"

Belamus? The Great Sage's thoughts stirred at the word. *In Goblin speech, it means "great" or "distinguished." A weighty name indeed. But why choose that for me…?*

Arèsa glanced down at the baby cradled in her arms, her voice soft yet imbued with certainty.

"When we found this child alone in the forest, he didn't cry. Even now, held by a goblin like me, he hasn't shed a single tear. I believe he's destined for greatness. Maybe… just maybe, he'll grow

to accomplish something truly significant for both goblins and humans."

The elder nodded slowly, his gaze lingering on the infant's serene expression.

"Well now, when you put it that way… not only is he calm, but he looks *serene* as well. Yes, he appears to possess the makings of someone exceptional. I don't know what his fate will be, but if it brings benefit to our people, I shall welcome it with open arms."

"Yeah," Arèsa agreed with a quiet smile.

"Then, it's settled. This human child, Belamus, will be accepted as one of our own," the elder declared, his voice ringing with quiet finality. "Arèsa, you're to raise him with care and full responsibility."

"I will," she said firmly.

So, they've pinned high hopes on me, have they? the Great Sage mused, a touch of ironic amusement creeping into his thoughts. *Well, perhaps it's only right. I owe my life to these goblins. Maybe I should live in a way that measures up to their expectations.*

And so, the Great Sage—now named Belamus—began his second life, raised among goblins in the heart of the forest.

Chapter 2

Belamus, now five years old, had grown into his second life within the goblin village and was loved among the inhabitants of his new environment.

The homes of most goblins were made of straw and wood, rough constructions that looked fragile at first glance. Due to the nature of their homes, rain and wind weren't always kept out, and comfort was more aspiration than reality. Belamus lived in one of these homes, nestled in the forest, with Arèsa.

One morning, after breakfast, as the sunlight filtered through the crooked beams of their home, Arèsa looked at him and asked, "Belamus… are you really five years old?"

Belamus paused, startled for a half-second, but quickly straightened his posture and answered calmly, "What a peculiar question. Surely, Mother, you know my age better than anyone."

Arèsa tilted her head, unconvinced. "Your body may be small, yes… but your words and demeanor suggest an adult, not a child."

Then, she gestured toward Delarosa, who sprawled across a bundle of straw in the corner, fast asleep. She was snoring loudly with her mouth wide open and a thin strand of drool trailing down her cheek. Her limbs were tangled awkwardly in the blanket like a caught animal. It was long past the time she should've woken up, but all efforts to wake her had proven futile.

Eventually, they gave up and allowed her to continue sleeping.

"Delarosa is two years older than you," Arèsa continued with a sigh. "And look at her. She's a bit of a dunce, sure, but you're… like a miniature grown-up. Are all humans like this?"

Naturally, Belamus had never revealed the eighty-eight-year-old soul residing within his infant body. How could he possibly explain

such a preposterous truth? For now, the tale of his reincarnation would remain his alone.

"Well then, I'll be off to help around the village," he said, shifting the conversation as smoothly as he could.

"Hey, Belamus!" Arèsa called after him. But he was already heading out the door before she could press the issue further. The last thing he needed was to slip up and say something suspicious.

Outside, the village was already alive with motion.

"Oh, Belamus! You here to lend a hand again today?" a goblin called out, waving as he passed by.

Life in the village was built on cooperation—they would all gather food, cook meals, and craft clothes together. Everyone pitched in where they could.

Belamus helped wherever he was allowed. He didn't like sitting around doing nothing. Though still a child and forbidden from hunts, he diligently assisted with cooking, foraging wild plants, and even sewing simple garments. It was honest work that made him feel like he belonged, and he derived joy from doing it.

"Wow, Belamus, you're such a good boy, even though you're still so little!" a goblin woman said with a cheerful smile, her arms full of gathered herbs.

"As a member of this village, I'm simply doing what's expected of me," Belamus replied with a small nod, his tone calm but sincere.

"So mature! My kid is already eight, and all he does is run around causing trouble and playing all day," she said with a laugh, shaking her head in mock exasperation.

Through his constant efforts to help out around the village, Belamus had earned a place among the villagers. Despite being human—a race typically met with deep suspicion by goblins—his consistently well-behaved demeanor led the villagers to embrace him. No longer an outsider, he was met not with fear or prejudice, but with an unwavering, silent acceptance.

After finishing his chores for the day, Belamus slipped away, looking for a quiet place where no goblins were around.

His home was empty, as Arèsa and Delarosa were out, likely foraging for food in the forest. He sat cross-legged on the wooden floor, raised both hands above his head, and closed his eyes.

Then he spoke, softly but clearly.

"*Light.*"

A glowing orb flickered into existence just above his palms, radiating a soft, steady brilliance. It hovered in the air like a captured star.

It was a basic spell—*Light*, a simple illumination, cast to dispel darkness. Yet it signified one singular truth: his magic had, at last, awakened.

He dispelled the orb with a breath, then raised his hands again.

"*Light.*"

Once more, the glow returned.

He repeated the process, casting and canceling the spell over and over again. To an outside observer, it might have looked meaningless, even strange. However, exhibiting this trait involved serious training.

When a person first awakened their magic, their magical power capacity—the amount of magical energy they could hold—was extremely low. With such limited reserves, only the weakest spells could be cast. The most effective method to expand that capacity involved relentless magical exertion, pushing the body to adapt and strengthening it like a muscle.

Belamus had a reason for wanting to grow stronger as quickly as he could.

His original aspiration for reincarnation was a quiet, unassuming existence, even one devoid of great magical power. But that dream had begun to transform after being raised in the goblin village.

A powerful new imperative took root within him: to repay the profound debt on his life as swiftly as possible. This conviction, born early, had only intensified with each passing day.

The goblin village, kind as its inhabitants were, lived under brutal conditions. Lacking any agricultural technology, its survival

hinged precariously on meager forest hunts and the sparse bounty of wild plants. The villagers' food supply was perpetually unstable, condemning the roughly fifty goblins to a precarious, day-to-day struggle for existence.

Every hunting trip came with a risk—monsters roamed the forest, and those who encountered them sometimes came back injured or didn't return at all. Arèsa's husband was one of the victims of the monsters' attacks. He was killed during a hunt, and his loss was just one of many in the village's quiet history of hardship.

Despite their own harsh lives, not a single goblin had ever suggested casting Belamus out. They had taken him in without hesitation. They were quite simply kind.

Because of that—because of them—Belamus couldn't help but grow fond of this strange little village that had taken him in as a child and nurtured him. Due to the love they showered on him, he decided to set aside his original goal of living a quiet life.

First, he thought, *I'll repay the kindness I've been shown. I'll use my knowledge, my magic—everything I have—to help this village thrive.*

He had once tried to share some of that knowledge when he first learned to speak, but no one took him seriously. To them, he was just a precocious child with a vivid imagination, and this propelled him to change tactics.

Belamus knew that only by awakening his magic and vanquishing a powerful monster would the villagers take his words more seriously. Once they witnessed his capabilities firsthand, the goblins might finally heed his wisdom and place their unwavering trust in him.

And so, he waited. Patiently. Quietly. Until the day his magical power awakened.

Even now, Arèsa had begun to question whether he was truly a child. If he told her everything, she might believe him. But still, without magic, much of the knowledge he held would be useless anyway.

This meant that there was only one path forward: training. So, he did exactly that.

My magical power capacity has grown a lot recently, he thought as he felt the energy pulsing quietly through him. *I can use more spells now. I might even be able to take down a strong monster.*

Just as that thought came, Belamus shook his head.

No. Not yet.

If I lose, I die. It's that simple. I can't risk it—not until I'm absolutely sure.

There could be no recklessness. Not in a world like this.

And so, Belamus chose caution over pride. Day by day, spell by spell, he continued to train, growing stronger, more precise, and inching ever closer to the moment he would be ready.

With today's training, I should reach about one-tenth of my prime magical power capacity, Belamus calculated silently. *At that level, I'll be able to take down most monsters with ease.*

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One morning, after lending a hand with the chores, Belamus headed off to his usual secluded spot to begin his magic training. As always, his goal was to increase his magical power reserves, one spell at a time.

He had already decided that once today's session was complete, he would move forward with his plan—seek out and defeat a powerful monster.

He raised his hands and activated his training spell.

"*Light.*"

A familiar orb of brilliance sparked to life above his palms. But just as the glow flickered into existence, a loud, unmistakable voice rang out behind him.

"Belamus! Whatcha doin' over there?!"

It was a voice he'd heard more than any other in this life—the voice of Delarosa, the goblin girl who was technically his "older sister."

Belamus froze.

Damn. She found me.

He preferred to train alone, where distractions were minimal and practice was most efficient. Of all possible disruptions, Delarosa was perhaps the most formidable: loud, insatiably curious, and brimming with boundless energy. He had meticulously avoided her detection, but today, his guard had slipped.

"What was that shiny thing I saw just now?" she asked, trotting up with her wide, sparkling eyes.

Belamus sighed, pausing his spellwork. He didn't want to ignore her, so he turned and offered a short answer: "Magic."

"Oooh. And what's magic?" she asked, her head tilting as she leaned in eagerly.

Belamus disliked vague or lazy explanations, but in this case, he knew that simplicity was best.

"It's a power that causes mysterious phenomena to happen. That's the easiest way to put it."

"Whoa! I wanna use it too!" Delarosa declared, stomping one foot as her ears twitched in frustration.

"You can't use it. At least not right now, Delarosa," Belamus replied calmly.

"Whaaat?! Why not?! If you can do it, then I should be able to do it too!" Delarosa whined, throwing her arms up in exaggerated disbelief.

Belamus hesitated, unsure whether to tell her the real reason.

The truth was simple: Delarosa, like most goblins, had incredibly low magical power capacity. So low, in fact, that she couldn't even cast *Light*, the most basic of spells.

A goblin's ability to use magic required evolution. All monsters in this world could evolve if certain conditions were met. Once they

did, their appearance would change, and their abilities would drastically increase.

In the case of goblins, their next stage was hobgoblin. Upon evolution, they would grow taller, their features would become more humanoid, and their physical strength would spike dramatically. Most importantly, their magical power capacity would increase enough to allow them to use magic.

The conditions for evolving from goblin to hobgoblin were extremely difficult to achieve. In fact, natural evolution was practically unheard of.

Of course, Belamus already knew the precise requirements. He intended, eventually, to help the village goblins achieve this evolution, but the process demanded a vast reservoir of mana, more than he currently possessed. So, for now, he had postponed it.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure you can use magic someday," Belamus said gently, trying to soothe her.

"But I wanna do it now! That's not fair. You're keeping it all to yourself!" Delarosa whined, puffing up like a balloon about to burst. "You're supposed to listen to your big sister, aren't you?!"

Belamus sighed inwardly. He'd had no children in his previous life. And truthfully, he'd never been good at dealing with them. So handling Delarosa's tantrums was still a work in progress.

How do I even begin to reason with this kind of chaos?

He paused for a breath, then straightened.

"Listen carefully, Delarosa. Patience is a virtue, the very hallmark of greatness."

"Eh? Pay-shence?" she echoed, blinking blankly.

"It means the strength to endure," he clarified, slipping effortlessly into lecture mode. "Take Rekord the First, for example. He forged a mighty empire, but only after enduring years of hardship and obscurity. He waited for his chance, and when the moment arrived, he rose, ignited a rebellion, and carved an empire from the ashes. Had he lacked that patience, or acted rashly, he would have perished long before his time."

Belamus concluded with a subtle nod, quiet satisfaction at the aptness of his historical parallel.

Delarosa merely stared, utterly bewildered, before flinging her hands into the air.

"You're saying weird stuff again! Just teach me already!" Delarosa huffed, her arms rising in exaggerated exasperation.

Clearly, the lesson hadn't landed, and he knew he had more work to do.

"Hm… maybe that one was a little too advanced for children," Belamus murmured, stroking his chin as he watched Delarosa pout. "Very well then. How about this one… A tale of the great adventurer Kaileth, hailed as the finest in the land—"

Just as he began his next lesson, a panicked voice rang out across the village.

"Emergency!" a goblin shouted, breathless and wide-eyed as he came sprinting into view.

Something was undoubtedly wrong, but Belamus and Delarosa couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was. Belamus's head instinctively snapped toward the sound.

What happened? he wondered, already rising to his feet.

"It's orcs! A group of orcs just marched into the village!"

Orcs—monstrous creatures, their physique a brutal fusion of man and boar, typically massive and powerful—were invading the village. Standing nearly three meters tall and weighing almost seven hundred kilograms, they were not mindless beasts, yet their intelligence paled compared to humans or goblins. Most were timid by nature, but that changed quickly when they had a powerful leader to rally behind.

Ten of these towering monsters, each wielding a heavy iron club, sent a palpable wave of terror rippling through the goblin community.

There was no mistaking it—if a fight broke out, the goblins didn't stand a chance.

The orcs gathered at the village's edge, glaring down at the goblins with condescension. Their apparent leader bellowed in a gruff, snarling Orcish, a language utterly incomprehensible to the frozen, panicking goblins. Mercifully, they had yet to attack.

Sensing that things might spiral out of control if they didn't act quickly, a goblin ran to inform the village elder. The village elder was the only one who could speak and understand Orcish.

The old goblin stepped forward, unshaken and calm.

"What business do you have with our village?" he asked in fluent Orcish, meeting the orc leader's gaze without flinching.

"Well, look at that. One of you can talk," the orc snorted. "This whole area is our boss's territory now. You wanna keep living here? Then you'll have to pay tax regularly, including food. If you refuse, you will suffer the consequences. Got it?"

The threat hung heavy in the air.

The village elder's eyes narrowed slightly, but he recognized the grim truth: fighting them was futile, at least for now. He knew compliance was their only recourse. Still, he posed the inevitable question.

"How much food are we talking about?"

The orc grunted, then pulled out a large sack and tossed it at the elder's feet with a thud.

"Ten bags every seven days. Stuff 'em with meat."

The sack was big enough to stuff three full-grown goblins inside. If they were forced to deliver ten of those every seven days, the goblins would starve.

"T-There's no way we can manage that!" the village elder cried, his voice cracking with desperation. "If we hand over that much, we'll all starve to death!"

"Not my problem," the orc sneered, his tone dripping with contempt. "You goblins can gnaw on the weeds around here or suck mud for all I care. You'll survive."

"W-What did you say about goblins…?!" the elder growled, his composure finally shattering. "I'm telling you, this demand is

impossible! Reduce it, at least a little!”

The orc leader narrowed his eyes.

“Obero’da. Kill one. Let’s set an example.”

Immediately after their leader muttered these words, one of the orcs behind him grunted in response: “Understood.”

Then he stepped forward, raising his massive iron club and aiming it toward a nearby goblin.

“Stop! Stop it right now!” the elder shouted, moving to intervene.

Then, a voice, sharp and clear, cut through the tension from beyond the crowd.

“*Rock Blast.*”

A chunk of stone, launched with bullet-like force, hurtled through the air. It slammed straight into the orc’s temple, brutally, precisely. The massive brute collapsed backward with a thud, the iron club slipping from his fingers as he hit the ground, unconscious.

A stunned silence fell over the clearing.

“Anyone who harms the goblins of this village will answer to *me*.” The voice was firm and commanding. It was far too solemn and cold to belong to a five-year-old child.

It was Belamus.

The moment he heard orcs had breached the village, he had rushed to the central square. Seeing one about to strike a defenseless goblin, he had acted without hesitation, unleashing *Rock Blast*—a rapid-fire projectile spell that launched stone with lethal precision.

“Belamus!” someone gasped.

“W-What was that just now?!”

“Was that magic?!”

The goblins erupted into a flurry of shocked voices, disbelief written across their faces.

Belamus stepped forward slowly, placing himself directly in front of the orcs.

“B-Belamus… what in the world was *that* just now?” the village elder stammered, still wide-eyed from the earlier display.

“Elder,” Belamus said calmly, without turning his head. “This is dangerous. Please fall back.”

“Wha… Wha-wha…?” the elder stammered.

It was an absurd thing for a mere five-year-old to utter. Yet the cold, unwavering sharpness in Belamus’s eyes brooked no argument. Immediately, the elder quietly stepped back.

“Belamus! Get back!” Arèsa cried from the crowd, her voice trembling. Worry flooded her expression as she tried to push through the gathering of goblins to reach him.

“I’m fine,” Belamus replied, eyes still locked on the orcs. “You’re the one in danger, Mother. Please stay back.”

“Wh-What…?” Arèsa whispered, her eyes wide with disbelief.

Then Belamus turned his gaze on the orcs and spoke in fluent Orcish.

“You’re lucky,” he said coldly. “Had you killed Melda just now, I would’ve killed *every last one of you.* But now, if you leave quietly, I’ll let you go.”

The orcs blinked in confusion.

“You’re a human…? Hmph. What the hell is a human doing in a goblin village?”

The leader had no intention of backing down. With a snarl, he started advancing.

“You’ll regret underestimating us, boy. Even in your next life!” With a roar, he raised his massive iron club and swung it down toward Belamus with murderous force.

It never connected. The massive weapon stopped in midair.

“W-What…?!” the orc stammered, his massive frame frozen rigid in disbelief.

Belamus, meanwhile, hadn’t moved an inch, merely raising his right hand. The rest was unspoken history: with that single, effortless gesture, he had caught the orc’s full-powered swing, stopping it dead.

Gasps erupted from the goblins; the orcs' eyes bulged in disbelief.

"Magic has many applications," Belamus stated, his voice calm, composed as ever. "It can enhance physical strength, defense, and more. Though my magical power training is far from complete, even at my current capacity, a blow like yours is laughably easy to stop."

As he spoke, he clenched his left hand into a fist, then swung it down with full force, smashing it into the orc's iron club. A deafening clang echoed through the square. A sharp crack followed, and the club shattered. Fine fractures spiderwebbed through the metal before the entire weapon crumbled to dust and splinters.

"Th-That's impossible!" the orc choked out, stumbling backward.

"You cannot win against me," Belamus said coldly. Magical power surged around him, crackling in the air. His presence pulsed like a living force, pressing down on the Orcs with an unbearable weight.

Under this immense pressure, the orcs began to falter.

They stared at him. This child, barely as tall as their knees, in that moment, looked enormous. Some began to sweat, while some others trembled. It was as if a dragon stood before them, and not a human child.

"I'll say it one more time," Belamus declared, eyes narrowed. "Leave."

That was the final blow. The orcs turned pale and began to sweat profusely. True to their nature as inherently cowardly monsters, the orcs turned tail and fled, utterly overwhelmed by sheer terror.

Just before vanishing into the woods, one of them turned back and shouted in a shaky voice, "R-Remember this! Even if you're strong, you're no match for our boss, King Rydos! You better sleep with one eye open!"

The threat, whined like a child after losing a game, fell flat. It was the kind of petty last word that only made them look smaller before the people they thought they could trample over.

Belamus considered blasting them in the back, but he shook his head.

No. I'll follow them instead.

Killing them now would only invite retaliation. One way or another, King Rydos would learn of this incident and find ways to get back at them. Belamus was well aware that it was better to strike first before the village became a target.

If war was coming, it should come on Belamus's terms.

Before leaving, he turned to the elder, whose face was still stiff with shock.

"You heard everything, Elder. Please tell the others," Belamus said firmly.

"W-Wait, Belamus, you… What are you…?" the elder stammered, his eyes wide, his voice cracking with disbelief.

"Don't worry. I won't let anything harm our village," Belamus said with calm resolve. "I'll deal with their leader myself."

With that, Belamus turned and vanished into the trees, silently beginning his pursuit.

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In his previous life, Belamus had served in the military during his youth, and trailing enemy movements was part of his job description. Thanks to his small size, he remained unnoticed as he trailed the orcs through the forest.

Sooner than he expected, Belamus arrived at what he believed to be their base—and the location of King Rydos.

The stronghold was a rough fortress made of timber and sharpened stakes. It was crude but solid; strong enough to shield them from enemy attacks. Belamus could see a fair number of orcs patrolling the area.

About thirty, he estimated.

It wasn’t a small force, but he didn’t consider it a threat. His magical power training wasn’t yet complete, but even so, that many ordinary orcs were barely a warm-up at this point.

The problem is King Rydos, he considered, narrowing his eyes. The leader’s strength was a complete unknown, so his takedown demanded careful consideration. While he was likely an orc, multiple evolutions could have propelled his power far beyond that of his kin, even to the rare, ultimate form of orc evolution. Should that be the case, even Belamus might struggle to defeat him.

If Rydos had any intention of attacking the goblin village, there was only one choice— to strike first.

Drawing a deep breath, Belamus crept closer to the fortress. Before launching a full assault, he wanted to gather information. Perhaps Rydos had no intention of attacking. Maybe he was the kind of leader who wouldn’t bother with a poor, strategically useless goblin settlement. If so, there was no need to provoke a war.

So Belamus crouched low and cast a spell, one to enhance his hearing and sharpen his focus.

At that moment, his senses surged to life. He slipped between trees and roots, careful to avoid the watch patrols, and he positioned himself just close enough to hear the voices inside.

“Lord Rydos!” a voice called out. It was one of the orcs who had been at the goblin village earlier.

“You’ve returned,” came the reply. The voice was deep and rough, yet commanding. It carried a weight of authority that resonated even through the wooden walls. “Did you bring back food from those goblins?”

At the sound of the voice, Belamus could tell that this wasn’t some inexperienced young chieftain. King Rydos had been leading for a long time. That imposing weight and commanding presence stemmed from years of undisputed dominance.

“W-Well… about that…” one of the returning orcs began to say nervously. “There was… a human in the village.”

“A human? In a goblin village? Why?” Rydos growled, his voice laced with suspicion and rising anger. The question came sharp and fast.

“We don’t know,” the orc admitted, voice shrinking. “But he *was* there. He got in our way, and we couldn’t collect the tribute!”

“What did you say?” Rydos said slowly, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous rumble. The very air seemed to thicken, charged with his electric, perilous tone. Anyone hearing his growl knew instantly that he was consumed by fury.

“You let a human stop you?” he growled.

“H-He was small! But insanely strong!” the orc blurted out. “B-But we figured someone like you, Lord Rydos, could easily kill him, so we—”

“So, what you’re telling me,” Rydos interrupted, voice like iron drawn across stone, “is that you lost… and then ran crying back to me for help?”

“Ugh… y-yes…”

“You’re lucky I’m letting you crawl back at all…”

“P-Please—!”

“Lock them up. I’ll deal with their education later.”

“E-Education?! P-Please, anything but that!”

“He really *was* strong!”

“Spare us, please!”

Their desperate pleas dissolved into whimpers, echoing hollowly through the fortress as their bodies were dragged across the wooden floors.

They’re terrified, Belamus thought.

Rydos merely snorted in disgust.

“Goblins and humans… the lowest of the low. And being looked down on by *them*? That’s something I cannot abide. I’ll go myself and make sure they remember their place and are prepared to move out.”

The moment he said that, a sudden flurry of movement stirred within the fortress. The sound of orcs scrambling to gather their

weapons and provisions filled the air.

Belamus narrowed his eyes.

So… he's coming himself.

He had expected Rydos to scoff at the incident and send his subordinates again while remaining behind in safety. King Rydos was more than just a tyrant; he intended to personally crush his enemies.

Belamus retreated slightly from the fortress, finding a hidden position from which to watch and wait.

It would be best to take King Rydos down *after* he emerged from the stronghold. If Rydos proved to be one of the final evolutionary forms—Last Dragon Orc, Diamond Orc, Emperor Orc, or Magic Master Orc—a frontal assault would be reckless. Belamus had already decided: in such a scenario, he would initiate a preemptive ambush.

Based on the title "King Rydos," however, Belamus guessed that he was likely a King Orc—the stage just before becoming an Emperor Orc.

Powerful, yes, but well within Belamus's current capabilities.

Then, at last, King Rydos emerged from the fortress gates. Belamus narrowed his eyes, studying the figure carefully. Finally, he caught a clear glimpse of him.

"That's just a General Orc," he muttered after some thought, feeling a slight twinge of disappointment.

General Orcs were a stage before King Orcs in the evolution tree. In other words, Rydos wasn't just weaker than expected; he wasn't even at the level Belamus had originally prepared for.

This will be easy, Belamus assured himself. In the world of monsters, each evolution brought exponential growth in strength. And General Orcs, while formidable to common folk, were nothing compared to King Orcs.

Having confirmed the enemy's level, Belamus took the bold step of moving directly into Rydos's path. The orcs around him froze as the human child calmly raised a hand.

“Stop,” Belamus commanded, as he stood firm before the towering figure.

Rydos, already enormous compared to other orcs, loomed even larger. He was three heads taller than most of his kin. And unlike ordinary orcs who typically wielded iron clubs, King Rydos carried a massive sword across his back.

“Huh? Stop?” he repeated, confused, his eyes sweeping the battlefield where Belamus’s small form was easy to miss.

Finally, his gaze dropped.

“Ha! What’s this tiny thing? That voice came from *him*?”

Behind Rydos, one of the orcs murmured in surprise, “Isn’t that a human?”

Dozens of orcs trailed their leader, squinting at the lone boy blocking their path.

“Human! You’re absurdly tiny. Move, unless you wish to be crushed. I have no time for insects.” Rydos’s disdain was unmistakable; Belamus was merely an irritating obstacle fueling his rage.

Given their size difference, that wasn’t surprising.

“You intend to march on the goblin village, don’t you?” Belamus asked, his voice flat.

“What the hell? How do you know that?” Rydos snapped, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m warning you. Turn back now, and you can walk away without pain,” Belamus stated calmly, his expression unreadable.

He believed in giving an enemy a chance to walk away. Attacking without warning was, in his eyes, nothing more than savagery, even if he didn’t expect the warning to be taken seriously.

“*Pffft*—pain? From you?” Rydos laughed, his voice booming. “What’s a pipsqueak like you gonna do, huh?”

At this point, his expression changed. The amusement vanished, replaced by a dark scowl.

“I hate being underestimated more than anything, runt. I’m gonna crush you,” Belamus reiterated.

With that, Rydos reached for the massive sword slung across his back. The sword was more like a slab of raw iron designed for smashing enemies to a pulp. Rydos raised it high, his muscles bulging, then brought it crashing down toward Belamus with a roar, but he was unable to bring down his hand.

The great sword froze mid-swing.

"*Light Arrow.*"

The moment Belamus spoke the words, a blinding flash streaked through the air.

Light Arrow was a spell that conjured a lance of radiant energy, launched at incredible speed. The glowing projectile shot straight toward King Rydos like a line of divine judgment.

Rydos didn't move. He tried to, but he couldn't.

Since he had no time to react, the arrow struck him in the chest, piercing through his heart in a single, clean blow. Belamus was proud of his perfect shot.

A gaping hole opened in Rydos's chest—his armor, muscles, and massive ribcage were torn apart like paper. For a heartbeat, no one moved. Not the orcs. Not even Rydos.

All they could do was blink and mutter, "Huh?" in stunned confusion.

As the king's body succumbed to death, a fountain of crimson burst from his chest, splattering the ground. He fell backward with a heavy crash, arms limp at his sides, his massive sword slipping from his fingers as blood pooled beneath him.

And with that, King Rydos was dead.

"L-Lord Rydos…?" one of the orcs whispered, his voice trembling.

Panic began to ripple through the group. The orcs, stunned at first, were now slowly beginning to process the impossible reality: their king had been killed in a single strike.

"Well," Belamus said softly.

The word alone was enough.

"*Eek!*" The orcs gasped in unison, shrinking back with audible terror.

Orcs were creatures that mocked the weak but crumbled before the strong. Their society revolved around fear, not loyalty. And now, the one who had ruled them through dominance lay dead at their feet.

It was even more painful because he was killed by a child.

The fear Belamus inspired went beyond awe—it was primal. The orcs wanted to run, as every fiber of their beings screamed at them to flee. But their bodies refused to move, paralyzed by the overwhelming aura of the boy who had slain their king.

Belamus glanced over the group, his expression unreadable.

What now? he wondered. *Killing them all would be easy. But overkill.*

They hadn't harmed the goblin village yet; their intent was only nascent. So, for now, allowing them to depart seemed acceptable.

Still… if another like Rydos evolves a few years down the line, the cycle might repeat.

He weighed the risks carefully, then made his decision.

"I'm the one who defeated your boss," Belamus said coldly.

"H-Hey…" one of the orcs stammered, glancing nervously at his companions, unsure if he'd heard right.

"Which means, from this moment on, I am your leader. You'll obey my commands from now on," Belamus continued, his tone absolute.

"Uh… H-Huh?" another orc muttered.

The orcs blinked, clearly still processing the situation.

Belamus had made his decision: if he left them alone, they might grow bold again in time. But if he brought them under his command, that risk would be managed and eradicated. More importantly, he had other plans.

He intended to transform the goblin village, rebuilding it into a safer, more sustainable settlement. The orcs, with their formidable

strength, offered valuable labor resources, and under his control, they could certainly serve a vital purpose.

Of course, he couldn't just bring a troop of orcs into the village out of nowhere. Until the reconstruction began, they would remain at the fortress.

"Wait… you mean you want us as your underlings?" one of the orcs asked nervously, as if still unsure this was actually happening.

"Do you dislike the idea?" Belamus asked coolly, his voice suddenly steely.

"NO, NO, NOT AT ALL!" the orc yelped. "You're the boss now! All hail the new boss!"

The others quickly followed suit, bowing their heads with loud, hasty nods. Orcs, after all, knew only one rule: submit to the strong.

Then, Belamus gave his first command: "I'm returning to the goblin village now. Until further notice, you are to remain here and stay quiet. And clean up Rydos's corpse."

As the orcs scrambled to obey, Belamus added, "One final warning. If any of you try to run… I'll know. I can track your locations with magic, so don't even think about it."

It was only half a lie. He could locate them with magic, but doing so would be a pain, and frankly, he didn't want to bother.

Still, the threat landed. The orcs nodded rapidly, fearfully, sweating through their armor.

Without another word, they began dragging King Rydos's body away and trudged back into the fortress, subdued and silent.

As Belamus prepared to return to the village, he paused. He realized that arriving empty-handed would offer little proof that the orc threat had truly been neutralized; the goblins would likely remain fearful, anticipating a resurgence.

He knew right away that he needed to put their fears to rest.

Should I stop them from disposing of the body and bring back King Rydos's head? he considered. *No… that's far too barbaric. I want to avoid unnecessary brutality whenever possible.*

He thought for a moment longer.

What if I take one of the orcs who came to the village? If I bring him along and have him apologize for the threats and violence, the goblins will understand things are truly resolved. It'll give them closure and reassurance.

He nodded to himself, agreeing that doing just that would clear their anxiety.

Turning back to the orcs, Belamus issued a clear command: "Bring me the orcs who came to the goblin village."

Without protest, the orcs obeyed. A short while later, ten of them were brought before him.

"Y-You?!" one of them stammered, his voice rising in panic. "Why are you here?! We were in prison. How are we out?! What happened to King Rydos?!"

It was the same orc who had insulted the goblins and nearly ordered one executed. Orcs were notoriously difficult to distinguish, yet Belamus had meticulously trained himself to observe and identify them. He distinctly remembered this particular orc.

The others gave a rushed explanation, and the look on the prisoner's face twisted into one of absolute shock.

Belamus raised a hand and pointed directly at him.

"That one," he said flatly. "Only him. The rest of you can return."

The others nodded and quickly filed away, eager to disappear from his sight.

"You. What's your name?" Belamus asked, his voice calm but unmistakably firm as he leveled a finger at the orc.

"B-Balbora," the orc stammered, head low.

"Balbora, is it? I'm heading back to the goblin village. You're coming with me." Belamus said evenly.

"E-Eek…!" Balbora yelped. But Balbora didn't ask why. He didn't protest. He simply bowed his head and followed in silence.



Chapter 3

"I can't take this anymore! I'm going after him!"

Arèsa's voice rang out across the village square, trembling with urgency.

"Arèsa, calm yourself!" the village elder snapped, stepping in front of her.

"He's right!" another goblin cried. "What good would it do if *we* went after him? We wouldn't stand a chance against orcs!"

It was early evening, and the goblins had assembled in the central square to debate two pressing matters: the looming threat of the orcs and Belamus's absence.

After hours of anxious waiting, Arèsa, Belamus's mother, had reached her breaking point and was determined to march out alone to find him. The others were doing everything they could to stop her.

"Even if we did go," the elder said grimly, "we'd be no match for them. All we can do now is put our faith in Belamus."

"You're saying to gamble on him?! He's still just a five-year-old boy!" one of the goblins cried out, throwing his arms in the air in disbelief.

"That's true," the elder conceded, nodding slowly. "But that spell, the one he used to bring down that orc with such ease, wasn't ordinary magic. That boy holds something truly special within him. I'm certain of it."

"Well, yes, but—" one goblin interjected, rubbing the back of his head. "This is Belamus we're talking about. He was barely out of swaddling cloths not long ago!"

Arèsa, worried, stood in the middle, her fists clenched and lips trembling.

“Either way,” the elder added, voice low, “we don’t even know where the orc base *is*. Without that knowledge, charging into the forest blindly would be suicide. We have no choice but to wait and brace ourselves.”

“Grghhh…” Arèsa bit her lip hard, trying not to cry.

The other goblins didn’t look much better— they were anxious, restless, and shifting their feet as they spoke in hushed tones. Yet not one of them suggested abandoning the village. Not one said, *Belamus is probably dead—we should flee while we can.*

“He’ll be back soon!” Delarosa chirped brightly, rocking on her heels. “Belamus never breaks a promise, you know. I bet he’s already on his way!”

She was the only one in the square whose face wasn’t shadowed by fear, and never once doubted that Belamus would come back.

Suddenly, they heard a marching sound from afar.

“Ah! It’s Belamus!” Delarosa cried brightly, her voice ringing through the square as she broke into a sprint.

The other goblins, startled, all turned their eyes toward the village entrance. There, walking calmly down the path, was Belamus, with an orc trailing behind him.

“Welcome baaack!” Delarosa beamed as she rushed to meet him.

“I’ve returned,” Belamus said.

“Who’s the orc?” she asked, tilting her head. “Did you make a new friend?”

“No, this is—” He didn’t get the chance to finish, as he was interrupted.

“Belamus!” Arèsa shouted, rushing forward with panic and relief tangled in her voice. The other goblins weren’t far behind, and they hurried across the square to surround him.

“You’re safe, but that orc, what is it doing here?!”

Some of the goblins were already backing away, fearful of Balbora’s looming figure.

Seeing their panic, Belamus calmly explained everything that had happened: the subduing of the orcs, the defeat of their leader, King Rydos, and this very orc, Balbora, now offering an apology.

Then, he gestured for Balbora to step forward. With a nervous gulp, Balbora bowed deeply.

"S-So… What's that orc saying?" one of the goblins asked hesitantly.

The village elder narrowed his eyes, translating aloud: "He's apologizing for insulting us and for trying to kill us."

A stunned silence fell over the goblins before erupting into a wave of whispers and gasps.

"He truly beat their boss?!"

"The orc actually apologized?!"

"So we're safe now?!"

"Belamus… He's not just some kid after all…"

As their disbelief melted into admiration, Delarosa puffed up with pride and planted her fists on her hips.

"See? I told you he'd be back!"

Arèsa stood nearby, her voice low, tangled in emotion.

"Still, Belamus, running off like that without a word… That was reckless. Do you have any idea how worried I was?" Her expression wavered—half furious, half overjoyed.

"It wasn't reckless," Belamus replied, his tone calm and unwavering. "I went because I calculated a high chance of success. Still, I apologize for worrying you."

"Honestly, you haven't changed at all," Arèsa muttered with a half-sigh. Arèsa gazed at Belamus—stoic, composed, his expression utterly unreadable—and couldn't help but feel a little exasperated.

"Well, no matter," the village elder cut in cheerfully. "Everything turned out for the best! Let's celebrate tonight with a proper feast!"

That evening, the goblins held a banquet in the central square both to celebrate Belamus's safe return and to honor his defeat of the orc threat. To everyone's surprise, even Balbora, the orc, was present at the event.

Because no real harm had ultimately come to the village, and perhaps because goblins weren't the type to hold grudges, no one expressed any anger toward him. Still, he looked like a cat in a wolf den.

With Belamus seated nearby and watching him closely the entire night, he spent most of the feast hunched and quiet, barely touching his food. It was clear he didn't feel particularly welcome in his new environment, which was to be expected.

And so, the celebration came and went, marking the end of a long and eventful day.

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The next day, despite all that had happened, the goblins didn't treat Belamus any differently.

They still spoke to him casually and treated him like a member of the village, but their questions came more often now, especially regarding his magic.

"How can you use such powerful spells?" they'd ask.

Belamus responded with practiced ease.

"Humans grow up fast," he said with a shrug.

Since goblins possessed little firsthand knowledge of human development, his vague explanation, for the moment, appeared to satisfy them. At least he could tell they were okay with the explanation for now.

Even though their attitude toward him didn't change, they had realized he wasn't just an ordinary child.

Later that morning, Belamus made his way to the village elder's house. He had something important to discuss, which he had been thinking about for a while. In his mind, it was time to improve the goblins' way of life. However, he recognized that he needed permission to begin rebuilding the village.

“So then, what’s this all about?” the elder asked, settling into his seat as Belamus prepared to speak.

“First,” Belamus began, standing tall before the elder’s seat, “have I made it abundantly clear that I am not your average five-year-old?”

“Well,” the elder chuckled, scratching his chin thoughtfully, “knowing that no normal five-year-old could defeat an orc warlord, I’d say yes. Even by goblin standards, you’re anything but ordinary.”

Belamus gave a single nod.

“As you’ve seen, I possess a wide array of magical skills and a considerable amount of knowledge. I intend to use that knowledge and magic to improve this village’s living conditions and strengthen its defenses. That’s what I’ve come to ask your permission for.”

The elder’s expression shifted from curiosity to consideration.

“Improving our way of life and our defenses, you say? And what exactly do you plan to do?”

“First, agriculture,” Belamus declared, his tone measured and deliberate. “I want to establish a stable, self-sustaining food supply for the village.”

“Agriculture, huh… That’s a human technique,” the elder mused.

“Then,” Belamus continued without pause, “housing improvements, better clothing, a fortified wall around the village, enhanced weapons, and facilitating the evolution of goblins where possible.”

He listed his plans methodically, one after another, his tone calm but brimming with quiet resolve.

The elder leaned back with a far-off look in his eye.

“With all that in place, this village would start to look a lot like a human town,” he said wistfully, as though recalling a memory from long ago. “I’ve seen a human settlement once, long before I came here,” the elder stated.

He smiled faintly, then looked at Belamus with aged clarity.

“I don’t *hate* this village the way it is now, you know. But if your genuine desire is to improve it—for the sake of everyone here—I see

no reason to stop you. And the recent encounter with the orcs served as a stark reminder of this forest's inherent harshness. We've enjoyed ten years of peace, yet tranquility doesn't last forever out here…"

His voice trailed off, as if he were watching something distant and dangerous pass through his mind.

"Then I'll do it," Belamus said. "I promise to create a safer, better life for the goblins here."

"Good," the elder said, nodding slowly. "Do your best."

"One more thing," Belamus added. "There's only so much I can do on my own. I'll need help from the other goblins. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Ask them yourself," the elder replied, grinning. "But I doubt there's a soul in this village who'd turn you down."

"I see," Belamus said with a small nod, his expression unreadable, but a quiet confidence settled behind his eyes.

"And if there's anything I can do," the elder said, leaning forward slightly, "you only have to say the word. I may be an old bag of bones, but I've still got some use left in me. Though I may not be able to do anything that has to do with heavy lifting."

Belamus gave him a rare, faint smile.

"I won't ask you to work. Just take it easy and enjoy watching the village grow."

The elder laughed softly.

"Ho ho. I suppose I will. You've given me something to look forward to, lad."

With that, Belamus stepped out of the elder's house and immediately set to work.

The reconstruction of the goblin village had begun, with Belamus determining that the initial undertaking would involve cultivating every available piece of grassland in the forest. There weren't any large open spaces in the goblin village, but there were a few modest clearings scattered throughout. Since he wasn't aiming

for mass production right away, he knew that starting small was the ideal thing to do.

Then, he chose one of the cleared spaces to begin his agricultural experiment. The first question was what crop to grow. He already had a plant in mind: the Merune.

Merune was a plant known for its stringy, hanging flowers, and a few of them grew naturally in the forests surrounding the village. The plant produced clusters of tiny, bead-like fruit, plentiful and fragrant. But in the raw state, it was dangerous.

The fruit was toxic. Eating it wouldn't be fatal, but it would paralyze the body for two full days. Neither boiling nor roasting could neutralize the toxin. Because of this, the goblins knew better than to touch it.

However, there *was* a way to make Merune edible: growing it using magic water.

Magic water was water created through magical means. It had mild toxic properties of its own, enough to cause nausea and headaches if consumed in large amounts. But when Merune was cultivated using this water, the toxin disappeared.

No one knew exactly *why*, but the result was undeniable. The fruit became not only safe to eat, but also sweet and delicious.

Belamus ventured into the nearby forest and carefully gathered ten Merune stalks. The fruit itself could be used as seeds, and each stalk bore a considerable number of them. With ten plants, he'd have enough to start a solid first harvest.

Now, where to plant them? he thought.

There was a relatively open space near his house that would be ideal for a test crop. He turned to Arèsa, who was busy tending to something near the hut, and asked her directly.

"Would it be all right to use the clearing near our house for a farming plot?"

"What's a farming plot, anyway?" Arèsa asked, tilting her head.

"It's for growing plants we can eat," Belamus explained, already carrying a bundle of leafy stalks under one arm.

“Huh… sounds kinda fun,” she said, then squinted. “Wait a second. Is that Merune you’re holding?! Don’t tell me you’re planning to grow that stuff!”

“I am,” he replied plainly.

“You can’t eat that!” she blurted, waving her arms. “When I was a kid, I ate one and it wrecked me for two whole days! Pick something else!”

“It’s fine,” Belamus said, unshaken. “There’s a way to make it safe.”

“R-Really?” Arèsa stammered, doubting his words. “That fruit doesn’t get any better boiled or roasted, you know,” she explained, her brow furrowing as she crossed her arms.

“The trick is in changing the kind of water used during cultivation,” Belamus replied matter-of-factly, his gaze steady, as if the answer were the most natural thing in the world.

“Wait… you’re serious?” she asked, blinking in disbelief. Arèsa still looked skeptical, but after a moment of staring into Belamus’s unblinking eyes, she sighed. “All right. You can use the clearing near the house.”

With her approval secured, Belamus scouted out two more potential plots and asked the nearby goblins for permission to use them. They all gave their blessings, but like Arèsa, they remained unconvinced about the Merune.

Still, it was a start, and he had to begin immediately with the groundwork.

He then started clearing near his home, tilling the soil using earth magic. Surprisingly, the process was fast, and after a few passes, the field was ready. By his estimate, the space could support around forty Merune plants.

Next, he called on Arèsa and Delarosa to help with planting. Delarosa, true to form, nearly tried to eat one of the sweet-smelling Merune fruit mid-task, but Belamus stopped her before she could try one.

Once the seeds were all planted, it was time to water them, but not with normal water. Belamus stepped back, raised a hand toward the sky, and spoke the incantation.

"*Small Cloud.*"

A gentle shimmer gathered in the air above the plot as a small artificial cloud formed; this was one of his utility spells. Gradually, the cloud began to drift into place over the farmland.

"Whoa! A cloud!" Delarosa shouted excitedly, pointing up at the fluffy white mass hanging in the sky.

"Wait… you can make clouds with magic?" Arèsa murmured, tilting her head. "But didn't you say you were going to water the field? It's not raining."

The conjured cloud hovered overhead, perfectly white and still.

Belamus turned to face it again, raising his hand as he cast another spell.

"*Water Cannon.*"

A burst of water surged into the air, a pressurized jet slamming directly into the cloud's base. No splash resulted; instead, the water was instantly absorbed, darkening the cloud from white to a heavy gray.

Moments later, a steady rain began to fall over the field.

"Ohhh! It's raining!" Delarosa squealed with delight.

"This method allows me to water the crops evenly and efficiently," Belamus explained calmly, watching the rain begin to soak the freshly seeded soil.

"Magic really *is* useful…" Arèsa muttered, clearly impressed.

After a few minutes, the *Small Cloud* automatically dissipated, as no cleanup was required, but Belamus wasn't done. He turned to his helpers.

"Don't drink the rainwater from this cloud," he warned. "It's bad for your health."

"Huh? Bad for your health?" Arèsa frowned. "Wait… so we're growing a poisonous plant using unhealthy water, and that somehow makes it edible?"

"That's right," Belamus said with a small nod. "Strange, isn't it?"

Arèsa didn't reply. Her expression was clear enough to show that her skepticism had deepened.

Without missing a beat, Belamus raised his hand again and cast another spell, this time forming a transparent magical shield above the farmland.

"If natural rain falls, it might interfere," he explained. "This shield will keep it out."

He expanded the barrier, crafting a full dome that gently encompassed the entire plot. The shield would hold any form of rain for around two weeks.

With that in place, he repeated the entire process at the other two cleared locations: tilling the soil with magic, planting Merune seeds, conjuring clouds, summoning rain, and sealing the fields beneath protective domes.

If everything went smoothly, one hundred thirty Merune plants were now growing. And thanks to enhancement magic, the crops would reach maturity in about two weeks.

This should be enough to ease the village's food troubles for now, Belamus thought. *Eventually, we'll need a larger farm, but this is a good start.*

With the farmland prepared, Belamus turned his attention to the next major upgrade: rebuilding the forest village's homes.

"I can construct sturdier houses using magic," he told the gathered goblins. "But before I begin, I'd like to hear what you all want. Do you want new homes?"

"Houses?" one of them echoed, blinking in surprise.

"You can build houses with magic?" another asked, clearly skeptical.

"I can. And I promise they'll be far stronger than the ones you have now," Belamus said calmly.

"If you can, then yes, I want one!" one goblin said without hesitation.

"Yeah, same here! My house looks like it's about to fall apart. It doesn't even keep the rain out! And the floor creaks like crazy," another goblin grumbled, throwing up his hands in exasperation.

Their eager voices made it clear: every single goblin desperately sought assistance in rebuilding and upgrading their homes; every single goblin wanted a new house.

Before the construction began, Belamus traveled to the orc fortress and returned with the orcs in tow, but not for them to help rebuild. He needed their strength to clear more usable space around the village by cutting down nearby trees. The fortress had a stash of axes, which he had the orcs bring with them.

Strong as they were, the orcs made short work of the trees, clearing land quickly and efficiently. However, the goblin village didn't have housing large enough to accommodate even a small number of orcs, so Belamus had them return to the fortress after the work was done. Given the considerable distance between the two locations, Belamus ensured he didn't keep them working extended hours.

He realized that proper housing within the village would soon be necessary if he wished them to remain for longer periods. Fortunately, the orcs had a good stockpile of food at their fortress, so their immediate survival wasn't an issue.

As for the construction itself, calling it a "rebuild" was generous. Most of the existing homes were so worn down and poorly constructed that it was more efficient to demolish them and start from scratch.

Belamus intended to use earth-elemental magic to build the homes. Specifically, he would use a spell he had developed in his previous life… *Magic House*.

It was a powerful, specialized spell designed purely for housing construction, capable of creating solid, stone-built homes in a short time. He had created it after a noble once begged him to invent something that would make "quick and livable homes without needing ten laborers and a year's time."

So he had.

The spell worked well, but it came with a cost, especially as its magical consumption was large. In the end, only those with vast reserves of magical power could use it, and because of that, the spell never gained traction among the public.

To Belamus, it was a failed project.

Still… I'm glad I created this spell after all, Belamus thought, silently watching the cleared land. *With my current magic reserves, I should be able to build one house per day.*

Without further delay, the construction began with the demolition of the old structures.

Belamus didn't want to waste any magical power on unnecessary work—he needed to conserve his strength for house-building, watering the Merune fields, and accelerating crop growth. So he left the demolition to the orcs.

The task didn't take long, as the original houses were poorly made and crumbled easily under the orcs' brute strength.

Once the space was cleared, Belamus stepped forward and cast his spell: "*Magic House.*"

First, the foundation took shape—smooth, flat, and reinforced. Then, perfectly cut stone blocks began to stack themselves one after another, interlocking tightly to form strong, even walls.

This was the part in the spell that needed absolute precision. A moment's lapse in focus could lead to structural weakness. Belamus kept his concentration razor-sharp, guiding the spell with the care of a craftsman.

After the walls were set, he formed the roof, then a door, sealing the structure with a final surge of magical energy.

"It's done," he said softly.

It had taken nearly two hours, but the result was unmistakable: a solid, dignified stone house. Durable. Weather-resistant. Safe.

The goblins, who had been watching in awed silence, suddenly erupted with excitement.

"Magic is amazing!"

“He built that so fast!”

“That house looks incredible! Belamus, please build one for me next!”

Their voices rang with wonder, and maybe even a touch of envy.

Encouraged by their enthusiasm, Belamus continued construction the next day and for many days after. By the end of a week and a half, he had completed ten homes. After that, he built additional structures—a food storehouse, a materials depot, and even utility sheds.

Gradually, the village began to take on a new shape.

“Amazing… It’s like a completely different village now.”

“And it’s only been ten days…”

The goblins walked through their newly formed streets in a daze, overwhelmed by how much had changed. What was once a loose cluster of huts now resembled the beginnings of a proper town.

Finally, once the orcs had finished clearing enough trees to make space, Belamus constructed several orc-sized homes at the village’s edge, giving their newfound allies a place of their own.

Although the orcs numbered twenty-eight, only four houses had been built for them. And considering their size, the space was tight. Belamus made a mental note to expand their housing as soon as more land was cleared.

Just as the final houses were completed, the Merune crops reached full ripeness, ready to be harvested and eaten.

“Can we really eat these?” Arèsa asked, eyeing the fruit suspiciously.

“I told you they’d be safe,” Belamus replied calmly.

He began picking the ripe Merune and turned toward Arèsa and Delarosa, offering them the first taste. Arèsa hesitated, staring at the fruit like it might bite her.

It was different with Delarosa. She had no doubts about what Belamus had done, and she didn’t even flinch a bit.

"Time to dig in!" she sang and bit straight into it with a grin. "Mmm! So tasty!" she beamed.

"W–Wait, really? You're not… going numb? Or getting dizzy?" Arèsa asked, still clutching hers like it might explode.

"Nope! I feel totally fine!" Delarosa said, cheerfully munching away.

Watching her daughter's enthusiastic chewing and seeing that she hadn't collapsed, Arèsa finally gathered the courage to take a bite herself.

"I-It's delicious!" she exclaimed in surprise. Once she realized there were no negative effects, Arèsa relaxed as she happily dug in.

Just like Arèsa, the rest of the goblins were hesitant at first, but they gradually began to feast on their new fruit. Soon, everyone was enjoying the juicy, sweet Merune, the field echoing with satisfied murmurs.

A few were left over, so Belamus placed them in the newly built food storage unit and cast a preservation spell to keep them from rotting. Then, without delay, he planted the next round of Merune seeds in the field.

Now that food and shelter were secured, Belamus turned his attention to defense. Right now, the village was terribly vulnerable.

The goblins weren't fighters, and even the orcs, though strong, weren't dependable against more advanced threats. If enemies on par with those orcs attacked again, Belamus knew for sure that he could handle it all alone. *But what if something stronger came?*

Waiting until that moment would be a mistake. He needed to begin reinforcing their defenses immediately. That would mean weapons, walls, and other safeguards.

Before reinforcing their defense, Belamus decided to guide the goblins through evolution. The defining difference between ordinary creatures and what the world called "monsters" was simple: monsters could evolve, and goblins were no exception.

Each time a monster evolved, it grew stronger. Monsters that underwent repeated evolution could eventually achieve such

overwhelming power that they became living natural disasters—beasts feared and named in records across the continent.

Unfortunately, evolution didn't happen just because one wanted it to. To evolve, monsters needed to meet specific conditions. These varied depending on the species, but in most cases, the core requirement was the same: they had to consume another monster.

That didn't mean eating just *any* monster. Each species had its own evolutionary requirements, tied to certain monsters that would trigger the process. In most cases, there was more than one valid option, but only *one* needed to be eaten for evolution to occur.

Again, goblins were no exception. To evolve into hobgoblins, they, too, had to eat certain monsters.

Compared to others, monsters with eating-based evolution conditions were considered relatively easy to evolve, but goblins were still among the *least likely* to experience evolution.

Especially here, in the Frazes Great Forest, goblin evolution was practically unheard of. This was because the forest held very few monsters that goblins could eat to evolve. The few that did qualify were either far too powerful to defeat or had such potent toxins that eating them would be suicide.

There was one exception. A monster called the Arrow Spider—a giant, arachnid-like creature that lived in the forest. It wasn't especially strong, and it could trigger goblin evolution if eaten.

The problem? It looked inedible and tasted even worse. It was so vile that almost no goblin had ever bothered trying it.

Aware as he was of all these factors, Belamus developed a plan.

Thanks to the magic of culinary techniques, even the foulest meat could be rendered somewhat edible, and he just happened to know how to go about it. In his past life, Monsterology had been a recognized field of study, and Belamus had pored over the research of scholars who had mapped the evolutionary pathways of dozens of species.

So he knew exactly what needed to be hunted and how to cook it.

He planned to hunt Arrow Spiders, prepare their meat, and feed it to the goblins, which would kick-start their evolution into hobgoblins.

Before heading out, however, Belamus gathered the villagers and posed a simple but life-altering question…

"Do you want to evolve into hobgoblins? I want to help everyone in the village with the process," Belamus announced, his tone steady but firm. "What do you think?"

"hobgoblins?" one goblin echoed, tilting his head.

"Evolve?" another murmured in confusion.

It seemed they weren't familiar with the concept.

Belamus took a moment to explain it clearly and in detail. He outlined what evolution meant for monsters, and how goblins, too, could grow stronger by eating certain magical creatures.

"Huh… So if you eat other monsters, you get stronger?" one goblin asked, blinking while processing the idea.

"But wait, are you talking about Arrow Spiders? You can *eat* those things?" another asked, wrinkling his nose.

"If evolving means I can use magic," someone else muttered, "then I might wanna give it a shot…"

Belamus made sure to mention that hobgoblins did gain the ability to use magic—a fact that instantly sparked the goblins' interest.

"I'll do it! I wanna evolve! I wanna use magic!" Delarosa shouted, bouncing on her heels with her hand raised high.

Belamus smiled faintly, then recalled an important detail—there *was* an age restriction for evolution. A goblin had to be at least five years old. But Delarosa, at seven, was qualified.

"I wanna use magic too…" a young goblin murmured, his eyes wide with quiet longing.

"If I could help Belamus after all he's done for us, that'd be nice," another goblin added quietly.

It seemed none of them opposed the idea. If anything, the mood had turned curious and hopeful. So, seeing no resistance,

Belamus set out immediately to hunt the necessary catalyst: the Arrow Spider.

Arrow Spiders lived in caves. When Belamus asked the goblins and orcs if they knew of any nearby, they pointed him to a cave to the northeast of the village. It was known to be so dangerous that the goblins avoided it entirely.

The danger didn't deter Belamus.

He made his way to the cave and arrived within minutes, encountering no monsters along the way. The entrance loomed, its mouth gaping wide with oppressive darkness.

Let's begin.

He stepped inside. The darkness swallowed him, thick and suffocating. With a flick of his fingers, he whispered the incantation: "*Light.*"

A glowing orb appeared above his hand, casting pale illumination over the jagged stone walls. Slowly and cautiously, Belamus pressed deeper into the cave.

Arrow Spiders were not to be taken lightly, as their webs were more than just traps; they also served as weapons. The spider would spin its thread in a spiral, compressing and twisting it into a needle-sharp point. The resulting projectile—dense and barbed—could pierce even steel armor when fired.

It took an Arrow Spider several dozen seconds to prepare and launch its deadly silk projectile. This meant that if someone struck first, they posed little threat, allowing time for merciless and unwavering attacks.

Belamus moved deeper into the cave, his footsteps echoing faintly through the dark. A few other monsters lunged from the shadows, but he dispatched them without so much as breaking stride.

Then… he felt it.

There…

His senses pricked as a faint tremor in the air—almost imperceptible—came from *above*.

Arrow Spiders never hunted from the ground. It wasn't their way. They clung to ceilings, weaving dense, nearly invisible webs high above. When prey wandered underneath, the spiders would fire, impaling, killing, and retrieving, all from a safe distance.

Belamus narrowed his eyes, then raised his hand.

"*Light,*" he whispered, and the glowing orb above his palm suddenly brightened, flooding the cavern with pale brilliance.

Three adult Arrow Spiders, massive even by goblin standards, nested in the upper corners of the ceiling. Each one was in mid-formation, twisting thick coils of silk into spiraled, needle-sharp arrows aimed directly at him.

Alas, it was already too late for them.

"*Light Arrow.*" Belamus intoned, his voice low and calm.

Three beams of radiant light lanced through the air in rapid succession, and they all found their marks. The spiders shrieked briefly and then fell. Their heavy bodies thudded against the stone floor, legs twitching once before going still.

All three were mature specimens, large enough that a single leg could match the girth of a goblin's arm. To trigger evolution, each goblin would need to eat about three legs' worth—not just a nibble, but a substantial amount.

Belamus continued his sweep through the cave, careful but swift. He encountered more—ten more, to be exact—and eliminated them just as quickly. Beyond that, the tunnels were empty. There were thirteen Arrow Spiders in total, making a total of one hundred and four legs, which was just enough. And if more was needed, the torsos could be harvested as well, despite the taste.

For transport, Belamus relied on magic.

First, he gathered the spider corpses into a single location. Then, extending his hand, he conjured a web of shimmering silver threads—*Magic Thread*, a utility spell that summoned ethereal string woven from pure mana. He wrapped the corpses tightly, layer upon layer, until the bundle was secure and seamless. Then, with a pulse of magic, the wrapped mass began to float, rising gently into the air.

A single control thread extended from the bundle to his hand, like the reins of a spectral carriage. Belamus tugged gently, and it moved with ease.

Satisfied, he turned to leave. But just as he reached the edge of the cave, he noticed something strange: a stone. It was lying half-buried near the exit, half-glowing *and humming softly.*

He stepped toward it, his eyes narrowing.

Is this… a Lightstone? This is a good find, Belamus thought, his lips curving in quiet satisfaction.

Lightstones were rare minerals known for one thing: when struck with a light-based spell like *Light*, they would absorb the energy and begin to radiate a gentle glow. Once activated, the stone would continue to emit light for three days straight, making it an incredibly useful resource, especially at night.

This cave has lots of them in it.

Though his current priority was transporting the Arrow Spiders, Belamus mentally noted the location. He would return later to mine more. For now, he picked up four of the glowing stones and exited the cave, leading the floating cocoon of spider corpses behind him like a silent procession of the dead.

When he returned to the village, the goblins' reactions were predictable.

"W-We're supposed to eat those…?"

Their faces twisted in visible discomfort as they stared at the hulking, bristly bodies of the Arrow Spiders. To eat one raw was unthinkable—their bodily fluids were an acrid green ichor that filled their meat with overwhelming bitterness.

Belamus had a solution.

He drained the fluid thoroughly, cleaned the flesh, and boiled it several times until most of the bitterness had been tamed. It wouldn't be delicious, but it would be edible.

He prepared just enough for one day. The remaining spider meat was sealed in the food storehouse with a preservation spell, and the next courses were planned for the following two days.

After he had finished, it was time for the goblins to taste their new meal.

They sat in silence, staring down at their portions like prisoners awaiting execution. One brave soul took the first bite and grimaced.

"Ughhh…"

"I mean, it's not inedible…"

"But this ain't good… It's still bitter."

Belamus watched their reactions with a hint of guilt. He had warned them about the taste.

Delarosa, in particular, was suffering. Her face contorted as she chewed through every fiber with theatrical despair, her eyes watering from the taste. But she didn't stop. Whether it was pride or her dream of wielding magic, she pushed through every nauseating bite. She finished her plate slowly and agonizingly. When Belamus gently reminded her that this was only day one of three, she stared up at him with the shattered look of someone betrayed by the world itself.

The following day, and the day after that, the routine continued. Belamus prepared and carefully served cooked Arrow Spider meat. All goblins eligible for evolution—those over five years old—were given their share. Seven younger goblins were excluded, as the transformation wasn't suitable for them just yet.

Even the village elder joined in, taking his portion with a dry chuckle and muttering, "There's no point in me turning into a hobgoblin at this age. I'll be dead soon anyway."

Once the required amount was consumed, there was nothing left to do but sleep. The evolution would occur during rest, with the goblins awakening the next morning as changed beings.

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"I DID IT! I EVOLVED!"

Delarosa's triumphant yell shattered the morning calm, yanking Belamus and Arèsa from their dreams.

"Too loud, Delarosa…" Arèsa grumbled sleepily. "Wait—huh?"

She sat up, blinking groggily. Something felt off. She looked down at her body and realized that she had undergone a tremendous change.

"Oh, right. I evolved, didn't I?"

Arèsa's voice was lower and more resonant than it had been. She examined her arms, legs, and newly lengthened frame. As a hobgoblin, her appearance had shifted dramatically. Aside from the singular horn now jutting from her forehead, she looked almost entirely human: tall, lithe, and strong.

She stood, and Belamus's trained eye quickly gauged her new height; she was roughly 170 centimeters in height. She was taller than most human women he'd met in his previous life.

"Morning," Belamus greeted, already evaluating her condition. "Looks like the evolution worked."

"Seems like it…" she murmured. "But… I can't wear any of my clothes. They don't fit anymore."

The scraps of leather that had once covered the necessities now hung in tatters. Arèsa stood completely naked, arms crossed over her chest in embarrassment. Goblins had pride, too, after all.

"We'll have to make new ones," Belamus said, calm and practical. "There's tanned hide in the supply shed. I'll stitch something together for you later."

"Who cares about clothes? TEACH ME MAGIC ALREADY!" Delarosa, buzzing with excitement, practically bounced in place. Her horn glinted in the morning light, and her grin was unstoppable.

Happy with her evolution, she appeared taller, with stronger limbs and slightly refined features. Still, she was only seven years old, so the transformation left her small compared to most hobgoblins. For the first time, though, she was taller than Belamus and was clearly delighted by the effect of her evolution.



Unlike Arèsa, Delarosa had zero shame about her lack of clothing. She stood proudly in the open air, completely unbothered by her nakedness.

Belamus sighed inwardly.

The real challenge starts now.

Chapter 4

"I'll teach you magic soon," Belamus said, with a calm shake of his head. "But right now, I need to check how the others in the village are doing."

"Whaaat?! Not fair!" Delarosa puffed her cheeks in protest, but Belamus had already turned on his heel.

He walked through the village, quietly observing. As expected, every goblin had successfully evolved into a hobgoblin. Afterward, they all worked together using spare leather to craft new clothes that better fit their newly enlarged forms.

Once the transformations were complete, Belamus returned to the village square. At Delarosa's insistent request and with the villagers buzzing with excitement, he gathered the hobgoblins together.

Standing before the crowd, Belamus began his lesson in magic.

"Magic is something anyone can learn to use, at least to a certain extent, with the right training," he explained, his voice clear and firm. "Today, we'll begin with the absolute basics—Light magic. The spell is called *Light*."

He held out his hand, and with a single word, summoned a soft, glowing orb of light above his palm.

"Magic must be visualized clearly in your mind," he continued, letting the light hover above him. "Watch carefully, and then imagine yourself casting this spell. Picture it vividly—down to the sensation of power flowing through your body."

The hobgoblins leaned forward, their eyes fixed on the orb with awe and curiosity.

"Once the image is clear, say the word *Light*. Speak it aloud. You can eventually cast magic silently, but for beginners, vocalization

helps keep the image intact."

With a mixture of excitement and nervousness, the hobgoblins began chanting, "*Light*... *Light*...!"

Tiny flashes sparked in the air. Some only managed faint glimmers. Others failed entirely. Still, Belamus watched with patience, knowing that it was their first trial.

It's rare for anyone to succeed on their first try...

"Yeahhh! I did it!"

A triumphant squeal broke through the crowd. Delarosa jumped up, both arms raised in glee, a glowing orb dancing at her fingertips. Her face lit up brighter than the spell itself. She turned toward Belamus with a wide grin.

"See?! See?! I did it! I can use magic now!!"

Belamus couldn't help but smile faintly.

She really is something else.

When Belamus glanced over at Delarosa again, he saw a bright orb of light floating just above her head, softly illuminating her joyful expression.

"Well now, you managed it on your first try..." he remarked, raising an eyebrow in genuine surprise.

"It's so bright!" she beamed, hopping on the spot with excitement.

She did it on her first try, Belamus thought, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. *Not many manage that. But goblins do possess innate magical traits—perhaps she has the magic affinity.*

He went on to explain how to dispel the light. He further mentioned that it would fade on its own with time, and that manually extinguishing it required visualizing it vanishing—a deceptively tricky task for beginners.

Delarosa, unsurprisingly, pulled it off with ease. The orb blinked out in an instant.

The real surprise came when Delarosa summoned it again, dismissed it, and then summoned it once more. She made it materialize and dissipate at will, like a child playing with a new toy.

She's controlling it with near-perfect precision, Belamus observed, the corner of his mouth twitching in admiration. *Even with a magic affinity, that level of fluency is rare.*

On the other hand, none of the other goblins had succeeded yet. Some continued to strain with intense focus, while others looked a little discouraged.

Still, Belamus wasn't worried.

Some talents take longer to bloom. It's not uncommon for someone to struggle at first, only to awaken incredible power later.

"Delarosa, you're amazing," said Arèsa, watching her daughter with a mix of awe and mild frustration. "I can't even get a spark going…"

"Belamus! Teach me another one! A new spell!" Delarosa pleaded, eyes sparkling as she rushed over.

"Wait a little longer," he said firmly. "I'll teach the next spell once everyone can handle Light properly."

"Huhhh?! That's not fair!" she huffed, pouting with puffed cheeks. But then her eyes lit up with sudden inspiration. "Oh! I know!" she chirped, and without warning, she shouted, "*Water Cannon*!"

Suddenly, a blast of water erupted from thin air, shooting forward with startling force and splashing against a nearby rock with a loud splat!

"Yesss! I did it again!" Delarosa cheered, spinning in place with her arms flung high above her head.

Even Belamus, who rarely showed surprise, blinked.

She can cast Water Cannon… without being taught. She's not just a prodigy. She's instinctively reaching for spells beyond her training.

"Delarosa. How are you able to use *Water Cannon*?" Belamus furrowed his brow, arms crossed, a faint edge of suspicion coloring his voice.

Delarosa tilted her head and tapped a finger to her lips.

"Umm, well… I saw you use it before during the farming stuff, so I thought, maybe, I could do it too?" she said with a sheepish smile, rocking slightly on her heels.

I did cast Water Cannon in front of her during our work in the fields… but for her to mimic it so effortlessly…

Belamus couldn't help but stare, his eyes narrowing with a mix of curiosity and growing astonishment.

Undeterred, Delarosa bounced in place and cheerfully cycled through more spells—*Small Cloud, Rock Blast*—throwing them out like it was child's play. Only when her magic abruptly fizzled out did she finally pause, panting and blinking in confusion.

"Huh? I can't cast anymore…"

"That girl is incredible. Maybe she's a genius," one hobgoblin whispered, wide-eyed.

"Yeah…" Belamus muttered in agreement.

"Heh! Of course she is. She's *my* daughter, after all! Though I still can't even manage Light…" Arèsa puffed out her chest with pride, but her triumphant tone faltered near the end, her expression slipping into an awkward grimace.

There's no doubt about it—Delarosa's a prodigy, Belamus thought, watching her wipe sweat from her brow with a radiant grin. *At this rate, she might just reach the final evolution for a magic-wielding goblin… a High Sage Goblin.*

From hobgoblin, goblins branched into two evolutionary paths: Magic Goblin, for those skilled in sorcery, and Soldier Goblin, for those with martial prowess. Only the most gifted of Magic Goblins could ascend to the rarest final form—High Sage Goblin.

Over the next two days, the rest of the village goblins began catching up with what they had been taught. Most had finally mastered *Light*, and soon they were able to cast basic offensive spells. Interestingly, it was the younger goblins, even aside from Delarosa, who showed the fastest growth in magic.

Children adapt faster—it's the same in magic as it is in anything else, Belamus mused.

With the basics established, Belamus paused the lessons. He knew there were other priorities now: they still had no defensive walls, and with the newly cleared land from the hardworking orcs, expanding the farmland and strengthening the village's security took precedence.

Delarosa grumbled at the temporary halt, but Belamus calmed her with a firm yet patient voice.

"Focus on increasing your magical power capacity for now. Cast *Light*, then extinguish it. Over and over."

She reluctantly agreed, already returning to her drills of glowing orbs and quick dispersals.

Meanwhile, Belamus turned his eyes to the next phase: constructing the village's defensive wall.

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Construction of the defensive wall began with earth-element magic.

Belamus intended to repurpose the same spell he'd used for building houses—*Magic House*—to create an outer perimeter. While the spell was originally designed for residential structures, it was adaptable enough to form sturdy barriers.

The real challenge, however, was the gate. Crafting the wall itself was simple enough; tedious, but manageable. But the mechanism for the village's main gate required a more delicate touch.

The area to be enclosed hadn't been particularly large originally, but thanks to the land cleared by the orcs, the zone had expanded considerably. Belamus planned to encircle the entire space, including the newly reclaimed land. That made for a much wider perimeter than expected.

The spell consumed a massive amount of mana, which was far too much for even the hobgoblins to wield yet. That meant Belamus had to do everything himself. He expected the task to take time.

And he was right.

Despite his significantly increased magical power reserves since the early days of home-building, the sheer scale of the project stretched his limits. In total, it took thirty days to complete the fortification. But when it was finished, the village's defenses had transformed entirely.

Thanks to the goblins' newfound ability to use magic, especially ranged attacks like *Light Arrow* and *Rock Blast*, any intruder would find breaching the perimeter exceptionally difficult.

Belamus had also designed the gate to be especially secure. Instead of the typical hinged doors that could be pushed or pulled open, he created a vertical-lift gate, one that could only be raised upward. And he implemented a clever mechanism to operate it: a Golem, summoned and stationed atop the wall, rigged to lift the gate only upon a specific magical command.

The entire village was now wrapped in solid stone walls and protected by an enchanted gate with an autonomous magical guard.

The project had been a long and exhausting endeavor, but Belamus could now confidently say the village was safe.

Still, his work was far from over. Clothes needed to be made, weapons forged, and farmlands expanded. Gathering supplies required meticulous organization, and further training remained essential.

With his hands on his hips, eyes scanning the fortified horizon, Belamus let out a quiet breath.

What should I tackle next…?

He was already turning over plans in his mind, one step ahead as always.

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"We can't just keep swallowing this. No way in hell."

Gathered in a rough circle, the orcs sat hunched together in a clearing, their voices low, their expressions hard. As Belamus quietly debated his next project, the orcs had convened away from the village to have a very different kind of meeting, one fueled by resentment, fear, and desperation.

"But his strength is not normal," one of them muttered, his voice trembling.

"He'll kill us for sure if we screw this up…"

"Then are you saying we just stay like this?" another snapped, baring his tusks.

"Well, no, but…"

"I hate this too, but I hate dying even more!"

"We could just run away," someone offered weakly.

"Run *where*? He said he can track us down with magic! You think we can get away from that?"

"Exactly! We've got to kill him *first*. Only then can we even think of escaping!"

"I-I don't know if we can…" another voice quavered, doubt spreading like a slow rot.

The conversation circled in heated, hopeless frustration. Tensions mounted until one orc finally barked out above the rest:

"Balbora! What do *you* think?! You're our leader now. So, *you* decide!"

All eyes turned to him. Balbora, the first orc Belamus had brought back to the village, now stood as the de facto head of the orcs. Not because he had asked to be, but because he was the strongest among them.

He didn't speak immediately. Balbora stood still, his jaw tight, fists clenched at his sides. This wasn't a decision that affected only him, but one that would shape the fate of every single one of them.

A heavy silence fell over the group as he thought, and then finally, slowly, he raised his head.

"We fight."

Suddenly, there was a deafening roar: "OOOOOOHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

The orcs howled with primal fury, their blood burning with resolve as the forest quaked with their war cry.

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"Rebellion?" Belamus asked flatly, his eyes narrowing.

"That's right!" Demu exclaimed, his small frame practically vibrating with urgency. "Last night, I overheard the orcs! They were whispering about attacking the village tomorrow as soon as they spotted an opening!"

"I see. Good work, Demu," Belamus replied, nodding with cool approval. "It was wise to plant a spy just in case."

Belamus had never fully trusted the orcs. From the beginning, he had taken precautions—one of which was secretly assigning Demu, a nimble and sharp-eared goblin, to monitor their movements. With his small stature and quick reflexes, Demu was a natural for the role. After some quick training in the Orcish tongue, he'd been the perfect choice for the job.

Still, I hadn't expected an actual attack, Belamus mused, folding his arms thoughtfully. *I assumed they might try to run… but rebellion?*

He considered the possibility. He had gone to great lengths not to mistreat the orcs. Had he bred resentment somehow? True, he had put them to work hard, but it had all been fair.

"Belamus, what're you going to do?" Demu asked anxiously, shifting on his feet.

Belamus exhaled slowly. "I'll speak with them first."

Muttering "What a pain" under his breath, he turned on his heel and strode toward the orcs' settlement.

Standing before them moments later, he wasted no time.

“You lot,” Belamus said, voice cutting through the murmuring crowd like a blade. “You’re plotting rebellion, aren’t you?”

The orcs stiffened.

“N-No… No! That’s… a mistake!” Balbora stammered, flailing his hands wildly. Sweat poured down his face as his eyes darted desperately to the sky, searching for an excuse that wouldn’t come.

Seeing how blatantly the orc was lying, Belamus let out a long, weary sigh.

“You’re a terrible liar,” he said, his voice dry and unimpressed.

“I-I’m not lying…!” Balbora stammered, sweating bullets.

“You don’t need to lie anymore,” Belamus said, his tone sharpening as he leveled a piercing glare at the orcs. “Tell me why you plotted a rebellion. Be honest, and I might consider sparing you.”

The weight of his presence pressed down hard on them. Balbora flinched, his whole body trembling as he darted frantic glances at the other orcs around him. They were just as shaken, their faces pale and anxious.

Despite their fear, none of them showed any sign of backing down. No one was ready to surrender easily. That was how much this mattered to them. It was a cause they couldn’t abandon, even if it meant facing someone as terrifying as Belamus.

Licking his lips nervously, Balbora clenched his fists. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, bowing his head, taking a long, deep breath to steady himself. Then, in a snap, his eyes shot open wide, burning with reckless determination.

“This is the end of the line, runt! We’re not taking orders from you anymore! Boys, let’s crush him!” he roared, thrusting a fist in the air.

“UWOOOOOOAAAHHH!!!” the orcs bellowed in unison, rallying behind him as they charged—

—only to be utterly crushed in an instant.

Belamus moved with calm, brutal efficiency, unleashing a flurry of spells that utterly overwhelmed the orcs in under three minutes.

When it was over, the once-defiant orcs sat in a miserable row before him, battered, bruised, and trembling. They knelt in a perfect, pitiful formal kneeling position, their legs tucked beneath them, heads bowed low, some sniffling, others trying and failing to hold back tears.

"W-We're so sorry…" they whimpered, their voices barely more than squeaks.

Belamus crossed his arms, towering over them with a gaze as cold and heavy as a drawn blade.

"You knew full well the difference in our strength," he said, his voice like iron, "so tell me, why did you rebel?"

His words fell into the stunned silence that followed, heavy and inescapable. They were orcs—a race that naturally bowed before overwhelming strength. They had witnessed firsthand the might Belamus used to slay King Rydos, and still, they had chosen this.

Even as he stood before the defeated orcs, Belamus couldn't help but wonder: *Was there no other way? Was there some unavoidable reason that forced them into rebellion?*

Balbora, still kneeling with his bruised face lowered, gathered what little courage he had left.

"We… We know how strong you are, Lord Belamus… But… we had no choice!" he burst out, his voice hoarse but desperate.

"Yeah!" another orc chimed in, clutching his side. "This village doesn't have what we NEED!"

Belamus narrowed his eyes.

Food? No. Shelter? No. Then what…?

He racked his brain but came up with nothing.

Instead of wasting time, he decided to just ask directly.

"What exactly is missing?" he said sharply.

The orcs exchanged awkward glances. Then, with a collective gulp, they shouted as one:

"Women!!!"

"Women?" Belamus echoed, blinking slowly.

"You heard us!" Balbora said, practically in tears. "Take a look around, it's just men! Only men!"

"Yeah! Look closely! We're all guys!" another orc wailed.

Belamus blinked again, utterly taken aback. Now that they pointed it out, he realized he truly hadn't noticed. Orcs weren't the easiest species to tell apart by their appearance.

"I see… I hadn't realized," he muttered.

Balbora nodded furiously, his voice rising with raw frustration.

"Without any women, we've hit our limit…! We can't take it anymore! Our instincts—our urges—are out of control!"

"It's gotten so bad some of the guys are… starting to look at each other the wrong way!!" another orc wailed, throwing his hands over his face in shame.

Belamus winced internally. He had heard before that orc males were notoriously aggressive and that their lust far outstripped even the worst of human men.

The situation, he admitted to himself, was serious.

Still frowning, Belamus asked the obvious next question:

"Why are there no women among you?"

Balbora's ears drooped.

"King Rydos only wanted strong fighters," he said miserably. "He didn't take females into his army. We were just his battle-thirsty brutes…"

"Every once in a while, we'd find some orc village and borrow the womenfolk for a while," another muttered, shame coloring his voice.

Belamus exhaled slowly, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I see," he said at last. "So that's what drove you to this."

The orcs sagged visibly, their eyes pleading. Belamus sighed again, the weight of leadership heavy on his shoulders.

They've worked hard for me, too, he thought. *I can't just ignore this.*

They were part of his village now. Ignoring the fact that they were suffering, even over something like this, would leave a bad

taste in Belamus' mouth. With a weary sigh, he spoke, his voice low but firm: "Fine. I'll bring back some orc women for you. But in return, there will be no more talk of rebellion. Ever."

"R-Really?!" Balbora's eyes widened, gleaming with hope.

"B-Boss!" another orc blurted out, his hands clasped as if in prayer. "We'll follow you for life!"

Even though he hadn't actually brought anyone yet, the orcs were already staring at him with sparkling eyes full of pure admiration.

Honestly… if they were this desperate, they could've just told me sooner, Belamus thought, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I'll find an orc village," he continued. "And I'll bring back anyone willing to move here. I don't know where the nearest village is, though. If anyone does, step forward and guide me."

"I'll do it!" Balbora immediately shouted, throwing his hand into the air.

"Hey, that's not fair!"

"Me too!"

A wave of eager voices followed, and soon every orc was raising his hand, shouting over each other.

Obviously, they all wanted to be the first to bask in the presence of orc women again.

"Hold it," Belamus said sharply, raising a hand to calm the chaos. "If too many of us go, it'll just slow us down. Only Balbora will come. The rest of you, stay here and wait quietly. Understood?"

"Y-Yes…"

The other orcs drooped, their shoulders sagging in disappointment, but none dared to argue.

Before setting out, Belamus decided to inform Arèsa and Delarosa of his mission. He would be away for several days at least, and it would be wrong to leave without telling them. When he explained the situation, Arèsa's face immediately tightened with worry.

"H-How long will you be gone?" she asked, biting her lip.

“Five days, give or take,” Belamus said calmly.

“S-Such a long time… Please… be careful,” she said, her voice trembling with motherly concern. No matter how well she understood that Belamus wasn’t an ordinary five-year-old, Arèsa couldn’t help but worry. It was simply a mother’s nature.

Delarosa, in contrast to the worried Arèsa, merely waved a hand and called out in a light and carefree tone, “Okay! Good luck!”

Belamus blinked in surprise at her unexpected reaction. He had fully anticipated her to throw a fit and insist on tagging along no matter what.

“Delarosa,” he said, pointing and tilting his head slightly, “you’re being surprisingly well behaved. You’re not going to insist on coming?”

“Huh? I mean,” she replied with a shrug, “orcs kind of smell bad, you know? Doesn’t sound like much fun.”

The sheer simplicity of her reason made Belamus chuckle.

“I see,” he said, turning toward the door and stepping outside.

Waiting just beyond earshot was Balbora, who scratched the back of his head and muttered with a droop to his shoulders, “Man, sounds like she doesn’t like us…”

Despite his size, he looked genuinely disheartened. Compared to the other orcs, Balbora had proven himself smarter, already picking up a decent amount of the goblin language.

“Delarosa is just picky,” Belamus said with a small, reassuring smile. “The others don’t feel that way.”

He didn’t bother mentioning the less-than-stellar impression the orcs had left on the village overall. Without wasting any more time, Belamus and Balbora set off together in search of an orc village.

Chapter 5

"As I mentioned before," Balbora said, trudging beside Belamus through the dense forest, "there are three orc villages up north, but there's a bit of a problem…"

"What kind of problem?" asked Belamus, casting him a sharp glance.

Balbora fidgeted, visibly uncomfortable.

"It's hard to say, but back when King Rydos was in charge, we kind of raided two of them on his orders. So, uh, if we head to either of those, there's pretty much zero chance the girls will want to come."

Belamus narrowed his eyes.

"You what?"

Shrinking under the glare, Balbora raised both hands in a panic.

"We had no choice! Orders were orders! Say no and *bam*! You get hurt! I hate pain, boss!"

Belamus sighed, his expression stiff.

"Fine. You said two villages were raided. That leaves one untouched?"

"Y-Yeah, uh, there's the village called Belonika," Balbora answered quickly. "It's way further out, but since it's Lord Rydos's hometown, we didn't touch it. Buuut…"

At the memory, Balbora visibly shuddered, his skin paling.

Belamus cocked an eyebrow.

"Something wrong with it?"

"W-Well, it's not just any village, boss. Everyone there is freakishly strong. The place is mostly high orcs and some General Orcs, too. Regular guys like me? We'd be lucky if they even noticed us…"

Belamus let out a quiet hum, appearing to consider it. "Doesn't matter. It's our only option, isn't it?"

"Y-Yeah… I guess we gotta…" Balbora trailed off, wiping the sweat pouring down his forehead.

Belamus shot him a pointed look.

"What's with you? Weren't you the one practically begging to come along? You *want* women for your group, don't you?"

"I do! I do!" Balbora cried, his voice cracking under pressure. "B-But you know, boss… a guy needs to mentally prepare for these things! I'm not brave! Everyone keeps calling me a leader lately, but honestly… I'm a big coward. Uuugh… we're gonna get killed, aren't we?"

Belamus chuckled softly to himself.

He's a textbook orc, through and through, he mused. *Big, loud… and hopelessly timid at heart.*

In truth, Belamus recalled that, in his previous life, there had been a faction of orcs who didn't oppose humans, and he had even known one of them.

That orc had had a personality strikingly similar to Balbora's, Belamus thought with a wry smile.

"Don't worry. If anything happens, I'll protect you," Belamus said firmly.

Balbora's eyes filled with emotion. "Lord Belamus…! I've always been kinda scared of you, but today you're the most reliable guy around. Please, protect me…!"

What a shamelessly convenient guy, Belamus thought, feeling half amused, half exasperated.

After walking a little further, they finally arrived at the village. It was larger than Belamus had expected—more like a small town than a village, capable of housing several hundred orcs. A tall wooden fence and a heavy gate guarded the perimeter, and standing at the entrance was a watchful orc—not an ordinary one, but one appearing to be a high orc. As Belamus approached, the guard immediately barked at him, scowling fiercely.

"What's this? A human? Here to be our next meal? Get lost before I catch you!"

Before Belamus could respond, Balbora quickly stepped in, waving his hands defensively.

"Hey, hey! Don't be like that! This guy's a friend! He's not an enemy!"

Belamus blinked, surprised. There had been no prior discussion, but Balbora had instinctively rushed to cover for him.

Not bad, Belamus thought, slightly upgrading his opinion of the orc.

The guard narrowed his eyes, carefully studying Belamus.

"A human? A friend? That's a first… Are you for real?"

"I am," Belamus replied calmly, speaking in fluent Orcish. The guard's eyebrows shot up.

"Whoa, you can speak our tongue? Well, guess you do seem like a friend… But even so, I can't just grant you entry on my own. Hold on a sec."

Grumbling, the high orc pulled the heavy gate open just enough to slip inside, presumably to fetch someone higher up the chain of command.

Belamus and Balbora stood quietly, waiting.

"They say you're allowed to enter," the high orc announced gruffly upon returning. "The village chief says anyone who can speak our noble Orcish tongue must have a deep respect for our people. Even if you're human, if you show such reverence, you're welcome."

As the gates swung open, Belamus and Balbora stepped forward.

"Lord Belamus," Balbora whispered as they walked, his tone curious, "do you, uh… truly respect orcs? Is that why you can speak our language?"

Belamus glanced at him sideways. "I used to know an orc. A long time ago. I learned the language so we could talk."

"I see…" Balbora mumbled, still glancing around nervously. "Wait, hold on. How old are you, Lord Belamus? I mean, I don't

know much about humans, but you don't seem like some ancient geezer or anything…"

"I'm five," Belamus stated plainly, his expression unreadable.

Balbora blinked once, then twice, before his jaw slackened.

"Huh?" Balbora stared at him, utterly dumbfounded. Clearly, he assumed Belamus was either joking or simply refusing to answer seriously.

"Anyway," the high orc called over his shoulder, "I'll take you to the chief. Follow me."

Without waiting for a reply, he set off at a steady pace. Belamus and Balbora quickly fell into step behind him.

"So, where are you from, anyway?" the high orc asked, glancing back at Balbora.

"Uh, from outside the forest," Balbora answered hastily. "You wouldn't know it."

"Good," the guard grunted. "If you'd said the neighboring village, Booska, I'd have killed you on the spot."

"S-So glad I didn't!" Balbora stammered, visibly trembling.

As they walked, Belamus scanned the village. He had hoped to catch sight of some orc women. But if they were there, they blended in so seamlessly that he couldn't tell the difference from the men. He considered asking Balbora how to spot the females but quickly abandoned the idea; the poor orc was too busy staring nervously at the ground, overwhelmed by sheer terror. Apparently, his fear outweighed even his desperate longing for a mate.

Just as Balbora had said, most of the villagers were high orcs. Their sheer presence was imposing, and Belamus couldn't help but worry—if strength ruled here, then an ordinary orc like Balbora would be lucky if he was just ignored, rather than humiliated.

"Here we are," the guard said, stopping before a sturdily built house. "This is the chief's place. Hey, Chief! I brought the visitors!"

Suddenly, a deep, authoritative voice rumbled from within.

"Enter."

The guard nodded and swung open the heavy door. Belamus and Balbora exchanged a glance, then stepped inside.

Within the house sat a hulking orc, easily a full size larger than the others.

This one's probably a General Orc, Belamus assessed silently.

"Welcome, guests," the large orc rumbled, his voice heavy with authority. "I am Rydor, chief of this village. What business brings you here?"

At the sound of the question, Belamus thought critically before answering.

Should I just come out and say I'm looking for female orcs who want to move?

Females were precious assets to any orc village. Even without any intent of abduction, the mere mention of taking them could spark immediate conflict; the mere suggestion might ignite trouble.

Still, there was no point tiptoeing around it. If the situation turned hostile, retreat was always an option. Having made up his mind on what to say, Belamus stepped forward.

"I'm looking for any female orcs who might want to move to another village," he stated clearly. "The village I live in has orcs, but no females. It has become a bit of a problem for them."

"Hmm… females, huh?" Rydor stroked his thick chin thoughtfully. "If there are any who wish to leave, you're welcome to take them."

Belamus blinked in mild surprise.

"Are you sure?"

"It's fine," Rydor said with a heavy grunt. "After some skirmishes with neighboring villages, we've ended up short on male orcs. Female orcs have strong urges too, you see. One male ain't enough to handle multiple females, and now we've got some women with no partners, which is causing all sorts of trouble for us. To them, this is a golden opportunity."

That worked out better than expected, Belamus thought, giving a small nod of gratitude.

“I’ll go ask them, then. Thank you for your generosity.” Belamus said with a courteous bow, his voice calm and composed.

With that, Belamus turned and stepped outside, dragging a still-shaking Balbora along behind him. The poor orc hadn’t said a single word inside. He spent the entire conversation trembling like a leaf, as if the mere sight of Rydor had sucked the soul right out of him.

“Looks like things are going to work out after all,” Belamus remarked casually.

“H-Huh? What’s gonna work out?” Balbora stammered, blinking at him.

Belamus sighed, running a hand through his hair. “The part where you actually get to meet female orcs. Were you even listening in there?”

“U-Uh, sorry…!” Balbora yelped, slumping his shoulders. “That old guy was so scary, I couldn’t hear a thing! I swear he’s gotta be Lord Rydos’s grandpa or something…!”

Belamus shook his head with an exasperated chuckle.

“You are hopeless. Absolutely hopeless. Anyway, we’ve got permission to bring some women back.”

“For real?!” Balbora whooped, throwing his arms up in joy, his earlier fear completely forgotten.

“Problem is,” Belamus said evenly, his arms folded as he glanced at the crowd of orcs lingering nearby, “I can’t tell which ones are the females. You’ll have to do the recruiting.”

“Got it! Leave it to me!” Balbora barked with an eager nod, pumping his fists for motivation before trotting off toward a group of five orcs gathered by a tree.

Belamus watched quietly, observing the exchange from a distance. Balbora struck up a conversation, animated and hopeful at first, only for his shoulders to droop pathetically within seconds. Head bowed in utter defeat, he slunk back toward Belamus like a whipped puppy.

“How did it go?” Belamus asked, raising an eyebrow as Balbora trudged closer.

"It was no good…" Balbora muttered, voice small and miserable.

"Why? Were they already paired with someone?" Belamus tilted his head slightly, his voice steady but curious.

"No… no, they said they wanted a mate…" Balbora whimpered, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

"Then why refuse?" Belamus pressed, a puzzled frown forming.

"Because… because I'm not a high orc!" Balbora cried out, tears welling up in his eyes. "They said they'd *never* marry a weakling regular orc like me! They said they'd rather live alone forever than be stuck with some weakling husband!"

Belamus was silent for a moment, feeling an unexpected pang of pity as he looked at the crumpled figure before him.

"That's… harsh," he finally murmured, unable to find any better words.

Belamus crossed his arms, his tone calm but probing as he asked, "Are you sure the others don't think differently? Maybe it's just those particular females who won't settle for a regular orc."

Balbora flailed his arms dramatically, looking half desperate and half miserable as he protested, "They all think the same! Every single one in that group! I don't wanna go ask again! I can't bear those mocking eyes staring at me once more! If anyone's gonna ask, it's gotta be *you*, Lord Belamus!"

Belamus let out a small sigh, his expression tight with mild frustration.

"I already told you… I can't even tell the females apart."

"Waaaaah! We're doomed!" Balbora wailed, throwing his arms in the air like a man who had just lost everything. "We're never gonna get girls! It's over for us!"

Belamus watched him quietly for a moment, then said with complete calm, "If they won't settle for anything less than a high orc, then you just have to become one."

Balbora stopped mid-wail, blinking in confusion.

"Huh? That's impossible! You can't just become a high orc! These guys have been training for years! That's why there are so

many of them here! It's not something you can just do overnight!"

Belamus offered a rare, slight smile, his voice edged with a quiet certainty.

"No, it's actually not that hard. The reason there are so many high orcs in this village is probably because of their diet."

Balbora stared at him, slack-jawed.

"H-Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. To become a high orc, you need to eat a magic beast called a Blue Rat," Belamus explained smoothly. He tilted his head. "What have you been eating until now?"

Balbora scratched his head awkwardly.

"Uh, ever since we came to the goblin village, mostly Merune and vegetables… Before that, we mostly ate Dark Rabbit meat."

"I see," Belamus nodded. "There's probably a colony of Blue Rats somewhere near this village. We'll hunt them down. If you eat them, you all should evolve into high orcs."

Balbora's whole face lit up, like the sun breaking through a storm.

"Really?! You mean it?!"

"Yeah," Belamus replied with a cool nod. "Let's get moving."

Without wasting another second, Belamus and Balbora set off to hunt for Blue Rats.

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Belamus and Balbora moved quietly through the forest surrounding Belonika Village, scanning for any sign of their prey.

The Blue Rat, just like the name suggested, was a bright blue rodent, about three times the size of an ordinary rat. Among the creatures that prowled the Frazes Great Forest, the Blue Rat ranked among the weakest. It was almost harmless compared to the real threats lurking deeper within.

"Ah! There it is!" Balbora shouted, pointing excitedly.

Without even bothering to make use of a weapon, Balbora stooped, snatched up a decently sized rock from the forest floor, and hurled it with formidable force. The stone struck true. The Blue Rat jerked violently, its limbs spasming before it collapsed into helpless twitches.

"All right! At this rate, we'll wipe them out fast!" Balbora said with a grin, jogging over to retrieve the body. Then, as if just remembering something, he glanced back at Belamus. "By the way, how many do we need to catch again?"

"Fifty-six," Belamus replied without missing a beat.

Balbora nearly dropped the rat in shock.

"F-Fifty-six?! Seriously?!"

"We have twenty-eight orcs back at the village," Belamus explained calmly, stepping lightly over a fallen branch. "Each orc needs to eat two Blue Rats to evolve into a high orc."

Balbora's shoulders sagged dramatically.

"Ugh… This is gonna take forever…"

The sheer volume of rats to hunt had utterly deflated his spirit. Yet their luck quickly proved unexpectedly favorable.

After only a short while, they stumbled upon a massive nest. Blue Rats poured out of it in waves, easy pickings for the two of them. When they had finished, Balbora wiped the sweat from his brow, hoisting up the last twitching rat by the tail.

"That should be the last one! Man, that went way faster than I thought…" he said, his voice buoyant with relief.

"Good. Let's head back immediately," Belamus ordered, already moving into action.

He raised his hand, casting the spell he had used once before to transport the Arrow Spider corpses. From his fingertips, shimmering threads of magic—*Magic Thread*—unspooled into the air, twining around the heap of captured rats. Once securely bound, the entire bundle began to float in the air at Belamus's command.

"That's a pretty handy spell you've got there," Balbora said, eyes sparkling with admiration. "Could you maybe teach it to me, too?"

"You can't use it right now," Belamus replied bluntly. "Maybe once you evolve into a high orc. Though it'll take time to master."

"Then, teach me once I become a high orc!" Balbora insisted, puffing out his chest.

"If I have the time," Belamus said with a faint smile.

It seemed Balbora was finally starting to warm up to him. Up to now, Belamus had been a figure of pure terror in Balbora's mind—untouchable, intimidating. But seeing how he guided and helped him, he discovered that Belamus wasn't so scary after all. Compared to King Rydos, at least, Belamus was a far better boss.

Maybe even a good one, Balbora thought with growing respect for Belamus.

When the two returned to the village, Belamus wasted no time explaining the situation to the gathered orcs.

"Huh? You found females willing to come here?!" one orc blurted, his ears perking up with sudden hope.

"But… only if we're high orcs?" another added, the excitement draining from his face.

"That's correct," Belamus confirmed. A collective wail of despair arose from the orcs.

"That's impossible! We're just worthless, regular orcs!" one wailed, throwing his hands up as if to tear his hair out.

"Relax," Belamus said calmly. "If you eat these Blue Rats, you'll be able to evolve into high orcs."

A bewildered silence descended. The orcs simply stared at one another, as if Belamus had suddenly grown a second head.

"Huh?" one mumbled.

"Wait… how does that even *work*?" another asked, scratching his head.

"Magical creatures evolve by consuming specific kinds of monsters," Belamus explained patiently. "For orcs, eating Blue Rats triggers your evolution."

"Heeey… no kidding?" one mumbled, his face scrunching in disbelief.

“I didn’t know that,” another muttered.

“I mean, they look nasty. I always just ignore them when I see one,” a third added, making a face.

“All right, I’ll cook them first. Once they’re ready, you eat,” Belamus said, fetching a giant cauldron and tossing the heap of Blue Rats inside.

After a few minutes of boiling, he served the steaming meat to the orcs. They stared at the bowls with deep suspicion, but their gnawing hunger compelled them to eat.

“Doesn’t taste bad… Doesn’t taste good either,” one orc grumbled after a reluctant bite.

“Yeah. Just… normal,” another shrugged, chewing without enthusiasm.

It wasn’t exactly a feast, but it would get the job done.

“I ate two of them, but… I’m still not evolving,” one of the orcs grumbled, scratching his head in confusion.

“By tomorrow, you’ll have evolved,” Belamus said calmly, arms crossed. “Just be patient.”

“I see…” the orc muttered, not entirely convinced.

The orcs all managed to finish off two Blue Rats each by the end of the day.

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The next morning, a loud, ecstatic shout echoed through the camp.

“Whoa! I’ve evolved!”

Belamus came early to check on the orcs. Sure enough, they had grown noticeably larger overnight, and their bodies had become sturdier, their features sharper. Each one had successfully evolved into a proud high orc.

“I evolved!” one of them marveled, flexing his newly thickened arms.

“Does this mean the female orcs are coming?” another asked, his voice bubbling with hope.

“I’m just happy I became a high orc at all, even more than I am about the idea of women arriving,” said a third, a wide grin spreading across his face.

“It was my dream to become a high orc!” cried another, his fists pumping in the air.

For some reason, many of the orcs seemed more excited about their evolution than about the possibility of attracting mates. high orcs were seen as a legendary status—an aspiration they had carried for a long time.

“All right, Balbora,” Belamus said, clapping his hands together. “We’re heading back to the orc village. If they see you’ve evolved into a high orc, the chances the females will follow should go way up.”

“Understood! Leave it to me!” Balbora replied enthusiastically, pounding a fist against his chest.

With that, Belamus and Balbora set off once again toward Belonika Village.

“You know, Lord Belamus is a pretty good guy,” one of the orcs said after their departure, his voice warm with newfound admiration.

“Yeah, seriously. He not only evolved us into high orcs, but he’s also really bringing women for us, too.”

“Honestly… I think I like Lord Belamus way more than Lord Rydos!”

“I’m gonna follow Lord Belamus for the rest of my life!”

Their praise for Belamus rose higher and higher, a wave of loyalty swelling among the newly minted high orcs.

Meanwhile, Belamus and Balbora arrived at Belonika Village. This time, there were no jeers or mocking stares. Instead, the villagers greeted Balbora with impressed looks and words of praise for how strong and imposing he had become. Balbora, for his part, could barely contain his giddy smile.

Soon after, twenty-five female orcs volunteered to leave the village and join them. So, Belamus and Balbora decided to bring them all back. The number was still a bit short, but, apparently, among orcs, it wasn't unusual for one female to be shared by several males. It wasn't seen as a negative thing among their kind—an outlook starkly different from that of humans.

The arrival of the female orcs filled the high orcs with palpable satisfaction.

"Thank you so much, Lord Belamus!" one of the orcs cried, his voice thick with overwhelming emotion.

"Seriously, I'll follow you for life!" another shouted, pumping a fist in the air.

"I thought you were scary at first," a third admitted, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, "but you're way kinder than I ever imagined! To treat us so well, even after we were your enemies…!"

From that day on, Belamus earned the profound, unwavering respect of every orc. They pledged their absolute loyalty, each dedicating themselves earnestly to the prosperity of the village.

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"Belamus," one of the goblins said, crossing his arms with a suspicious look. "Looks like the number of orcs has gone up, huh?"

"Was it okay to bring in more without asking?" another added, frowning slightly.

A few days after the female orcs arrived, the goblins came up to Belamus to ask questions about the sudden increase in the orc population. Now that they mentioned it, Belamus realized he had completely forgotten to get the goblins' approval first, thinking it would be better to act quickly while the opportunity was there.

Lowering his head in apology, he said, "You're right. I'm sorry for bringing them without asking."

"It's not like you need to apologize or anything," one goblin muttered, scratching his cheek awkwardly.

"So far, the orcs haven't caused any trouble, but honestly, we can't afford to trust them."

The historical animosity between goblins and orcs ran deep, and it wasn't hard to see why. Though the orc attacks on the goblin village of the past had ceased, a quiet resentment festered on both sides: goblins harbored ingrained distrust, while orcs, subtly, still viewed their smaller counterparts with disdain. Neither overtly displayed this; the orcs, grateful for their refuge, refrained from open defiance, and the goblins, recognizing the orcs for their labor, had no desire to expel them. This uneasy truce prevented overt conflict, yet genuine camaraderie remained absent.

Belamus couldn't help but wonder if it was okay for people who lived on the same land to harbor so much quiet hostility toward each other.

If you hate the people you're living with, of course, you're going to feel uncomfortable. And more importantly, when a real crisis hits, they won't be able to work together…

If it truly became impossible for the goblins and orcs to coexist, he would have no choice but to expel the orcs. But after going through all the trouble to bring in the female orcs, Belamus didn't want to cast them out now.

There has to be a way to fix this, he thought, determination hardening within him.

After giving it serious thought, Belamus concluded that the root of the problem was communication, or rather, the lack of it. More specifically, the orcs and goblins didn't fully understand each other's languages. If they were going to live together, they needed a common tongue. So, Belamus decided that the goblin language would become the village's official common language.

The orcs would be taught goblin speech. Fortunately, orcish and goblin languages were quite similar, so it probably wouldn't be too difficult for the orcs to pick up enough to manage everyday

conversation without much trouble. Once they could talk to each other properly, Belamus planned to arrange occasional social gatherings to help foster friendship over time. It was a small step, but also the beginning of a future where goblins and orcs could coexist together.

With his plan settled, Belamus went to the orcs to begin teaching them the goblin language.

"You want us to learn… Goblin?" one of the orcs asked, tilting his head in slight confusion.

"That's right," Belamus said with a nod. "I want all of you to learn it."

"If that's what Lord Belamus says…" the orc replied, his expression earnest.

"Yeah. I'll learn it too," another chimed in with a determined nod.

To Belamus's slight surprise, there was little resistance. The orcs agreed readily, their attitudes refreshingly open. And it appeared the female orcs possessed a remarkable aptitude for listening to the males—when the women saw the men obediently accepting Belamus's instruction, they, too, fell in line without complaint.

"Then let's start with greetings," Belamus said, stepping forward to begin the first lesson.

He started by teaching them basic phrases in goblin speech. For the next week, he drilled them thoroughly, and by the end of it, they were able to hold simple conversations. Thanks to the similarities between the Orcish and Goblin languages, the orcs picked up the new tongue faster than Belamus had expected.

After laying the foundation, Belamus sought the help of the village elder and Demu—the goblin who had once served as his scout and spy, and who also happened to know Orcish. Since he was persistent in achieving the goal of commonality between the orcs and the goblins, he asked them to continue teaching the orcs.

He had two reasons for this: first, Belamus simply had too many responsibilities to handle this alone; second, he believed that if the

orcs learned directly from the goblins, it would naturally help build mutual trust and friendships between them. The village elder and Demu accepted the task willingly.

Before stepping back, Belamus made sure to warn the orcs, "Think of the elder and Demu as an extension of me. Treat their words as my own."

With that assurance, he trusted the orcs would remain obedient. Leaving the language lessons in capable hands, Belamus turned his attention to the mountain of other tasks awaiting him.

There's still so much to do for this village, he thought, running through the priorities in his mind. *We need weapons in case of an emergency. The farmland still needs further expansion. And the goblins' clothes are in tatters… I'd like to provide them with something better.*

He paused, organizing his thoughts.

All right. Weapons and clothing come first. But unlike houses, there's no easy magic to create weapons or garments. How should I tackle this?

After a moment's reflection, he came to a decision.

The quickest way would be to buy them from a human town…

Of course, he knew he would need money for that. But that wasn't an insurmountable problem—he could hunt monsters in the forest and sell the materials for profit.

The value of goods must have changed since my previous life, Belamus thought. *Something I once considered expensive might now be cheap…*

It was unlikely that everything would be cheaper, and he couldn't afford to be careless. After weighing his options carefully, Belamus made up his mind to go to the human town, but make the trip alone.

The reason was simple—goblins were likely to be hated by humans. Bringing them along could invite trouble or even attacks. Maybe, if they hadn't already evolved into hobgoblins, it might be a

different story. But Belamus didn't want to risk putting them in danger, not even by accident.

For reference, the human town lay west of the goblin village, just beyond the forest. Belamus recalled that the village elder had told him about it some time ago. The distance wasn't far, but with the time needed to earn money, buy supplies, and complete other tasks, Belamus estimated it would take at least five days to make the round trip.

Before leaving, he thought he should explain everything properly to Arèsa and Delarosa.

Fortunately, the cultivation of Merune plants wouldn't be a problem during his absence—Delarosa was already capable of using all the necessary magics. During the construction of the village's defensive walls, she had even taken over using magic midway through without issue. Belamus set his departure date for two days later.

On the day before his journey, he gathered Arèsa and Delarosa and informed them plainly of his proposed trip to the human town.

"Tomorrow, I'm heading to the human town."

Arèsa's reaction was immediate and extreme.

"Huh?!" she gasped, her face contorting with shock, as if she had just been struck by a bolt from the blue.

Why is she making that face? Belamus wondered, frowning slightly.

Before he could ask, Arèsa gave a stiff, awkward smile and began to speak, her voice trembling with emotion.

"S-So… it has come at last, has it? I always knew this day would come someday, and I tried to prepare myself…"

"Hm?" Belamus grunted in confusion.

"I've been worrying for a long time," Arèsa continued, her hands clenching at her sides, "that maybe… as a human, you'd be happier living among your own kind. You've done so much already—you're only five, but you've changed this village so much… If you really

want to live with humans, I thought… maybe I shouldn't try to hold you back."

Belamus pressed a hand to his forehead, realizing she had completely misunderstood.

"Huh?! Belamus, you're going to the human town and never coming back?!" Delarosa wailed, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Don't cry, Delarosa!" Arèsa said firmly, placing her hands on the girl's shoulders. "When the time comes to say goodbye, we must smile!"

Belamus gave a small sigh, shaking his head.

"You're both getting the wrong idea," he said. "I'm only going to the human town to buy weapons and clothes. I'll be back shortly. I'm not leaving forever."

"R-Really?" Arèsa asked, her voice cracking with hope.

"Of course," Belamus replied with a small nod. "I'm indeed human, but more importantly, I'm a member of this village. I have no reason to live anywhere else."

Arèsa exhaled deeply, pressing a hand to her chest as relief flooded her features.

"I-I'm so glad…" she whispered.

"You're not leaving forever?!" Delarosa cried, puffing up her cheeks in frustration. "Geez, don't scare me like that!"

Belamus gave her a wry smile. "My phrasing could have been better. I apologize."

"But I wanna go, too!" Delarosa said, bouncing on her toes. "I've always wanted to see a human town! Can't I come with you?"

"No," Belamus said firmly. "It's too dangerous."

"Huhhh?! Why?!" Delarosa whined, pouting.

"There are likely many humans who don't view goblins favorably," Belamus explained, his tone serious. "Besides, I need you here to water the Merune plants."

"Hmph! But I really, really wanna see the human town!" she cried, stomping her feet.

"Delarosa, stop being selfish," Arèsa scolded, frowning at the girl.

"I'll take you someday," Belamus said gently. "But for now, be patient."

"Really…?" Delarosa asked, peering up at him with wide, suspicious eyes.

"Really," Belamus affirmed with a small nod.

"Okayyy… but you *promise* you'll take me someday! You have to! Promise!" she said, holding out her pinky eagerly.

"I promise," Belamus replied with a faint smile.

When that day will come, though… I can't say for sure, he thought silently.

Still, Belamus harbored a genuine hope that one day, the pervasive misunderstanding and fear surrounding goblins would dissipate, allowing them and humans to trade and coexist peacefully. If that time came, Delarosa would be able to walk freely into a human town without worry.

After settling things with Delarosa, Belamus made his way to Balbora.

"Balbora, you here?" he called out.

"Y-Yes, Lord Belamus! What can I do for you?" Balbora answered quickly, standing up straight with a stiff salute.

The reason Belamus had sought him out was the village's defense. While he was away, he needed someone to take charge, and though the high orcs had grown strong, he wanted clear instructions in place in case of an attack.

All the orcs had successfully evolved into high orcs, becoming a formidable fighting force. Still, Belamus felt it was crucial to spell out their duty explicitly.

"I'm going to the human town for a while," Belamus said. "I'll be leaving the village. While I'm gone, I want you to protect it."

"You're leaving, sir? Understood!" Balbora declared, pounding a fist against his chest. "Leave it to me! I swear I'll defend the village with my life!"

Watching him, Belamus noted with quiet satisfaction how much Balbora's attitude had changed.

Bringing in the female orcs significantly boosted morale, he thought. *An upward trend, for sure.*

Satisfied, Belamus turned to leave, but paused to add, "One more thing. Make sure you continue to study goblin speech properly and get along with the goblins. You're part of this village now, too."

"Y-Yes, sir! I'll study hard and do my best to get along!" Balbora replied, bowing deeply.

The next morning, just as dawn broke, Belamus set off toward the human town. He packed a modest supply of food onto his back, passed through the village's south gate, and left his home behind.

Since the human town was located west of the village, he estimated it would take two days to get to his destination. The distance wasn't that great—normally, he would have been able to get there in a single day, but Belamus planned to hunt monsters along the way to earn money. Factoring in those detours, he expected his arrival to be delayed by about a day.

What monsters live on the west side of this forest that could fetch a good price if I defeat them? Belamus pondered as he walked.

Swiftly sifting through his memories, he recalled five types…

Mithril Turtles, Death Spiders, Magic Slimes, Hellhounds, and Spike Snakes. All of them were fairly powerful monsters, but for Belamus, none would pose much of a threat. However, these five types of monsters had all undergone one or two stages of evolution. Unlike goblins, the creatures of Frazes Great Forest thrived in an environment that naturally encouraged evolution.

Belamus decided he would actively hunt these five kinds of monsters while making his way toward the western human town. With his course set, he continued on.

Along the way, he encountered a Mithril Turtle and a Spike Snake.

The Mithril Turtle was a monstrous tortoise, its shell made of mithril—a rare and incredibly durable metal. If sold, the shell would

surely fetch a high price.

The Spike Snake, on the other hand, was a serpent whose entire body was covered in deadly barbs. Each spike had tiny hooks, making them extremely difficult to remove once embedded. Their natural design far outperformed any man-made spikes, making them a highly sought-after monster.

At least… they used to be, Belamus thought. *In my previous life, these materials sold for a fortune. Their value might have dropped since then.*

Regardless, he made quick work of both monsters, then used his *Magic Thread* spell to bind and transport their remains.

He continued onward through the forest, but no other notable monsters appeared. By the time night fell, Belamus had spent the entire day walking and hunting, eventually reaching the forest's edge. His final tally: four Mithril Turtles and three Spike Snakes defeated.

Not bad, he thought. *It should be worth a decent amount… but probably not enough.*

If it turned out to be insufficient, he planned to check which monster materials were in demand in town and hunt accordingly.

As he emerged from the forest, the sun dipped below the horizon, draping the world in twilight. Suppressing his magic signature to avoid attracting attention, Belamus quietly cast *Magic House*, creating a small, simple shelter. He laid down fresh grass inside to fashion a rough bed. Curling up inside the modest house, he spent the night in peace.

The next morning, after a light breakfast, Belamus set off again, heading toward the human town.

Before long, he found himself walking along a paved road. In the distance, a walled city came into view. Without hesitation, Belamus set his sights on it and continued walking toward the town gates.

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“Hey, you there! Mind stopping for a moment?”

A guard called out as Belamus approached the gate. It had been a long time since Belamus had heard human speech. Technically speaking, the language was called Lindor, the common tongue of the region.

“What is it?” Belamus asked, keeping his voice calm.

“Well, uh…” the guard said, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. “Your outfit, I guess, is fine and all… But, uh, what’s that white thing floating above you?”

“That’s a spell,” Belamus explained plainly. “It’s called *Magic Thread*, a common magic. Do you mean to say you’ve never encountered it?”

“S-Seriously? Uh, I’m not that well-versed in magic…” the guard admitted, chuckling sheepishly. “What does it do?”

“It’s used for transporting goods,” Belamus replied. “In this case, monster carcasses. I’ve brought them to sell.”

“Ah, I see… Would you mind if I checked them, just in case?” the guard asked, shifting his spear nervously.

“I don’t mind,” Belamus said with a shrug. Lowering the floating bundle, he unraveled the *Magic Thread* and revealed the contents. The guard peered down, his eyebrows shooting up.

“What kind of monsters are these? I’ve never seen them before,” he said, leaning in for a closer look.

“They’re Mithril Turtles and Spike Snakes,” Belamus answered smoothly. “They originate from the Frazes Great Forest. You’ve truly never heard of them?”

“Frazes Great Forest?!” the guard gasped, stumbling back a step. “You mean… those monsters come from *that* dangerous place? Monsters from there rarely show up here!”

Apparently, Frazes Great Forest had a reputation as an extremely hazardous zone. Belamus found that a little strange.

Sure, it’s dangerous… but for an adventurer, it shouldn’t be that unusual to enter the forest, he thought, tilting his head slightly in

quiet confusion.

Come to think of it, Belamus mused, *no humans have ever come to the goblin village. Maybe they deliberately avoid the Frazes Great Forest?*

If that were the case, then the value of the Mithril Turtle and Spike Snake materials might be even higher than he thought. Belamus took it as a promising sign that he would make more than he had expected.

"Did you defeat these monsters yourself?" the guard asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

Belamus hesitated for a moment, considering his answer. Given his current appearance as a young child, a truthful answer would likely cause unnecessary commotion.

Opting to avoid trouble, he smoothly lied: "No. I'm merely transporting what someone else defeated," he said.

"I see. Well, there doesn't seem to be any problem," the guard said, waving him through with a relaxed smile. "Welcome to Tankes."

Thus, Belamus was officially permitted to enter the town.

Apparently, this place was called Tankes—a town that hadn't existed in his previous life. Lifting the monster carcasses once again with his *Magic Thread*, Belamus crossed through the gates and into the bustling streets.

The moment he entered, he felt the weight of curious stares coming from every direction. He knew their gazes lingered due to his peculiar clothing.

Living in the goblin village, Belamus naturally wore the same rough, threadbare garments as the goblins. To see a five-year-old child walking around dressed like that was enough to draw plenty of bewildered looks from the townsfolk. Belamus wasn't concerned if the goblin villagers would like it since he was fine with it. But as a former Great Sage, he couldn't help but think…

This outfit isn't doing me any favors…

Resolving to change that, Belamus decided that once he sold the monster materials, he would buy clothes more fitting for a sage.

First, though, he needed to sell his goods.

He stopped a passing villager and politely asked where he could sell monster materials. He was directed to the Adventurer's Guild, which was responsible for handling the buying and selling of such items. Thanking them, Belamus made his way toward the guild. When he arrived, he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"I'd like to sell some monster carcasses," he said, approaching the counter.

"Huh? A kid?" the receptionist said, raising an eyebrow. "You've got monster carcasses, huh? Just so you know, bringing them in whole means a disassembly fee, which will slightly reduce your payout. Is that acceptable?"

"I don't mind," Belamus said with a nod.

Maybe I should have taken the spikes out first, he mused with a twinge of regret. *Would've gotten a better price…*

Belamus lowered the four Mithril Turtles and three Spike Snakes onto the ground, revealing his haul.

"Hold up a second," the receptionist said, squinting suspiciously. "How exactly did you haul all this here?"

"Hm? I used a spell called *Magic Thread*," Belamus replied matter-of-factly. "You've never heard of it either?"

"Never even heard the name…" the man muttered, scratching his head. "Well, whatever. Let's see what we've got here…"

Belamus frowned slightly.

Why does nobody know about Magic Thread*…?*

It nagged at him, but he decided not to dwell on it for now.

The receptionist leaned over to inspect the monsters and immediately recoiled, his eyes widening in shock.

"Wha—?!" he practically shouted, drawing a few curious glances from nearby adventurers. "These are Mithril Turtles and Spike Snakes…?! Four of the turtles and three of the snakes…?! Did you… Did you defeat them yourself?!"

"No," Belamus said smoothly. "I'm just transporting them for someone else."

"R-Right, of course. There's no way a kid your size could've taken these down… Still, this is incredible!"

"Are they worth a lot?" Belamus asked, feigning casual interest.

"A lot? Hah, kid, this haul could fetch around ten thousand Lin! Enough to build an entire house!"

"Ten thousand Lin?" Belamus echoed, a frown creasing his brow. The currency name was entirely unfamiliar; in his previous life, the standard unit had been Zel.

I guess the currency must have changed since then, he thought.

Still, if the man said it was enough to buy a house, that gave Belamus a rough estimation of its value. It proved to be easily ten times more than he had initially anticipated.

With this much, I won't need to go hunting again right away, he thought, a small surge of relief in his chest.

"Are you sure you can pay out that much?" Belamus asked, just to be certain.

"Don't underestimate the Adventurer's Guild, kid," the man said, flashing a grin. "We can handle a payout of ten thousand Lin without a problem."

The receptionist disappeared into the back for a moment. When he returned, he was carrying a large, heavy sack.

"Here you go. Ten thousand Lin," the receptionist said, grinning as he heaved the heavy bag onto the counter with a dull thud.

Belamus accepted the bag with both hands. It was heavier than he expected. Belamus floated the heavy bag of money using *Magic Thread*, just as he had done with the monster carcasses, and left the Adventurer's Guild behind.

His shopping list for this trip included clothes, weapons, and seeds. He planned to expand the farmland in the goblin village, and growing only Merune wouldn't be enough—he wanted to cultivate a wider variety of crops.

Since he intended to buy in bulk, Belamus first stopped at a merchant's stall and purchased three large wooden crates. It would

be far easier to carry everything if he packed the goods neatly into them.

His first shopping destination was a clothing shop. There, he bought a basic outfit for himself: a plain shirt, a pair of sturdy trousers, and a new pair of shoes. Then, on a whim, he also picked out a long robe, something a magician might wear.

After changing into his new clothes, Belamus inspected himself critically.

This looks a lot more like a proper sage's outfit, he thought. He was satisfied with his appearance until he noticed that the robe was far too big. It hung off his small frame in loose, drooping folds, making him look like a child playing dress-up.



Apparently, there were no smaller robe sizes available. Belamus would simply have to wait until he grew into it.

Next, he began purchasing clothing for the goblins. Since he needed a considerable amount, it quickly became clear that transporting everything in a single trip would be difficult for him to achieve. Even *Magic Thread* had its limits—he couldn't float an unlimited number of items at once.

He would need to make several trips between the village and the town. The second he delivered the first batch of supplies back to the village, he would immediately return to town.

By the time he finished buying as many clothes as he could pack into the crates, the sun had already set. Belamus decided to spend the night at an inn.

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The following morning, he shouldered his load and set out for the goblin village. Since he didn't need to hunt monsters on the way back, the journey was much faster. By the morning after departing from town, Belamus arrived safely at the village gates. He immediately began unloading the supplies he had brought from the human town.

As Belamus approached, Delarosa rushed out to meet him, her face lighting up with joy.

"Welcome back!" she called, beaming as she raced up to the gate.

Belamus's heart twisted slightly, burdened by the knowledge that he would depart again almost immediately.

"I'm sorry," he confessed, kneeling to meet her eye to eye. "I have to go back to town right away."

"Huh—?!" Delarosa gasped, her expression crumbling in disappointment. "Belamus, you dummy! I thought we could play together!" she cried, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I’ll bring you back something tasty,” Belamus said, giving her a small smile, “so forgive me, all right?”

“Really?! You promise?!” she said, her mood flipping almost instantly.

“I promise,” Belamus said, chuckling softly.

“She’s as simple as ever…” he muttered under his breath, careful to keep his voice low enough that she wouldn’t hear.

Wanting to avoid causing Arèsa the same false hope, Belamus decided not to inform her of his plans. Without wasting any more time, he set out for town once again.

Thanks to the money he still had left, he didn’t need to hunt along the way. He made a straight shot back to Tankes, wasting no time.

Once he got to the human town, he resumed his shopping. The clothing was finally all purchased, and now all that remained were weapons, armor, and seeds for planting. Following the same process as before, Belamus first bought more large wooden crates to carry the goods. Next, he headed to a weapon shop.

Unfortunately, Tankes didn’t seem to have any particularly high-quality weapons or armor. The equipment available was mediocre at best. Still, Belamus didn’t need enough for every villager, but just a reasonable stockpile for emergencies. Belamus ended up buying twenty swords, twenty bows, a substantial supply of arrows, twenty helmets, and twenty suits of chainmail.

Next, he turned his attention to seeds. He bought a wide variety: pumpkins, tomatoes, carrots, cabbage, wheat, and more. From then on, he decided, the village would grow seasonal crops. Having a range of vegetables would keep meals interesting and help prevent the villagers from getting bored.

As he browsed, Belamus spotted something else, which he deemed would be perfect for a gift. There, among the vendors, he found jars of strawberry jam and fresh bread. Thinking of Delarosa, he picked them up without hesitation. Back in the goblin village, they didn’t have any sweets.

Children love sweet things, he thought. *She'll definitely be happy.*

As he placed the jam carefully into his crate, Belamus made a quiet resolution.

One day, I want our village to have more luxury foods too.

It wouldn't be easy, of course. But Belamus firmly believed that delicious food was essential to building a happy, prosperous village where everyone could live in joy.

After he was done with his main purchases, he prepared to head back, only to notice there was still some space left among his floating crates.

Maybe I should pick up something else… he mused, glancing around.

"Is that… an art supply shop?" Belamus murmured, his eyes widening slightly as he stopped in front of the storefront, a flicker of nostalgia passing over his face.

The small storefront was packed with paint sets, brushes, canvases, and other materials for artists.

Belamus stood there, momentarily frozen.

In his previous life, painting had been a beloved hobby. Since reincarnating, he hadn't had a single opportunity to enjoy it. Drawn almost against his will, he stepped inside. Before he knew it, he had purchased some art supplies.

I bought it all, he muttered to himself, staring down at the impulsive purchases that included paints, brushes, palettes, canvas boards, and stacks of fine paper.

With that, the money he had worked so hard to earn was completely gone. Even a night at an inn was now out of the question.

Well, it's not like I really need an inn, Belamus thought. *I can just use magic.*

He picked a quiet spot outside town, summoned a small house using *Magic House*, gathered grass for bedding, and slept through the night.

The accommodations were rough and far from comfortable, but it was manageable.

After resting, Belamus gathered his crates, now filled with clothes, weapons, seeds, food, and art supplies, and set off for the goblin village once more.

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It was midday when Belamus returned briefly to the village and then set out for town again. A tense, uneasy atmosphere had settled over the goblin village in his absence.

"Tch…"

Many of the goblins wore sour expressions, their brows furrowed in irritation. A quiet frustration simmered among them.

"Keep your eyes on the orcs," one goblin muttered under his breath.

"Yeah… we can't trust those guys," another added, his gaze fixed warily on the orc settlement. Across the village, the orcs wore looks that were not cheerful, which heightened the goblins' curiosity.

"Those damn goblins… acting like we're beneath them…" one orc growled.

"We've been working hard for Lord Belamus, doing everything he asked…" another grumbled, clenching his fists.

The orcs, too, glared back at the goblin quarter, their resentment quietly flaring.

So, what had happened to spark this mutual hostility?

To get a clearer picture of it, one would have to go back to that morning—

As dawn broke over the village, the goblins rose and began their usual tasks. Among them were two goblins with a special assignment: the village elder and Demu. They had been entrusted with teaching goblin speech to the orcs—a duty Belamus himself had assigned.

Since early morning, they had gathered at the Assembly Hall with the orcs, giving instructions with surprising diligence. The orcs, in turn, took the task seriously. They respected Belamus's word and worked earnestly to master the language. Their progress was immense; they were rapidly gaining a solid grasp of the goblin language. From the outside, all appeared to be proceeding smoothly.

Then, suddenly, something happened.

"Don't mess with me! Say that again, I dare you!" Pugh snarled, rising to his feet.

"I'll say it as many times as you want!" Demu snapped, his eyes flashing. "You brain-dead meathead!"

Just like that, the lesson had devolved into a shouting match.

Tempers flared. Pugh, an orc with little patience, looked seconds away from throwing a punch. Before he could, Balbora quickly stepped in, grabbing Pugh by the arm and holding him back with a firm grip. Dozens of goblins, drawn by the commotion, had gathered outside the Assembly Hall.

"You two," the village elder said, his voice stern as he stepped forward, "why are you fighting?"

"He started it!" Pugh snapped, jabbing a finger at Demu. "He called me stupid, said I was single-celled or something!"

"Is that true, Demu?" the elder asked, narrowing his eyes.

"I did insult him, yeah," Demu admitted without a shred of remorse. "But only because he said something first. Something like, 'I can't believe I'm learning from goblins, such lowly creatures.' So, I figured I'd show him which one of us actually had the brains."

Balbora, standing nearby, turned sharply toward Pugh.

"Pugh," he said evenly. "Did you say that?"

Pugh didn't utter a word but gave a small, reluctant nod. Balbora sighed, then raised a fist and rapped it hard against Pugh's head.

"That was out of line. Now, apologize." Balbora said firmly.

"Sorry…" Pugh muttered, rubbing the sore spot.

“You too, Demu,” the elder said, giving the goblin a sharp look. “You should apologize as well.”

“Fine… Sorry,” Demu grumbled, folding his arms.

It seemed the matter was settled, but just as the tension started to ease, something happened.

“So that’s what they think of us, huh?” someone muttered from the crowd.

“‘Lowly creatures,’ he said…”

“Do they even remember who let them live here in the first place?”

A low rumble of voices began to stir among the goblins.

They had only allowed the orcs to stay because Belamus had asked them to let them stay. But at their core, most goblins still harbored distrust toward the orcs. If anything, the orcs had attacked the village once. No lives had been lost, but the scars were still there. Some of the goblins had personally been attacked, not by Balbora and his group, but by other orcs in the past.

Belamus’s presence was the only reason they suppressed their resentment. But since he had left, that old bitterness began to rise again. They had never truly seen the orcs as welcome neighbors. And now, those unspoken feelings were beginning to resurface.

The moment it was revealed that one of the orcs had called the goblins a “lowly species,” the goblins’ already strained opinion of the orcs began to plummet.

“He already apologized,” the village elder said, stepping forward, his voice firm but strained. “That should be the end of it.”

Unfortunately, there was still unrest among the crowd.

“Elder… even if he said he was sorry, it doesn’t mean he meant it,” one goblin growled. “Deep down, they still look down on us.”

“They’ve been keeping quiet all this time because Belamus was around, right? Now that he’s been gone for a bit, they finally let their real thoughts slip out.”

“Exactly. I don’t want someone who sees me as beneath them living in the same village,” another snapped.

“Me neither!”

“Same here!”

More and more goblins voiced their agreement, each shout adding fuel to the fire.

“Stop this, all of you!” the elder barked, raising his voice in an attempt to bring things under control. However, they didn’t adhere to his yelled orders.

The orcs, meanwhile, weren’t about to stay silent while their right to remain in the village was being challenged.

“Don’t screw with us!” one of them shouted. “We’ve done everything Lord Belamus asked—every job, every order—for the sake of this village!”

“Yeah! And don’t forget, the place we live in? It was built by Lord Belamus! We didn’t get a damn thing from you!”

“This land belongs to us goblins!” someone shouted back. “Are you trying to claim it for yourselves now? Then go ahead and kick us out if you think you can!”

“Oh yeah?! Try saying that again and see what happens!” one orc roared, stepping forward.

“We’ve learned magic from Lord Belamus! Before we couldn’t take you, but what about now? We can fight back!”

The shouting continued to grow louder. They hadn’t drawn weapons yet, and no one had made the first move, but the tension was electric. It felt like all it would take was a single blow to ignite the fight.

Just as the air seemed ready to explode into violence, a voice cut through the chaos like a blade:

“Enough! Be silent!” The shout echoed across the Assembly Hall, sharp and commanding.

It was Balbora, the leader of the orcs.

“We’re the ones who were allowed to live here,” he said, his voice loud and steady. “And we’re the ones who looked down on you. That was our fault. I’ll make sure it’s corrected.”

Then his tone softened slightly, but his eyes remained serious as he faced the gathered goblins.

"But there's one thing I want to say to all of you."

He stepped forward, planting his feet firmly, speaking not as a challenger but as a mediator pleading to be understood.

"We've followed every order Lord Belamus gave us. We've done everything for the sake of this village. If enemies come, we'll fight to the death to protect it. Because we consider ourselves part of this village."

Balbora's voice didn't shake. He wasn't performing.

"I think Lord Belamus taught us your language because he truly wanted us to become part of this village. Not just live in it, but belong to it. So please… don't say we should leave. If we get kicked out of here, we have nowhere else to go."

His words lingered in the silence that followed. The goblins, stirred by his sincerity, fell quiet. No one shouted. No one moved.

The village elder finally broke the silence, his voice firm but calm: "Balbora speaks true. You are *not* to say such things again."

Just like that, the confrontation came to a close.

Sadly, it was only a surface-level resolution, as the goblins and orcs didn't reconcile. The tension between them remained, a quiet unease that lingered through the night and into the next day.

By the following morning, that uneasy stillness had not lifted.

What neither the goblins nor the orcs knew was that a disaster was already on its way.

Chapter 6

Night had fallen over the Frazes Great Forest. From within the darkness, something wicked fixed its gaze upon the goblin village.

"*Hee hee hee*… So, that's where you've made your home now… Great Sage…"

The voice slithered through the night like smoke.

Shrouded in writhing black mist, the figure resembled a man, but it was no creature at all. It was a malignant will, a core of dark magic, a blight upon the world. A malevolent entity whose sole purpose was to corrupt, destroy, and unleash its poison across the land.

Its name was Hereldyne, a name it had clung to since its days as a human, before its descent into madness and darkness.

"I wonder what kind of face you'll make when I destroy everything you've built."

Hereldyne's grin twisted into something monstrous as it whispered to itself, voice laced with glee.

Then, at its feet, a summoning circle flared to life, casting eerie runes across the forest floor. From within it, a dark creature began to emerge.

"I can't wait… I can't wait… I can't wait…"

That hollow, fractured murmur echoed across the silent forest like a curse, rippling outward toward the unsuspecting village.

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Early the next morning, just as the goblins were beginning to stir from sleep, they heard a loud noise.

THOOOOOOM!

Without warning, a deafening crash shook the entire village. It sounded as though something large was breaking apart. Startled, the goblins rushed out of their homes, eyes wide and sleep forgotten.

The sight they saw before them shocked them to the bone.

In the southwest direction of the village, they were able to catch a glimpse of a face. It was a massive, single-eyed demonic face, peering *over* the village's high defensive wall. Whatever it was, it was enormous, far larger than anything that should have been able to approach unseen. The defensive wall, built tall and sturdy by Belamus himself, now seemed so small, considering the towering height of the beast.

"A Cyclops…" someone whispered, their voice barely audible over the rising wind.

It was a name that struck fear into every goblin's heart.

The Cyclops was one of the most dangerous monsters known to inhabit the Frazes Great Forest, and historically, goblins had never defeated one. They were taught from childhood to run whenever they saw a Cyclops.

Now, one stood just outside their walls, using its overwhelming strength to batter the defenses.

BAM!

The wall groaned under the impact. Belamus's magic-enhanced wall was no ordinary construction; it was strong enough to resist attacks that most monsters could never reach. But even so, it wasn't designed to last forever.

"What… What do we do, Elder?!" Demu cried, eyes wide with panic.

The village elder didn't hesitate.

"The wall will hold a little longer," he said firmly. "Use that time to gather everyone! Now!"

"R-Right!" Demu shouted, his voice cracking slightly. Demu took off at a sprint, rounding up goblins from every corner of the village.

One by one, they assembled near the central square, all of them pale, frightened, and unsure.

"We don't have much time," the village elder said, turning to address them all, "so I'll ask you plainly: do we *run*, or do we *fight*?"

"If we run, that giant freak will destroy the whole village!" one goblin shouted, voice trembling with anger.

"We can't just abandon the village Belamus built!" Arèsa declared, her face flushed with fury. "I'm his parent! I won't allow it! We fight, everyone!"

Her passionate cry was quickly met with reasoned resistance.

"Hold on," another goblin said. "If we all die here, what's the point?"

"Yeah… Don't you think Belamus would be more heartbroken if we died than if the village was destroyed?"

"Ugh… That might be true, but…" Arèsa faltered, words catching in her throat at the sudden rush of logic. "I-I mean, if we can just defeat it, then there's no problem, right?"

"We're talking about a Cyclops here!"

"Can we beat something like that?"

Their eyes turned again to the towering monster beyond the walls. Its single, enormous eye loomed above the barricade, its massive form far exceeding even the wall Belamus had built. The sound of its relentless pounding still rang in the air, echoing like thunder.

Most of the goblins had evolved into hobgoblins, and others had even learned magic, but no matter how much they'd grown, almost none of them could imagine victory against the monster.

However, there was a solution.

"If we join forces with the orcs…" the village elder murmured, eyes narrowing. "We might have a chance."

"The orcs…?" someone echoed.

"Come on, Elder!" Demu objected sharply. "They've probably already *run away*! They were never really part of this village!"

Many goblins nodded in agreement, their resentment still fresh. The village elder turned a quiet gaze toward them.

"Is that true?" he said. "Either way, we need to check. Go find out."

"It's a waste of time," Demu muttered. "They're gone for sure."

"Go see for yourself, Demu." The elder's voice carried a subtle edge—a low, commanding tone that pressed down like a physical weight.

Demu winced under the pressure.

"A-All right, fine! I'll go!" he snapped, spinning on his heel and storming off.

What a joke. Like they'd still be here, he thought bitterly as he headed toward the orcs' quarter.

"What the hell…?" Demu muttered, his voice barely more than a breath.

Demu's eyes widened in disbelief.

Before the south gate, he saw dozens of orcs. They were standing shoulder to shoulder, weapons in hand, facing the roaring Cyclops beyond the walls. At the front of them all, Balbora stood tall, his voice booming.

"We're gonna protect this village with our own hands!" he roared. "Don't fall behind me, you bastards!"

"Yeahhh!!" the orcs roared in unison.

Without hesitation, they charged forward, toward the beast.

Toward the impossible.

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"We should run, Balbora."

The orcs, like the goblins, had gathered to debate their fate the moment the Cyclops appeared.

"Yeah. There's no way we're beating that thing. It's a Cyclops! I bet the goblins are running too. Even if we do, Lord Belamus won't

blame us."

Most of the orcs agreed, as fleeing seemed like the only sensible option. But Balbora stood still, arms folded, unmoved.

"I'm going to fight."

"What?" one of them scoffed. "Why, Balbora? You're our leader now, sure, but you used to be the biggest coward of us all. Don't tell me you're not scared?"

"Of course I'm scared," Balbora said plainly, his voice low and steady.

"Then why—"

"Because I won't break the promise I made to Lord Belamus!" Balbora declared, his voice trembling with emotion. He clearly remembered Belamus's parting words before leaving for the town, which were to protect this village. Balbora owed him everything. And yet, Balbora hadn't always been this way. He was once just another thug among orcs—selfish, violent, and without purpose. Someone who would've scoffed at the idea of keeping promises, even to those who helped him.

Somehow, Belamus was different.

He was powerful—unimaginably so—yet he never flaunted it. He never looked down on anyone. He had helped them, even though they were orcs—creatures most would shun.

To Balbora, Belamus wasn't just a leader. He was something more. He was a hero. And so, Balbora couldn't just stand by and let the village that Belamus built be torn apart.

Even if his legs trembled. Even if his heart screamed at him to run. He would fight.

"Yeah, the Cyclops is terrifying," he conceded, raising his voice. "But we are no longer the orcs we once were. We've evolved—we're *high orcs* now. We're strong!"

He turned to the others, eyes fierce with conviction.

"Did we become stronger just to run away?"

"This strength was given to us by Lord Belamus, wasn't it?" Balbora shouted. "So, shouldn't we *use* it to fulfill the promise we

made to him? Isn't that *right*?"

His words hung heavy in the air. All around him, the orcs looked down, their gazes dropping to the ground. No one dared to argue because what he was saying made perfect sense.

"You might be right, Balbora… but I'm still scared."

"Yeah. We could get killed. That thing is massive… how the hell are we supposed to bring it down?"

"You're scared, too, aren't you? You don't wanna die either, Balbora!"

The fear of death, more than anything, held them back. Orcs were cowardly by nature. When faced with overwhelming danger, fear and retreat came first. Wanting to run was normal, but fighting was something they weren't used to.

Balbora drew in a long breath, then exhaled slowly. Without a word, he clenched his fist and slammed it down hard onto the floor.

"You bastards! Quit whining already!"

His voice exploded through the room, shaking the orcs to their cores.

"Listen good!" he roared. "I'm the biggest coward here! You hear me?! I gave up the girl I liked because I was scared of Lord Rydos! I've turned tail on the battlefield more times than I can count! I pissed myself more than once just because Lord Rydos looked at me the wrong way!"

He was trembling, but he kept going, louder and louder.

"Even now, I still call him 'Lord' Rydos! You know why?! Because I swear, if I drop the title, he's gonna crawl outta his grave and haunt me!" A strained, bitter grin twisted his face. "I'm terrified, all right?! But even so, I'm choosing to fight! What's your excuse, cowards?! Are you men or scared little girls?!"

His voice cracked with emotion, but he kept going, pointing furiously at the others.

"You've got no right to call yourselves orc men! If you're more chicken than *me*, you might as well chop it off and call yourselves women! Hell, I'll do it for you!"

There was a deafening silence as he continued to speak. Balbora stood hunched, panting, chest heaving with every breath. Then he straightened, turned toward the exit, and began walking.

"Where are you going?" one of the orcs asked quietly.

"If you cowards won't fight, then I'll go alone," Balbora said flatly, not looking back. With that, Balbora walked out.

For a few moments, the room remained silent. Then, one of the orcs mumbled under his breath, "I really *don't* want to get castrated…"

That was all it took.

One by one, the orcs stood, muttering things like:

"I'm going too."

"Still got things I wanna do… you know?"

"Not gonna let him show me up."

Just like that, they followed Balbora, charging out after their leader.

Watching the orcs charge toward the Cyclops, Demu felt a bitter heat rise in his chest.

They… they were trying to protect the village more than I was. Way more than someone like me, who was ready to run. I… I was the coward.

As the orcs' battle cries echoed through the air, more goblins began to gather, drawn by the commotion. They watched in silence as the orcs advanced, every one of their faces marked by an uncertain, complicated emotion.

"All right, let's do this!" A high-spirited voice, distinctly Delarosa's, rang out over the murmuring crowd. Without hesitation, she sprinted straight toward the southwest, in the direction of the towering Cyclops.

Halfway there, she skidded to a stop and turned, looking back at the goblins still standing around.

"What are you all doing?!" she shouted, her eyes blazing. "The orcs are out there fighting! So, let's get moving, smash that giant thing, and win already!"

Without waiting for a response, Delarosa turned and bolted toward the monster, her pigtails bouncing behind her.

Her voice snapped the goblins out of their daze.

"She's right! We can't let Delarosa and the orcs outpace us!"

"Let's go!"

Their hesitation shattered and the goblins surged forward, rallying behind the girl's fearless lead.

Before the towering Cyclops, the orcs had already gathered in formation, determined to defeat their enemy. Even as a species known for their size and power, the orcs looked like children compared to the hulking beast in front of them.

They charged in with their iron clubs, aiming blow after blow at the Cyclops's massive legs. Because of its sheer size, the beast's movements were sluggish, which allowed them to hit the animal as much as they could.

Unfortunately, the impact was minimal. They could feel it as each strike connected, but lacked the weight to bring the monster down.

Still, none of them gave up. They swung again and again, determined to bring down the Cyclops.

Finally, the Cyclops retaliated. It raised its enormous fist high into the air and brought it crashing down—a simple attack, but devastating in power. Balbora and two other orcs braced for it, raising their weapons in tandem.

"Rrrraaaggghhh!"

They caught the blow, but the weight was crushing. The ground beneath them cracked, and they struggled to hold it back.

We can't hold this… We're going to be crushed…

As that thought crossed Balbora's mind, he knew he had to act fast.

"*Fireball*!"

"*Rock Blast*!"

The shouted spells rang out like salvation. In the next instant, the Cyclops lifted its hand in defense. It turned its gaze toward the

defensive wall. There, standing tall, were the goblins.

"We've got the magic support covered!" one shouted.

"Let's take down that oversized freak *together*!" cried another.

They hurled spell after spell—explosions of fire, bursts of stone—drawing the Cyclops's attention and buying the orcs precious seconds. Seeing them, Balbora grinned fiercely.

"Reinforcements! All right, you bastards—we're taking it down!"

"Yeahhh!" the orcs shouted in unison, rallying behind him.

With goblins launching volleys of magic from afar and orcs hammering the front line, the tide turned. Together, the two races, once divided, fought as one to achieve victory. Magic rained from above in relentless bursts, while the orcs surged forward with brute strength, forcing the Cyclops back step by step.

Finally, they brought down the monster.

Despite the odds and their fears, not a single life was lost.

The Cyclops was defeated.

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After the Cyclops had been defeated, the goblins and orcs stood face to face.

Demu was the first to speak after considering the situation.

"Forgive me. I misunderstood you," he said, bowing his head low. "You truly are part of this village."

One by one, the other goblins followed suit.

"Sorry, we tried to drive you out."

"If it weren't for you, this village would've been finished."

"Thanks… really."

They offered both apologies and words of gratitude.

"You don't need to apologize or thank us," Balbora said with a shrug. "We're part of this village, too. It's only natural that we had to defend it. From now on, let's keep working together."

Another orc stepped forward, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I'll be honest. I did look down on you, goblins. But after that fight… Damn, you guys are tough. I don't even think I could've taken you in a one-on-one."

"Heh. You orcs are monsters in your own right," a goblin shot back with a grin. "With you around, I think we can finally feel safe here."

They all laughed, joking, teasing, and having easy conversations among themselves. The tension that had hung over the village just a day earlier had vanished and been replaced by a warm, easygoing atmosphere.

The orcs and goblins had finally come together.

"What in the world is going on here…?"

Belamus returned around midday the next day, crates in tow, his eyes narrowing at the sight before him. The orcs and goblins were all together laughing, chatting, and sharing food. He could see that they were all getting along, and he blinked in surprise.

"Aah! Belamus! You're back!" Delarosa came running up, beaming. "Did you bring the souvenir?!"

"I did," he replied, still watching the scene warily. "But… what's happening? Why are the goblins and orcs suddenly so friendly?"

"Umm, let's see…" Delarosa put a finger to her chin. "Back when you went to town, they were still fighting. But then this huge thing attacked the village, and they worked together to beat it! And now they're friends!"

"Hm."

It wasn't the clearest explanation, but it was enough.

Belamus looked around once more at the villagers who had once been on the verge of war and were now laughing shoulder to shoulder. And though unspoken, a quiet warmth flickered in his eyes.

So, they managed it… even without me.

They must have forged a deeper bond by standing united against a common foe, Belamus thought as he watched the laughter ripple through the village square.

"Guess it's what they mean by 'rain hardens the ground,' isn't it?" Belamus murmured, folding his arms as he watched the orcs and goblins chatting like old friends, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Huh? What're you talking about, Belamus?" Delarosa asked, tilting her head.

"It means that while rain is unpleasant, once it ceases, the ground becomes firm and strong. In other words, hardship can sometimes forge a more robust foundation."

"That's dumb. Anyway, the souvenir! Gimme!" Delarosa grinned, holding out both hands in an exaggerated gimme pose.

"Let's wait until we're home and share it with Arèsa…" Belamus said, cracking a small smile.

"Okay, okay! But it's still mine, right? Right*?*" Delarosa chirped, bouncing on her heels as she clung to Belamus's sleeve with eager eyes.

Back at home, Belamus brought out the strawberry jam and bread. The moment they took a bite, both Arèsa and Delarosa lit up with joy, their eyes widening in bliss.

"This is amazing!" Arèsa gasped.

"It's the best thing ever!" Delarosa mumbled between mouthfuls.

After that, Belamus finished unpacking the rest of his supplies and began distributing clothing to the goblins. They were delighted and grateful as they tried on their new outfits.

"We'll wear these from now on!" they declared proudly, examining themselves with excitement.

Unfortunately, the town hadn't sold any clothing large enough to fit the orcs' towering frames. Belamus glanced at the high orcs nearby, still wearing their old gear.

I'll have to make something for them myself, he thought. *They've earned it.*

Chapter 7

"Hmph… so they managed to repel the Cyclops. Not bad," Hereldyne muttered, a twisted smile curling across his shadowed face.

Despite the defeat of the monster he had summoned, his expression showed no hint of disappointment but rather delight.

"Seems they've been training… How precious this village must be to him… I wonder what kind of face he'll make when it all burns."

He tilted his head, eyes gleaming with madness.

"Will he fall into despair? Will he rage? Will he scream until his throat bleeds? *Ahhh,* I can't wait. I *can't wait* to drag him into a pit of agony and hopelessness…"

Hereldyne's voice trembled as he spoke, his body quivering with excitement. Then, with one last look toward the distant village, he turned away.

"One year," he said softly. "In one year… I'll turn that place into *hell.*"

He spoke the words like a promise—gleeful, hungry. And with that, he vanished, his presence dissipating into the forest like a foul wind.

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"Hey, hey, Belamus! Can I have another slice of bread and jam?"

The next morning, Delarosa was already begging for more of the strawberry jam on bread, apparently still reeling from how amazing it had tasted the day before.

"That was the last of it," Belamus replied.

“Whhhaaat! Then go get more!” Delarosa whined, puffing out her cheeks and stomping one foot like a child denied dessert.

“To do that, I’d have to go back to the human town again. Are you okay with me being gone for a while?” Belamus replied calmly, folding his arms.

“Ugh…” Delarosa hesitated, biting her lip. Then, her eyes darting as her brain visibly short-circuited, she started mumbling to herself. “Jam on bread… or Belamus… Jam on bread… Belamus…”

Belamus sighed, raising a hand to his forehead.

“Don’t make that a serious dilemma.”

Just then, Arèsa approached, her voice casual but curious.

“So? Got anything planned today, Belamus?”

“I do, actually. I’m thinking of turning the northeastern cave into a mine. But first, I’ll need to clear out all the monsters inside,” Belamus replied.

“A mine?” Arèsa asked, tilting her head slightly, her ears twitching in curiosity.

“That cave contains Lightstones—crystals that emit light for a long time. They’re incredibly useful. I plan to harvest them in bulk.” Belamus explained, his tone calm and focused.

“Huh. Well, if there’s anything I can help with, say the word.” Arèsa murmured, arms folding as she nodded slowly.

“This one is a monster-clearing job, so there won’t be any need. It’s dangerous. I’ll have the orcs help me—it’ll be fine,” Belamus said, shaking his head.

“As your parent, I guess I should be telling you not to go, but I know you’re stronger than any of us…” Arèsa gave him a resigned smile. “Just be careful out there.”

“I will,” Belamus said with a nod. He turned toward the door, ready to head out.

“I’m coming too!” Delarosa declared, then she rushed after Belamus, her steps quick and determined.

“It’s dangerous, so the answer is no. Stay here and behave,” Belamus said plainly, his voice calm but unwavering.

“Whhhaaat?!” Delarosa cried, puffing her cheeks. “I’m the strongest one in the village besides you, Belamus! I’d totally be useful!”

“No. Even if you’re strong, I won’t let you go monster hunting,” Belamus said flatly, his eyes narrowing just slightly.

“But I wanna gooo! Take me with you!” she whined, stomping one foot and crossing her arms. As Delarosa began to throw a tantrum, Belamus sighed and glanced over at Arèsa.

“Can you talk some sense into her?”

Arèsa gave a small shrug.

“Honestly? I don’t see any problem here. Let her go. She’s gotten stronger and was the most impressive one during the Cyclops fight, too.”

“But still—” Belamus began.

“If she’s staying in this village,” Arèsa interrupted, “then eventually she’ll have to fight monsters anyway. Better to train her now, don’t you think?”

Belamus was silent, considering the point.

She’s right, he thought. *Delarosa’s already become one of the village’s most important fighters. If there’s ever a time I can’t act… she’s the one we’ll be relying on most.*

“Fine…” he said at last. “You can come.”

“Yeaaah! Monster hunt time!” Delarosa shouted, practically vibrating with excitement.

Do goblin girls have a battle instinct, too? Belamus wondered dryly, watching her skip around with joy.

Though still mildly uneasy, he accepted the decision and headed out, Delarosa walking eagerly at his side. Then, they arrived at the orcs’ camp.

“Ah—Lord Belamus!” Balbora called out, straightening his posture as he spotted them.

“We’re heading to the northeastern cave to clear out the monsters,” Belamus said. “I’d like to borrow a few orcs… just whoever isn’t busy.”

"No problem at all!" Balbora replied with a grin. "I've got nothing going on, so I'm in! I'll go round up the others!"

He dashed off, and within a few minutes, he returned with a small army of orcs, nearly twenty strong.

"Got a lot of volunteers! Is this enough?"

"More than enough," Belamus replied. "Honestly, it might even be too many. But I suppose there's no harm in bringing extra muscle."

And so, Belamus, Delarosa, and a company of orcs made their way toward the northeastern cave. Before long, they arrived at their destination.

"All right," Belamus began, facing the group. "Today's task is to clear out all the monsters inside the cave. It's fairly big, but there's nothing particularly dangerous inside. With our numbers, this won't take long. Let's begin."

"Yeahhh!" the orcs shouted in unison, spirits high.

The sweep began immediately. The monsters lurking within the cave were predominantly weak: Arrow Spiders, Dark Rabbits, Big Snakes, and Cave Turtles. Amongst them, the Arrow Spiders were probably the strongest, yet even they posed little threat to the assembled group.

As the group moved deeper into the cavern, the first encounter occurred swiftly—a Dark Rabbit darted from the shadows. But before anyone else could react, Delarosa raised her hand and shouted: "*Fireball*!"

A brilliant orb of flame shot from her palm, slamming into the creature and consuming it in a burst of heat and smoke.

Belamus's eyes narrowed slightly.

Fireball is an entry-level spell… Its base power is relatively low. But the one Delarosa just cast had serious force behind it.

Magic becomes stronger depending on the caster's magical power reserves… and hers have clearly grown. She might already qualify for evolution into a Magic Goblin.

The conditions were specific: a hobgoblin had to consume a substantial number of Arrow Spiders and possess *exceptionally* high magical power. From what Belamus could sense, Delarosa's magical power had already surpassed the threshold, and all that remained was to eat enough spiders.

Since we're already here, he thought, *I may as well gather the spider corpses.*

To evolve, Delarosa would need to consume at least ten Arrow Spiders. That part worried Belamus a little.

Will she be able to eat that many? he wondered, glancing over at her.

They thoroughly swept the cave, hunting down every last monster and leaving nothing behind.

Belamus briefly considered leaving some of the Arrow Spiders alive. After all, they were key to evolution. But in the end, he decided against it. They existed outside this cave as well, and the group had found enough that, once preserved, the supply would last quite a while.

With so many orcs helping, the job was finished far faster than anticipated. They hauled the carcasses out together—fifty Arrow Spiders in total. Belamus transported thirty with magic, while the orcs carried the rest.

Before leaving, Belamus sealed the cave entrance with a protective barrier, preventing any new monsters from entering. Then, they returned to the village.

"Delarosa," Belamus said as they arrived. "Do you want to evolve?"

"Huh? I can evolve?! Yes, yes—I totally do!" Delarosa's eyes sparkled as she nearly leaped in place.

"Then you need to eat ten Arrow Spiders," Belamus said matter-of-factly, his expression calm as always.

"Wait… Those gross spiders?" Delarosa asked, recoiling as her face twisted in horror.

"That's right," Belamus replied with a nod, utterly unbothered.

"You mean… like… ten legs or something?" she asked hopefully, her eyes wide with desperation.

"No. I mean ten entire spiders," Belamus said flatly.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAT?!"

Her horrified shriek echoed through the village.

"Don't worry. I'm not telling you to eat them all at once. You can take your time and work through them little by little."

Belamus had already applied preservation magic to the carcasses and stored them in the food chamber, which would give her time to work through the supply.

"No…" Delarosa said, eyes burning with determination. "I'll do it. I'll evolve fast! I'll power through it!"

She was fired up, her desire to evolve outweighing her disgust.

"I see. In that case, I'll start preparing some dishes using Arrow Spider meat. You're probably going to be stuck eating it for the next ten days or so. Do your best to endure," Belamus said, folding his arms as he nodded to himself.

"Ugh… Ten days…" Delarosa groaned, her ears drooping as she slumped forward in despair, already regretting her bold declaration.

And so, Delarosa's ten-day nightmare began.

While she was facing her private culinary hell, Belamus had no intention of slacking off. He taught Arèsa how to prepare various Arrow Spider recipes, then put out a call for helpers to assist in launching the next stage of the operation: mining.

That was quicker than I expected, Belamus thought, surveying the group that had assembled.

Five goblins. Three orcs.

More had volunteered, but he chose only the fastest responders, especially as there was no need for more.

The mining wouldn't be done with tools. It was all magic-based. Magic to carve out stone was relatively easy to learn. He also needed to teach them *Magic Thread*, the spell used for transportation. That, too, wasn't especially difficult to pick up.

Once they've learned the basics, the rest comes down to their individual feel for it, Belamus mused. *Not something I can teach. Still, I can't just stand around doing nothing while they train…*

He paused, then nodded to himself.

Right. If I make a proper path to the northeastern cave, it'll make transportation far more efficient. Walking through a dense forest slows everything down, so I'll clear a route.

With that decision, Belamus began his task. Using wind magic, he felled the trees obstructing the path. Next, with earth magic, he unearthed the roots and leveled the ground, finally smoothing and compacting the soil into a clean, walkable trail.

None of these spells was complex for someone of his caliber. It took about three days to complete, but for Belamus, it was light work. By the time he finished shaping the final stretch of the road, the group had gotten the results they wanted.

"I finally got it!" an orc shouted triumphantly. One of the orcs, who had been struggling with the *Magic Thread* spell, had finally mastered it.

"Good. Then let's begin mining," Belamus declared, gathering the group and leading them back to the cave.

"We'll be collecting Lightstones," Belamus instructed, holding one up for the group to see.

Some of them lay loose on the cave floor, while others were buried in glowing clusters along the walls and ceilings. The more they could harvest, the better. A single shard could illuminate a wide area, but there was a catch: they degraded quickly. After about a month of use, a Lightstone would burn out and need to be replaced, which meant they needed a *lot*.

The mining work began in earnest. Everyone seemed to be using their magic properly, and before long, they had extracted a considerable number of Lightstones.

Belamus worked alongside them for about three days. After that, he left the task in the hands of the orcs and goblins. They had grown familiar with the process, and more importantly, Belamus had

other responsibilities. One of them was crafting a lighting system using crystals.

We don't have glass or anything like it in this village, Belamus thought, furrowing his brow. *So, how should I do this?*

After some contemplation, he devised a simple solution. He carved the Lightstones into elongated shapes and bored a small hole through the top of each one. Threading cords through those holes, he tied them off, creating a design that could be easily carried or hung in place.

They weren't exactly lamps, but they worked just fine. To activate them, one simply had to cast the *Light* spell on the crystal. To extinguish it, they would use a dark-element spell called *Dark*.

With the help of the villagers, Belamus crafted a large number of these makeshift lanterns. Then, they placed them throughout the village—hanging from beams, posts, and doorways—bringing light to every corner.

Belamus spent time teaching the villagers how to use them. Most, aside from the orcs, could already cast *Light* without issue. However, many still struggled with *Dark*, so he taught that as well.

As for the orcs, magic didn't come as naturally to them as it did to goblins. It took time and effort, but eventually, they learned to use the basic *Light* and *Dark* spells. And from that night forward, for the first time ever, the goblin-and-orc village glowed with a gentle, radiant light—even after the sun went down.

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"Uwaaaah! I hate this! I can't eat anymore! It's gross, it's awful, I'm done!" Delarosa wailed, her face pale and her hands flailing in dramatic protest.

It was the tenth night of her all-Arrow Spider diet. And this final dish was all that stood between her and evolution. But it seemed her tolerance had finally snapped.

"I hate it, I hate it! I've been dreaming about them! It's been a nightmare! I can't take it anymore!"

"This is the last one," Belamus said firmly. "You've come this far—don't waste it now. Just eat it."

Technically, the progress wouldn't be lost even if she gave up then, but Belamus had gone through the trouble of preparing a proper meal, and he was determined to see her finish it.

"Ugh… *hic*… I don't want it to be for nothing…" Delarosa sniffled, wiping her eyes with the back of her sleeve.

"Then eat," Belamus said, picking up a spider leg and holding it near her mouth. "Come on, open up."

"No! W-Wait, I need a moment to mentally prepare!" Delarosa cried, holding up both hands as if to ward off the approaching spider leg, her voice trembling with desperation.

"Hmph. It's easier if you just get it over with in one go," Belamus replied dryly, raising an eyebrow as he held the leg near her face.

"Okay… Okay, I get it… I'll eat it… I'll eat it…" she muttered under her breath, her eyes locked on the plate like it was her executioner, shoulders quivering as she braced herself.

Muttering under her breath like a doomed prisoner, Delarosa stared at the dish with deadened eyes. Then, suddenly, she grabbed the spider leg in both hands and shoved it into her mouth, chewing furiously. She tore through it with grim determination, swallowing it with the desperate strength of someone seeking salvation.

The moment she swallowed the last bite, she flopped onto the floor, face down, utterly spent.

"You all right?" Belamus asked, crouching beside her.

"Mmmngh…"

He could tell she didn't sound all right.

She was, in every sense of the word, done.

Maybe I pushed her too hard, Belamus thought, watching her twitch on the floor like a defeated soldier. *She did say she wanted to evolve quickly, but… yeah, maybe I should've spaced it out more.*

The next morning, Delarosa noticed a significant change in her body.

"Aha ha ha ha ha! Look, look at my horn! Isn't it awesome?!" Delarosa shouted, spinning in circles with uncontainable glee.

Delarosa had evolved. She was now a Magic Goblin, and she couldn't have been more thrilled. It was as if yesterday's spider-induced meltdown had never happened. Delarosa had made a full recovery, and she was *radiating* happiness, floating on cloud nine.

As a Magic Goblin, the horn on her forehead had grown noticeably larger, and its color had shifted from her usual reddish-brown skin tone to a striking, gleaming blue.

That day, Delarosa spent every waking moment parading through the village, proudly showing off her new horn to every goblin in sight.

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One morning, without warning, Arèsa approached Belamus and spoke with a rare hint of concern in her voice.

"Belamus, don't you think you're working a little *too* hard lately?"

Now that she mentioned it, Belamus realized he'd been in perpetual motion, tirelessly working day and night for the village's sake. In his mind, however, such ceaseless effort had always felt entirely natural, demanding no rest.

"This is all necessary," he replied calmly. "I'm not tired, so there's no problem."

"That's not the point," Arèsa said with a sigh, folding her arms. "It's not just about you. Honestly, some of us, including myself, feel a little guilty watching you do so much on your own. A few goblins even tried to match your pace and ended up getting sick."

"What…? Is that true?" Belamus asked, his eyes narrowing slightly as he turned to face Arèsa, a flicker of concern breaking

through his usually composed tone.

"It is," she said firmly. "That's why I'm telling you to take a break. Everyone understands how much you care about this village. They *see* that. And that's exactly why you need to show them it's okay to rest too."

"Hmm…"

She's right, Belamus thought. *When one person shoulders too much, it weighs on the rest. I should have noticed that sooner*, he realized.

"Very well… I'll rest for the day."

But what does one do to rest?

The moment the words left his mouth, Belamus realized he hadn't the faintest idea.

I'm not exactly used to taking breaks.

He mulled it over for a moment, then remembered something.

Ah… that's right. I bought those art supplies when I went to town. I'd nearly forgotten…

With a soft breath, he made up his mind.

It's been a while. Perhaps I'll try drawing again.

Choosing to keep it simple, he gathered only the essentials: a few sheets of paper, a stick of charcoal, and a drawing board.

With his art supplies in hand, Belamus made his way to the village square at the center of town. He hadn't decided what to draw yet, but figured he'd find inspiration once he got there.

"Hey, Belamus. Are you working again today?" A goblin greeted him casually as he passed through the plaza.

"Not today," Belamus replied. "I'm taking a break."

"Ohh? That's rare for you. Huh? What's all that?" The goblin's eyes immediately fixed on the bundle in Belamus's arms.

"These are drawing tools: paper, a board, and charcoal," Belamus explained.

"Drawing, huh? You like doing that sort of thing?"

"I do."

“I see. Ah, gotta run, I’ve got something to do. But hey, if you finish something, show me later, will ya?”

“I plan to show everyone in the village.”

“Heh, looking forward to it.”

With a grin, the goblin waved and wandered off. Belamus turned back to the plaza, looking up toward the open sky.

“I suppose I should live up to those expectations,” he murmured. “Now… what should I draw?”

He paused, considering something simple. Landscapes took too much time, and today wasn’t about precision.

Perhaps a portrait.

Though technically, not a “portrait” in the traditional human sense—more like a goblin or orc-trait.

As he stood contemplating his subject, he heard a voice.

“Belamuuus! What are you doing?” Delarosa’s familiar voice rang out. She wasn’t alone. She had two other young goblin girls trailing behind her. Delarosa ran up, eyeing the supplies in Belamus’s arms with exaggerated curiosity.

“What’s with the paper and charcoal? Are you gonna make something?”

The goblin beside her, a girl with short red hair and a tough expression, squinted at him.

“What’s that for, huh? Are you making stuff or what, Belamus?” she asked bluntly. That was Navasha. Despite her boyish haircut and sharp tongue, she was a girl and the same age as Delarosa.

The other girl stepped up more hesitantly. She had long black hair and a quiet, gentle air.

“Um… W-What are you going to do with those, Belamus?” she asked softly. That was Medello, also the same age, and the most reserved of the trio.

“I was just about to start drawing,” Belamus replied calmly.

“Huh? What are you gonna draw?” Delarosa asked, tilting her head, clearly intrigued.

“I was just about to decide,” Belamus replied, glancing down at his sketch materials. “I’m thinking of drawing a goblin or an orc, but I haven’t chosen who yet.”

“Oooh! Then draw me!” Delarosa beamed, puffing her chest out with pride.

Belamus saw no reason to refuse.

“Very well. Sit over there and stay still.” He pointed to one of the benches set around the square.

“Okay!” Delarosa skipped over and plopped herself down.

After about thirty seconds, she spoke up.

“I’m bored!”

“I expected this… but that was fast,” Belamus muttered as she immediately sprang up and ran off.

Staying still had never been her strong suit.

“Hey! Wait up, Delarosa!” Navasha dashed after her, hollering as she disappeared from view.

Belamus let out a sigh.

“Now, who else…?”

“Um, Belamus,” a soft voice piped up beside him. “I’m good at sitting still, so if you want to draw me, I don’t mind.”

It was Medello; her hands folded in front of her, cheeks faintly pink.

“That would help. Please, take a seat.” Belamus said with a small nod, already adjusting his charcoal as he glanced toward the bench.

“Okay,” Medello replied softly. She carefully sat on the bench, folding her hands in her lap.

Belamus stood, observing her carefully from a few steps away. Then, he began to draw.

“Uhhh… It’s kind of embarrassing being stared at like this…” Medello fidgeted, squirming slightly under his focused gaze.

She really was the shy type, and it was evident all over her face.

“Belamus… why do you draw?” Trying to distract herself, she threw out a question.

“Because I enjoy it,” he answered simply.

“But… why do you enjoy it?” Medello asked, her voice barely above a whisper as she peeked up at Belamus, curiosity flickering behind her shyness.

“A good question.”

Belamus’s eyes lit up.

“You see, drawing is the pursuit of essence—it’s not merely copying a subject’s shape. Instead, you’re observing, understanding, and capturing its very soul. Whether through light, form, movement, or silence—each element conveys a truth deeper than words…”

And just like that, he launched into a full lecture on his philosophy of art—technique, composition, metaphor, and symbolism. It was equal parts heartfelt and encyclopedic.

Medello blinked.

Ah… I really shouldn’t have asked that, she thought, shifting in her seat as the flood of artistic passion washed over her. Belamus kept talking at length.

“… And that,” he concluded with scholarly satisfaction, “is why drawing holds such value. Do you understand now?”

“Y-Yeah… I think so…” Medello replied with a tight-lipped smile, nodding along even as her expression twitched slightly from information overload.

“Good. I finished the sketch while we were talking. Want to see it?” Belamus asked, his tone calm but faintly pleased.

“R-Really? I’d love to!” she said, leaning forward with hopeful anticipation.

“Here,” Belamus said, handing over the paper.

Medello froze as soon as her gaze fell on the drawing, unable to find words. Her smile stiffened, and her soul left her body.

“Hey, Belamus! Are you still drawing?” Just then, Delarosa came bouncing by with Navasha in tow.

“No. I’ve just finished,” Belamus replied.

“Oooh, show meee!” Delarosa chirped.

“I wanna see, too!” Navasha added, peeking over Medello’s shoulder.

“Here it is.” Belamus handed the sketch over proudly.

“… Huh?”

“… What *is* this?”

Both girls blinked.

“That’s Medello,” Belamus said plainly.

“Huhhh?! No way it’s her!” Delarosa shouted, her face scrunching in disbelief.

“I thought it was supposed to be an orc!” Navasha barked, half laughing and half horrified.

“What? It clearly looks like Medello,” Belamus said, frowning as he looked over his work.

Delarosa and Navasha leaned closer to inspect it again.

The features were off.

The proportions were strange.

The eyes didn’t match in size, the nose was drawn at a weird angle, and the jawline looked like it had melted halfway through.

The clothes were off, and the neck was way too thin.

“This is supposed to be… *Medello*?” Delarosa blinked, then slowly turned to Belamus.

“Belamus, you…”

“… You’re really bad at drawing, huh?”

Delarosa and Navasha's voices overlapped in perfect, merciless harmony.

"What did you just say?" Belamus snapped, eyes narrowing.

He had spent a significant portion of his previous life drawing. He'd started at fifty, thinking it would be a nice hobby for his retirement. He'd kept at it until he was eighty-five—right up until his death at eighty-eight. That was thirty-five years of practice.

Sure, he'd started late, and his progress was slow, but still, he had always believed he was at least decent.

"Don't be ridiculous. There's no way my drawing is bad."

"Huhhh, but this doesn't look like Medello at all," Delarosa said, scrunching her nose.

"Yeah, I'm not even sure it looks like a *goblin,* honestly," Navasha added with a deadpan expression.

"Absurd. Medello, what do *you* think? This is obviously your portrait, right?" Belamus asked, thrusting the sketch toward her with stubborn confidence.

"U-Um…"

Medello fidgeted in place, visibly torn between honesty and kindness. After a moment of agonized hesitation, she bowed her head slightly and said: "I'm sorry… but… this doesn't look like me."

"Impossible…"

For the first time, the unshakable Belamus faltered. In his previous life, everyone had praised his work.

"Excellent composition."

"Very expressive linework."

"Such control for a late bloomer."

But now… now that he thought back on it, it worried him even more.

Weren't they all smiling just a little too tightly? Weren't their compliments always a little… stiff?

He had been a *Great Sage,* well-respected and feared.

Would anyone have *dared* tell him the truth?

Were they just being polite… because they were afraid?

If that was the case, then he hadn't been a skilled artist at all, but a fool. A foolish sage deluding himself for three and a half decades with well-meant lies.

"That can't be right…" Belamus muttered under his breath.

Then, standing stiffly, he declared, "I'll ask others. I need more opinions."

With wounded pride but desperate determination, he began roaming the village, showing his drawing to anyone who would look.

The answers he received?

Well, they weren't much better.

"Huh? What is *this*? Wait, you *drew* this? Is this Medello? Oh, sweetheart, I thought it was that shock-monkey I saw in the forest years ago," one of the village's older goblin women said, laughing without malice.

"This is supposed to be Medello…" the village elder muttered, grimacing as he studied the image. "Belamus… it seems you're not very skilled at drawing."

Even Balbora looked shaken.

"So even Lord Belamus has a flaw?" he murmured, like a priest glimpsing divinity's cracked façade.

No matter who he asked, the answers were the same. In the end, Belamus had no choice but to accept the truth that his drawing was, in fact, terrible.

He returned home quietly, a heavy cloud of shame hanging over him like a physical weight.

"There, there," Delarosa said awkwardly outside the house, patting his arm. "It's okay, you know. Everybody's bad at something."

It was the first time Delarosa had ever comforted him, which somehow made it even more humiliating.

"We're back!" Delarosa called out brightly, her voice echoing into the house as she pushed the door open with both hands.

"We're home!" Medello chimed in right behind her, stretching the words playfully as she stepped inside.

“Welcome back,” Arèsa called from the entrance, greeting them with her usual calm tone.

Belamus walked straight inside, not saying a word. He tucked his art supplies away in silence and dropped the offending sketch somewhere nearby, not caring where it landed.

“Huh…? Something’s off with Belamus,” Arèsa said quietly. Having spent so much time around him, she could immediately discern when something was amiss.

“Umm, well…” Delarosa fidgeted. “He’s kind of upset because his drawing turned out bad…”

Arèsa blinked in surprise.

Even Belamus gets discouraged?

He was always so composed and unshakably mature for a child; his expression rarely shifted, his resolve never faltered.

She glanced down at the crumpled piece of paper nearby, picked it up, and looked at it.

“That… That is…” Belamus began, clearly nervous about showing his work. The drawing wasn’t exactly masterful, but it radiated effort and sincerity. It was obvious he had poured his heart into it. Arèsa recognized that much immediately.

“I think it’s a good picture,” she said, nodding with gentle approval. “The others might not see it, but I do. Yeah, I really do.”

“Really?” Belamus turned to her with astonishing speed, eyes wide with hope.

“Really, really. Especially the eyes. You must’ve worked hard on those, right?”

“You could tell?” he said, lighting up. “Yes, exactly. I put a lot of focus into the eyes…”

With that, Belamus launched into an eager explanation of the drawing, his voice animated as he talked about the details. Arèsa listened patiently, nodding all the while, clearly enjoying his enthusiasm.

“All right,” he declared suddenly, “I’ll draw you next time, Mother.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Arèsa said with a smile.

“I should improve a little before then,” he added, already making plans. From that moment, Belamus decided he would start taking occasional breaks from work to practice his art.

Yet even as he felt that quiet resolve, a vague unease stirred in him—there was still something missing in this village. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but the feeling lingered. He stood for a while, lost in thought, searching for the elusive answer.

Before he could grasp it, Arèsa’s voice cut through his reverie. “Belamus, Delarosa, come on, we’re going for a wash!”

To the west of the village flowed a small river, enclosed safely within their protective walls. Every few days, the goblins would head there for a communal bath. It was a simple but necessary ritual.

Belamus turned to follow, then paused as realization struck. “That’s it. A bath.”

He had finally found what the village lacked.

In this world, there were no cultures or races with a daily bathing custom. Such a routine simply didn’t exist. But Belamus had lived differently in his previous life. Back then, he had taken baths nearly every day, and the reason for that habit had been one of his disciples.

During his time as a Great Sage, he had taught a peculiar student who possessed an extraordinary breadth of foreign knowledge. That disciple, above all else, had been obsessed with bathing—he claimed he couldn’t function properly without a daily bath.

The disciple’s passion for bathing was so profound that he even invented magic specifically to create high-quality baths. He poured his energy into perfecting the experience, developing spells and tools to enhance comfort and effectiveness. Encouraged by the disciple’s enthusiasm, Belamus eventually adopted the habit himself. Once he began bathing daily, he found it surprisingly enjoyable and, before long, it became an ingrained part of his routine.

The vague sense that something was missing in the village likely stemmed from the absence of this ritual. It wasn't just about cleanliness—it was the comfort, the rhythm, the moment of peace that the bath brought. That day, after the usual river wash, Belamus decided that he would build a proper bath the next day.

He chose to start small. Since he wasn't sure whether anyone besides himself would even want to bathe, he planned to invite only Arèsa and Delarosa at first. If they liked it, he'd build a larger facility that the whole village could use freely. This first location would be right next to his house, which would be convenient and private.

Construction wasn't difficult. First, Belamus used magic to create the basic bath structure: five stone slabs—one for the base, and four for the walls. Using precise spells, he bonded them seamlessly to form a watertight rectangular tub. With the structure complete, he turned to heating the water.

Using the spell *Burning Water*, he summoned steaming hot water into the tub. His former disciple had once gone to great lengths to engineer magical tools capable of producing mineral-rich, therapeutic water; baths that soothed shoulder pain, eased backaches, and more. Unfortunately, Belamus lacked the materials in this village to recreate those devices.

Still, he made do with what he had available. Carefully, he began mixing in cooler water using a separate spell, gradually adjusting the temperature. When the water reached just the right warmth, he constructed a privacy enclosure around the bath and added a door for easy access.

The bath was finished.

Without delay, Belamus stripped down and stepped into the tub.

"Ahhh… this is the best," he sighed, sinking into the water.

It had been so long since he had last soaked in a real bath. The warmth seeped into his body, melting away tension. He found himself regretting not having built one sooner. Lost in the comfort, he let time slip by.

Then, a startled voice rang out.

“What is this?” Delarosa exclaimed.

A faint trail of steam had begun to rise from behind Belamus’s house, and it didn’t go unnoticed.

“Hey, isn’t there some kind of smoke coming from over there?” came Medello’s curious voice.

“Think Belamus made something again?” Navasha chimed in, sounding intrigued.

Before long, Delarosa spotted the small wooden door leading into the bath area. “There’s a door! Let’s take a look,” she said, already stepping forward and pulling it open.

Inside, Belamus was soaking peacefully in the warm water, enjoying the bath he had built for himself. His eyes flicked over to the children entering.

“Hey, Belamus, what are you doing?” Delarosa asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“I’m taking a bath,” he answered simply.

“A bath? What’s that?” she asked again, blinking.

Belamus saw the opportunity to introduce the idea of bathing to the younger generation.

“It’s a way to clean yourself by soaking in hot water. But it’s not just about getting clean, it warms your body and feels good, too.”

“Oooh,” Delarosa replied with interest.

“We were playing just now and got all dirty anyway,” Navasha added. “Let’s get in!”

“Yeah, let’s do it!” Delarosa agreed without hesitation.

“I think I’ll join too…” Medello said quietly, though she didn’t sound entirely convinced.

As the three of them stepped toward the bath, Belamus quickly stopped them. “Hold on! You can’t get in with your clothes on.”

“Oh, right!” Delarosa said, reaching for her tunic. “We have to take them off!”

“We totally forgot,” Navasha laughed.

With casual ease, both Delarosa and Navasha stripped off their clothes, seemingly unconcerned. But Medello froze, her eyes wide.

“Wait… Are we seriously undressing? In front of Belamus?” she whispered, clearly flustered. Unlike the others, Medello had reached a point where modesty mattered to her. She clutched the hem of her shirt, hesitating to take it off.

Delarosa, already halfway into the water, turned around impatiently. “What are you doing, Medello? Hurry up and take your clothes off!”

“B-But Belamus is right here… I don’t think I can…” Medello mumbled, shrinking back.

Navasha let out an exaggerated sigh. “You’re so slow! I’ll help you out!”

“W-Wait! No—ahhh!”

Before Medello could react, Navasha lunged and gleefully yanked off her clothes, eliciting a startled shriek that echoed around the enclosure.

“Hey, you two, don’t force someone into the bath if they don’t want to go,” Belamus said firmly, his voice calm but disapproving.

“But she said she wanted to get in at first!” Delarosa protested. “And Medello is all dirty, too. She should totally take a bath.”

“Ugh… It’s just…” Medello hesitated, cheeks flushed as she tried to explain herself. After a moment of silence, she finally sighed in defeat. “Okay… I’ll get in…”

She stepped closer to the tub, her face beet red, hands covering herself awkwardly as she tried to preserve some sense of modesty. Belamus, understanding her discomfort, respectfully turned his gaze away to give her some privacy.

“All right then, let’s all get in together!” Delarosa called out cheerfully.

“Yeah!” Navasha shouted, full of energy.

“Ugh…” Medello still looked like she wanted to crawl into the water and disappear, but she followed the others in.

The moment their feet touched the water, delighted voices rang out.

“Whoa!”

“This feels amazing!”

“Told you so,” Belamus replied with a small smile.

“Washing in the river’s fine, but this is way better!”

“Yeah, totally!”

“I-It… does feel kinda nice…” Medello admitted hesitantly.

The bath was a hit with the children. Whether the adults would feel the same remained to be seen, but for now, Belamus was satisfied. He sat back in the water, relaxing as Delarosa and Navasha began splashing and trying to swim, prompting him to scold them gently for treating the bath like a pool.

Later, he invited the adult goblins to try the bath as well. To his relief, they responded positively. Unfortunately, the bath was too small to accommodate those with larger bodies. Belamus made a mental note to build a larger one specifically for them and let them test it later.

With the experiment a success, Belamus decided to build a proper public bathhouse that all goblins could use freely.

First, I’ll need to build a large enough structure, he thought, already envisioning the project. *It has to be divided by gender, of course. I’ll make the building big enough to hold two large baths. Then, I’ll need to process some wood to make buckets and repurpose old clothes into towels, ensuring everyone can properly wash themselves.*

Resolved, Belamus rolled up his sleeves and got straight to work.

To construct the bathhouse, Belamus used the *Magic House* spell. Creating a building of such size required a substantial amount of magical power, draining more of his reserves than he had anticipated.

Once the structure was complete, he turned his attention to making buckets. Fortunately, when the village had expanded, they had cut down a significant number of trees, and a large stockpile of lumber remained. While goblins in the village already used buckets in their daily lives, the standard size felt a bit too bulky for bathing.

Wanting something more suitable, Belamus approached Ranura—a goblin with a knack for crafting wooden items like chairs and tables—and asked if she could make smaller buckets for the bath. She readily agreed to help.

At the same time, Belamus began repurposing old, worn-out clothing into towels. This task was relatively easy with the help of magic; a few slicing spells made short work of the fabric. He handled this part himself, working quickly and efficiently.

I'll also need someone to oversee the bathhouse operations, Belamus thought as he worked. *Someone has to fill the tubs, handle post-bath cleanup, and maintain order. If no one volunteers, I guess I'll have to do it myself…*

With that in mind, he walked through the village explaining the new public bathhouse system to the goblins and asked if anyone was willing to help maintain it. He had expected little response—after all, the villagers all had their own tasks and responsibilities—but to his surprise, the reactions were overwhelmingly positive.

"If I can bathe in that thing every day, I'd say it's worth the work. Count me in!" one goblin said eagerly.

"If it's Belamus asking, I'll help. That bath felt amazing, after all," another chimed in.

In the end, fifty goblins volunteered. Of course, such a number wasn't needed daily, so Belamus established a rotating schedule where duties would be divided by day. The system was efficient and manageable.

He then trained a few of the volunteers to use the spell for producing hot water. Once they mastered it, the operation became largely self-sustaining.

Three days later, Ranura finished crafting the new buckets. With all the pieces in place, the public bathhouse officially opened for use.

The feedback from the goblins was overwhelmingly positive. The bathhouse not only became a cherished addition to village life, but it subtly reshaped their daily rhythms. A new routine was taking root—one of warmth, comfort, and a touch more dignity.

Belamus didn’t forget about the orcs. After the success of the goblin bathhouse, he set about constructing a bath large enough to accommodate their much larger bodies. However, this posed a logistical challenge. The existing village layout didn’t have enough space for such a massive structure.

To solve this, Belamus opted to expand the village itself. He dismantled part of the outer gate, rebuilt it further outward, and then began construction on the new building. The process was far more time-consuming than the goblin bathhouse; between expanding the walls, clearing land, and erecting the oversized structure, it took nearly seven full days to complete.

In the end, though, the effort paid off. Just like the goblins, the orcs thoroughly enjoyed their new bath. Seeing their satisfaction, Belamus felt the long hours and hard work had been more than worth it.

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In the dim stillness of the night, Hereldyne stood silently before a massive, pitch-black sphere. The object loomed in front of him, its surface smooth and ominous, with two gaping holes carved into its top and bottom. As shadows clung to the landscape around him, he muttered under his breath, “Now then… It’s about time.”

He reached out and pressed his hand against the cold surface of the sphere. A moment later, his voice shifted into a rhythmic cadence, chanting a spell steeped in dark purpose. The air around him grew thick with tension, and soon a sound rose from the depths of the earth, which was distant but unmistakable: the shifting, scuttling movement of countless creatures awakening and preparing to move.

Hereldyne’s lips curled into a cruel smile, his eyes glinting with malice in the gloom.

“Just… a little more…” he whispered, his voice low and dangerous.

Then, with a sense of finality, he declared, “Now, we will crush everything he holds dear.”

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There exists a type of monster known as the Alraune.

They are plant-based creatures with a humanoid appearance, specifically that of a human woman. However, unlike humans, Alraunes have grass-like strands growing from their heads instead of hair, and blooming flower crowns atop their skulls. There are no male Alraunes; in fact, the species has no gender distinction at all. Like ordinary plants, they reproduce through pollination, with their head-borne flowers producing seeds to propagate their kind.

Alraunes are proficient in magic and possess moderate strength, yet their nature is gentle and intelligent. They rarely initiate violence, choosing instead to live in peaceful coexistence unless provoked.

Despite their peaceful disposition, the Alraunes’ village now stood on the brink of disaster.

“Ugh…” one Alraune winced, her expression twisted with unease. The threat loomed close—an ominous, growing sound echoed from the south. The relentless movement of many creatures was drawing nearer by the moment.

“Lady Ellency! Your decision, please!” another cried, her voice tinged with urgency and fear.

A group of Alraunes had gathered, all wearing pained, conflicted expressions. The danger was real and immediate, and they knew that hesitation could spell ruin.

“We’ll flee… We must abandon the village,” Ellency said at last, her voice resolute.

Once the decision was made, she wasted no time. In a swift and coordinated effort, the Alraunes began evacuating, gathering

their people and leaving behind the homes they had cultivated for generations.

As she fled, Ellency cast one last glance over her shoulder, her eyes dark with fury and sorrow.

"Damn you… Legion Ants…" she muttered, the name dripping with venom.

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"All right, time to head out," Belamus said as he stepped outside after finishing breakfast.

"Wait for meee! Belamus! I'm coming too!" Delarosa's voice rang out behind him as she dashed to catch up.

It had been over six years since Belamus had reincarnated into this village. He had grown taller, his posture more assured, and his presence more integral to the life around him. As he walked through the familiar paths of the village, he took in the sights—small details that marked the steady evolution of a place he had come to call home.

Starting from the age of five, he had spent more than a year focused on rebuilding the village. The transformation was remarkable. Food shortages were a thing of the past—no one starved anymore. The houses, once dilapidated, had been repaired and strengthened. Clothing had improved as well, both in quality and comfort. The goblins had all evolved into hobgoblins or higher, growing physically stronger. Thanks to this, no one had died on hunts for quite some time.

The defensive wall Belamus had built had also played a key role in the village's safety. No monsters had breached the perimeter since its construction. Even the installation of lamps powered by luminous stones had brought light to their once-dark nights, making life easier and more secure.

At first, relations with the orcs had been strained, but they were now fully integrated into the community. The village population had grown, fostering a livelier and more vibrant atmosphere.

Belamus had initially pursued a simple goal of forging a better life for the goblins. Yet over time, that aspiration had broadened. It was no longer just about the goblins—it was about everyone. The orcs, too, were part of this home. Now, he wanted to develop the village not just for survival, but for prosperity, happiness, and a deeper sense of belonging.

Maybe it's because I've come to love everyone here… because I've grown attached to this place, Belamus reflected. *That's why my goal has changed.*

Even if others might have said, "It's good enough as it is," Belamus didn't believe that; he saw what was still lacking. While the essentials for life—food, shelter, safety—were now in place, there was almost nothing devoted to leisure, to joy for its own sake. He believed that mattered, too. And as safe as things felt, he couldn't call their current security complete—not when the village was nestled in the depths of the Frazes Great Forest, a region known for its dangers.

For now, Belamus had decided to set aside the matter of entertainment. There was something more urgent on his mind: increasing the village's safety.

He had a very specific reason for that decision—

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"Training already?" Belamus called out as he approached the grounds, his tone casual but observant.

"Good morning!" Delarosa replied cheerfully, bounding along beside him with her usual energy.

Belamus and Delarosa, as usual, sticking close to him, had arrived at one of the village's training grounds. The area was

equipped with scarecrow dummies, wooden swords, archery targets, and a range of practice tools—obviously set up for the goblins to hone their combat skills. Next to this was a separate facility for the orcs, featuring significantly larger equipment to match their massive frames.

Despite being a mage, Belamus oversaw training sessions for the village residents. He had studied close combat as well, using magic to enhance his physical abilities. Years of practice had given him more than just magical prowess—he had solid fundamentals in hand-to-hand fighting, and he believed that others should learn a mix of both skills too.

"Ah, Belamus. And Delarosa's with you today," a young male hobgoblin greeted them as they entered. This was Ugo—around fifteen years old and ranked second in swordsmanship among the goblins.

"Good morning. Hmm? Your forehead's swollen. What happened?" Belamus asked, noticing the red bump on Ugo's head.

"Ah, well, uh…" Ugo scratched his cheek, clearly embarrassed, unable to come up with a quick excuse.

Just then, a voice called out from behind him.

"G-Good morning, Belamus… Delarosa…" It was Medello, Delarosa's close friend and, as it turned out, Ugo's younger sister. She stepped out timidly from behind him, glancing awkwardly between Belamus and Delarosa.

"Medello! Let's play with magic again today!" Delarosa exclaimed, immediately grabbing her friend's hand and dragging her off before she could respond.

Though not quite on Delarosa's level, Medello had become surprisingly skilled at using magic. After being roped into magical games day after day, her abilities had improved without her even realizing it. Among the goblins, only Delarosa surpassed her in magical talent.

No sooner had the two girls disappeared than another energetic voice rang out.

“Ugo! Let’s go another round!” It was Navasha, shouting as she charged in, wildly swinging a wooden sword through the air. Her enthusiasm was unmistakable—and clearly, the training grounds were going to be lively this morning.

“I’ve had enough of sparring with you! You could at least try holding back a little, you know?!” Ugo shouted, clearly frustrated as he rubbed the swelling on his forehead.

“Oh, come on! Don’t be such a wimp, Ugo!” Navasha shot back, her voice loud and teasing.

Watching the exchange, Belamus quickly pieced together the cause of Ugo’s injury—he’d lost to Navasha in a sparring match.

Though Ugo was the second-best swordsman among the goblins, Navasha was the undisputed number one. Despite being only eight years old, her swordsmanship was exceptional, so much so that not even adults could hold their ground against her. Belamus couldn’t help but be impressed.

Perhaps she was born with a natural gift for the sword, he mused. It made sense for magic users like Delarosa to develop faster at a young age, as children tended to adapt to magic more quickly. But for someone with an undeveloped body like Navasha to dominate so completely in physical combat—that was extraordinary.

“Oh! Speak of the devil—there’s Belamus!” Navasha shouted, eyes lighting up with excitement. “Come on, Belamus! Fight me!”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right! Navasha, you should spar with Belamus instead!” Ugo added quickly, practically begging. “Please, Belamus, give her some training!”

Ugo was desperate to avoid another round with her, and Belamus had no reason to refuse—after all, this was exactly why he had come. He picked up a wooden sword and gave a simple command.

“Come,” Belamus said calmly.

With no hesitation, Navasha charged forward, sword swinging with her full strength; the training bout began.

The match was over in ten seconds.

“Damn it! Belamus is still way too strong!” Navasha shouted in frustration, panting slightly from the short clash.

Belamus had deliberately ended the match quickly. With prodigies like Navasha, he believed it was best not to go easy on them. By presenting a high, seemingly unreachable wall, they would push themselves to grow on their own. He never held back during their training.

“Navasha, your speed is excellent, and your form is solid,” he said, giving her a measured critique. “But your attacks are too predictable. Think more before you strike.”

“Think more when I attack…? Ugh, you’re always saying hard stuff like that, Belamus. Are you saying I’m dumb or something?” she grumbled, clearly exasperated.

“What do you mean, ‘are you saying’? Are you really not aware of it yourself?” he asked, half teasing, half serious.

“I mean, I think I’m smarter than Delarosa, at least!” Navasha huffed in her defense.

From what Belamus had seen, it was a close contest—neither of them stood out for brilliance, and both were about equally impulsive in their own ways.

“Anyway,” Belamus said, shifting the topic. “Ugo, where are the others? The orcs, the rest of the goblins—they’re not here yet.”

“Right… Well, training’s been pretty frequent lately, and we’ve been dealing with a bunch of Kobolds and other monsters showing up. Everyone’s been kinda worn out.”

“I see… so that’s what’s been going on,” Belamus murmured, frowning slightly as he folded his arms.

He had come to improve the village’s safety, but now he was beginning to realize just how strained things were becoming.

Lately, the village had been experiencing an unusual surge in monster attacks.

The reason for this sudden aggression remained unknown, though Belamus had already initiated an investigation. Not every assault was severe, yet their sheer frequency and escalating

numbers made the situation far from trivial. In response, he increased the intensity and frequency of the villagers' training. Still, he couldn't help but wonder: *Should I ease up a bit?* The goblins and orcs were showing signs of fatigue, and the strain was becoming apparent.

Beyond physical exhaustion, something deeper was bothering him. This pattern of attacks was completely unprecedented.

Something's wrong in the Frazes Great Forest, he thought, a gnawing sense of unease settling in. Belamus didn't know what it was yet, but he felt something dark was stirring. Until he could find the source, all he could do was keep training the villagers to prepare for whatever was coming.

"Well," he said aloud, glancing at the tired faces around him, "if everyone's worn out, we'll call off today's training."

"Yeah… that might be for the best," Ugo muttered, looking relieved.

Just as Belamus made the decision, a low, sharp *buooo* echoed through the air—the sound of a war horn.

It was the alert for a monster attack.

Belamus had created the horn system for precisely this reason. Watchmen posted around the village were issued horns to sound as early warnings if monsters approached. The sound had come from the south. Without hesitation, Belamus sprinted toward the southern gate.

This time, the invader was a swarm of Giant Killer Bees—aggressive, massive insects with no capacity for reason or communication. There was no point in negotiation. Fortunately, the numbers were small, and Belamus managed to eliminate them on his own. Still, he was all too aware of his limitations. If the numbers grew too large, his current magical reserves wouldn't be enough to handle them.

He had been steadily training to increase his magical power pool. While it expanded rapidly in the early stages, the pace slowed

as he progressed. Compared to the power he had wielded in his previous life, it was still woefully insufficient.

"Hey, Belamus," Navasha asked after the fight, her expression tense. "Why've there been so many monsters lately?"

"I don't know yet," he replied. "I'm still investigating."

He had already begun scouting the nearby forests surrounding the village, but he had found no conclusive evidence. He hadn't ventured too far—reluctant to leave the village unprotected for long—but all signs pointed to the south. Every attack had come from that direction, and the pattern was becoming impossible to ignore.

Belamus didn't want to leave the village for an extended time. He had hoped the situation would resolve before such a step became necessary. But with the attacks growing more frequent, maybe it was time to go deeper into the forest and see for himself what was happening.

Hopefully, this isn't a sign of something worse to come, he thought, casting a worried glance toward the distant southern woods.

Chapter 8

"Belamus! I'm going out to hunt monsters! If there are more of them, then we just have to beat them all and that'll solve everything!"

Delarosa's sudden declaration rang out inside the house, her voice full of urgency and frustration.

"No," Belamus replied immediately, rejecting the idea without hesitation.

"Whaaat?! Just because there are more monsters lately, you won't let me go outside! You won't even teach me the password to open the gate! I want to go out for once!" she protested, arms flailing.

"No. It's too dangerous," he said flatly.

"But I'm the second strongest in the village—right after you!" she shot back.

"Even if you're strong, you're still a child. Absolutely not." Belamus said firmly.

"You're a kid too!" she snapped.

"I'm allowed," Belamus said coolly.

"That's not fair! You're such a jerk! Stupid Belamus!" Delarosa shouted, her face flushed with frustration.

With that, Delarosa stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

"Why is she so obsessed with going outside…?" Belamus muttered to himself, genuinely puzzled as he watched the door swing shut.

Meanwhile, Delarosa walked through the village with a stormy expression on her face.

Ugh… I'm strong. So why won't he acknowledge it?

What really bothered her wasn't the monsters or the rules—it was the feeling of being underestimated. Belamus's refusal to acknowledge her strength wounded her deeply, fueling her burning desire to prove herself.

"What's wrong, Delarosa?" Medello had spotted her and came over, voice soft with concern.

"Ah, Medello! Listen to this!"

Delarosa jumped at the chance to vent, launching into a rant about how Belamus wouldn't let her leave the village, especially how he didn't trust her strength or believe in her. Medello listened patiently as her friend poured out her frustration.

"Hmm… Belamus is just worried about you, that's all," Medello said gently, trying to calm her friend.

"No, he's not! He totally looks down on me!" Delarosa snapped. "Acting like he's better than me just because he's my little brother! Belamus, you idiot!"

She shouted at the top of her lungs, drawing startled glances from several nearby adult goblins. But they were used to Delarosa's outbursts by now and simply returned to their business without much concern.

"That's not true," Medello insisted. "And besides, going outside isn't even that fun, you know? It's way better here in the village."

"But I want to help with monster hunting!" Delarosa said, her voice full of conviction.

Just then, a voice rang out from behind them, one that was loud, energetic, and unmistakably enthusiastic. "Yeah! I want to fight monsters too!"

"Navasha!" Delarosa turned around to see her sword-loving friend standing there with a wide grin.

"You want to hunt monsters too?" she asked.

"Totally!" Navasha declared, fists clenched. "I mean, no matter how much I train, it doesn't feel real unless it's in an actual fight! If I go out and beat up a bunch of monsters, I'll get way stronger, and maybe then I'll finally be able to land a hit on Belamus!"

“Right! If Navasha wants to go too, then let’s find a way to sneak out of the village and go hunt monsters together!” Delarosa exclaimed, eyes gleaming with excitement, as she grabbed Navasha’s hand.

“Yeah! Let’s do it, Delarosa! Come on, Medello!” Navasha said, clearly fired up.

“Huhhh?!” Medello yelped, completely caught off guard by the sudden turn of events. “You can’t! We’ll get in so much trouble! And it’s dangerous out there—it’s not even fun!” Medello pleaded, trying her best to stop the momentum building between her two reckless friends.

“Hmm… yeah, I guess you’re right,” Delarosa muttered, her enthusiasm dimming slightly. “Even if we went outside, there aren’t any really strong monsters nearby. Fighting weak ones doesn’t help us improve anyway…”

“Yeah…” Navasha nodded, folding her arms. “If we can’t go far, then it’s kinda pointless. The monsters close to the village aren’t much of a challenge.”

“Um, that’s not what I meant,” Medello said quickly, her voice rising with exasperation. “I mean, there’s no good reason to go out there at all! It’s dangerous and pointless!”

“If only something big would show up…” Navasha sighed wistfully.

“Yeah, that’s it!” Delarosa suddenly brightened. “Next time a really strong monster appears, let’s go fight it together!”

“Yeah! That’ll definitely help us get stronger!” Navasha agreed with a grin.

“And Belamus will finally recognize us, right?” Delarosa said eagerly, her eyes shining with the hope of finally earning his acknowledgment.

“H-Huh?” Medello stammered, blinking.

Wait… when they say "us"… do they mean me too? She wasn't sure, but the way they spoke made it feel like she was already part of their reckless plan.

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Buooo!

The sharp, resonant sound of the horn echoed across the village in the middle of the day. As usual, it came from the south.

"Again…?" Belamus muttered, his face tightening with frustration. The attacks had become relentless, happening so often now that even he was beginning to grow weary of them. This latest incident only confirmed what he had already been thinking—it was finally time to leave the village and investigate the source of these disturbances directly.

"All right. I'm heading to the south gate." Belamus said, his voice steady as he turned to go.

Just then, a deep voice called out behind him. "We'll come with you!" It was Balbora, one of the leading orcs. Today's attack had occurred during training, and for once, all of the orcs and goblins had shown up as scheduled. Their presence now felt reassuring.

"Of course we're going too!" said Ugo, stepping forward with a determined nod.

With that, the entire training group—both goblins and orcs—set off toward the gate together. Halfway there, a small figure sprinted toward them with incredible speed. It was Demu, one of the village's fastest goblins, his light frame allowing him to dart through the village like a shadow.

"Belamus, this is bad—really bad. The monsters that showed up this time…" he panted, still running alongside them.

"What is it? What's here?" Belamus asked, not slowing his pace.

"I-It's… what was it again… I heard about it from my grandpa…" Demu tapped the side of his head as he tried to recall. Then, with a

snap of realization, he shouted, “I remember! It’s an Alraune!”

“An Alraune? A plant-based monster?” Belamus frowned. “But Alraunes are usually… Well, never mind. How many are there?”

“That’s the crazy part. There were so many of them. I couldn’t even count. Must’ve been hundreds!” Demu exclaimed, his voice rising with urgency.

“What? Hundreds of Alraunes?” Belamus repeated, his expression tightening and turning grim with alarm. A single Alraune was already a high-level magical entity—gentle, yes, but powerful. Hundreds of them, showing up all at once? That wasn’t just troubling. That was a potential disaster.

Belamus was well aware that he was still far from regaining the full extent of his power from his former life. A few dozen Alraunes, he could likely manage alone. But hundreds? That was another matter entirely. Against such overwhelming numbers, he would undoubtedly struggle. He could call on the villagers for support, but that brought risks of its own—injuries would be almost certain, and in the worst case, someone might even die.

What troubled him even more was the nature of the enemy. Alraunes were among the most powerful monsters they had encountered so far—magically gifted and resilient. But more importantly, they weren’t typically hostile. They were known to be intelligent, calm, and disinclined toward unnecessary conflict.

Why would the Alraunes attack? That was the question gnawing at Belamus.

There was no obvious reason, not with the information he currently had. The village had never provoked them, and the Alraunes had shown no aggression in the past. It was obvious that something wasn’t adding up.

There was one advantage—they were capable of speech and, under normal circumstances, open to dialogue. Perhaps there was a way to resolve this peacefully. If he could talk to them, maybe he could uncover the reason behind the attack and avoid bloodshed.

As Belamus and the others neared the southern gate, a loud voice rang out from beyond the walls.

"Open the gate!" someone shouted.

Belamus paused, eyes narrowing. It was an Alraune's voice—but not in their native language. The call had been made in the goblin tongue.

So, some of them can speak Goblin… That small detail gave Belamus hope. There might still be a chance to end this without a fight.



Belamus quickly climbed to the top of the southern gate to get a clear view of the situation outside. Several orcs and goblins moved to follow him, but he stopped them with a firm gesture. He had no intention of provoking the attackers or escalating things prematurely. For now, he wanted to attempt negotiation all alone.

What he saw beyond the gate took his breath away. The sheer number of Alraunes was staggering, far beyond what he'd imagined. Though he couldn't count them precisely, it was easily more than five hundred.

It wasn't just the numbers that caught his attention. The condition of the Alraunes was alarming. Their usual graceful appearance was gone—petals from the flowers blooming atop their heads were missing or damaged, their faces were thin, their bodies fatigued and worn. Something serious had happened at their home that would force them here in desperation. Belamus narrowed his eyes.

They're not here for conquest. They were driven here…

Then, a commanding voice rang out from the front of the group. One Alraune, noticeably larger than the others and bearing a bright red flower on her head, stepped forward.

"This is a hobgoblin village, isn't it? We hold no grudge, but you'll need to leave. If you go now, you can avoid getting hurt!" she shouted in goblin language, loud enough for the whole gate to hear.

Belamus frowned. Her tone was aggressive, but there was something off—something *desperate*. These weren't the words of a conqueror. They were the words of someone with no options left.

"I cannot accept such an unreasonable demand," Belamus replied coolly, standing atop the gate, his cloak stirring in the breeze.

"I won't warn you again!" the Alraune barked. "If you don't vacate immediately, we'll launch a full magical assault on your village!"

Alraunes were magic-wielding monsters—naturally gifted spellcasters. Certain species, like them, were born with an innate ability to use Chantless Magic, though they were usually limited to

specific types of spells. Still, a mass magical attack from several hundred Alraunes would be catastrophic. The gate wouldn't hold, and Belamus couldn't be sure his magical power reserves would last through such a battle.

Convincing them to stand down is the only real option, he thought grimly.

He paused, then raised his voice to address the leader. "From the looks of you, you're already on your last legs. If you choose to fight, you'll lose. We have over five hundred hobgoblins and more than a hundred orcs inside this village."

It was a bluff—there were nowhere near that many warriors in the village. But Belamus was betting on perception. From the outside, the village looked fortified and well-organized, with high stone walls and disciplined defenses. If the Alraunes believed they were outnumbered and outmatched, they might be discouraged from attacking.

He delivered the bluff smoothly in fluent Goblin, ensuring his words would be clearly understood. All that was left now was to wait and hope they took the bait.

"W-What…?" the lead Alraune stammered, her voice trembling with confusion. She faltered, clearly shaken.

Did she believe me? Belamus wondered, watching her reaction closely. Seeing an opening, he pressed further.

"I don't want to fight," he said calmly. "Please—just leave peacefully."

If she had believed his bluff, then this should have been enough. Surely, they weren't suicidal. Belamus hoped they would choose survival over confrontation.

Unfortunately, the Alraune's eyes darkened with resolve.

"Guh… If we turn back now, we'll die anyway! We have no choice but to push forward!" she shouted. "No matter what's waiting for us, we advance! Everyone—cast your spells!"

What? Belamus blinked, stunned. They weren't bluffing either.

Clearly, they were far more desperate than he had imagined.

The attack came all at once—a storm of magic raining down from the massed Alraunes. Their spells surged through the air in a chaotic barrage. The color of each flower determined the type of magic its bearer could wield—water, fire, lightning, earth, wind. All five elements tore through the sky in violent waves, crashing against the village's outer walls.

Though the walls held for now, Belamus knew they wouldn't last forever.

There's no way I can handle this alone. Even with the goblins and orcs fighting beside me, someone could die. I have to find a way to end this without casualties.

Below the gate, the goblins and orcs had begun gathering, ready to fight, some trying to climb up to join Belamus. He stopped them with a firm hand, unwilling to risk their lives without cause.

As more spells slammed against the stone defenses, Belamus stood still, his mind racing.

They're not raiders, he thought. *They don't look like villains—they look desperate. This isn't a conquest. It's survival. They're not attacking because they want to—they're attacking because they have no other choice. They've likely lost their home, their food, maybe even their future. They're starving, with nowhere left to go.*

If that was true, then this wasn't just a siege—it was a plea. And if there was even a sliver of a chance to solve this without bloodshed, Belamus was willing to try.

Thanks to recent agricultural expansions and preservation magic, the village now had a surplus of food. Sharing it would hurt, but not cripple their reserves. And if it meant avoiding war, saving lives, and helping those who had lost everything, then Belamus knew precisely what he had to do.

Beneath his wary, calculating exterior, Belamus remained a fundamentally good person. His first instinct, even now, was to protect, not only his own people but also those in need.

Belamus considered attempting another dialogue, but faced with the Alraunes' sheer desperation and aggression, he knew

persuasion would be futile.

I have to stop the attack—whatever it takes. If I can capture their leader, maybe the others will cease their fire.

That became his strategy. His target: the Alraune at the front of the horde, the one with the large red flower blooming from her head—the one who had issued the ultimatum. Belamus needed to capture her, not injure her. If there was any hope of negotiation, it depended on keeping her alive and conscious.

Decision made, he moved swiftly. He located the leader again—she was out front, casting spells with relentless determination. He would need a spell to restrain her without causing harm: *Magic Thread*—a versatile magic used not just for carrying loads, but also for effectively binding enemies.

The problem was that the thread was slow and easily avoided. To use it successfully, Belamus would need to create an opening.

"*Dark Mist,*" he incanted.

A dense black fog burst forth and spread across the battlefield, swallowing the Alraunes in a thick veil of darkness. Visibility dropped to zero. Belamus couldn't see either—until he cast his next spell.

"*Dark Vision,*" Belamus murmured, his voice low and focused.

His eyes adjusted instantly, the world around him becoming clear in monochrome shades. He scanned the area and quickly spotted the leader—disoriented, unable to see through the mist, her casting faltering.

Perfect.

Belamus launched *Magic Thread*. The glowing strands slithered through the darkness and wrapped tightly around the Alraune, binding her arms and body.

"W-What is this?!" she gasped, struggling in the air as the threads lifted her off the ground and pulled her toward the gate.

Belamus released *Dark Mist*, allowing the fog to dissipate.

The sudden clarity revealed the scene to the rest of the Alraunes. A gasp rippled through the crowd.

"What?!"

“Lady Ellency!” voices cried out.

Right then, he knew that was her name.

Belamus raised his voice, switching to the Alraune language so all could understand.

“If you don’t want your leader to be harmed, cease your attack —now!” he commanded.

The moment Belamus made his declaration, a chorus of angry cries arose from the crowd of Alraunes; accusations like “That’s cowardly!” rang out. But despite their protest, the barrage of magic ceased completely.

“So, someone among you speaks our tongue,” the captured Alraune, Ellency, said with a sharp glare. “Hmph. Binding me is pointless. I don’t need my arms or legs to cast magic.”

As she began to concentrate, preparing to activate a spell, Belamus reacted instantly. With a flick of his hand, the magical threads binding her constricted.

“Ggh!” Ellency gasped, her focus breaking as pain flared across her body.

“If you try to use magic,” Belamus said firmly, “I’ll continue tightening the restraints. I don’t want to resort to violence, but I will if I have to.”

“Gggh…!” she growled in frustration, but the tension in her face showed she was weighing her options.

“I only want to talk,” Belamus continued, his voice calm. “There may be a way for us to resolve this peacefully. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Fine… I won’t cast any spells,” Ellency muttered after a pause. “Loosen the bindings.”

Belamus remained cautious, but seeing the sincerity in her tone, he gradually relaxed the magical threads. He remained ready to react if she betrayed his trust, but she didn’t. She kept her word. Perhaps, Belamus thought, she was an honest sort despite her situation.

“Why did you attack our village?” he asked directly.

Ellency lowered her gaze, her voice heavy with exhaustion. “A massive horde of monsters descended on our settlement. We couldn’t win—we had no choice but to flee with everyone. But without a home or food… we were lost. In the end, we decided the only way to survive was to take what we needed by force.”

Just as I thought, Belamus reflected. He had suspected desperation, not malice.

“This village has ample food stores,” he said. “Thanks to expanded farmland and preservation magic, we have reserves. We can feed your people. If you’re willing to back down, this doesn’t need to end in bloodshed.”

Ellency stared at him, stunned. “Are you… serious? You’d share your food with *this* many of us? Won’t your people go hungry?”

“It’s fine,” Belamus assured her. “We have more than enough.”

She still looked uncertain, as if afraid to believe him. But after a long silence, she spoke.

“If you truly mean to give us food… then we have no reason to keep fighting.”

That was all Belamus needed. He gently lowered her from the air and released the binding spell. Taking a deep breath, he turned to the Alraune horde and explained the situation. Gradually, the tension broke. The attackers lowered their hands, and the air began to clear; there were no more spells or threats.

For now, peace had been restored.

As Belamus descended from the gate, a flicker of doubt crossed his mind.

Was it really okay for me to promise food without asking anyone? What if the villagers object?

If they refused, a battle would surely follow—but even then, he doubted anyone actually wanted that. Most of the goblins and orcs, he believed, wouldn’t turn their backs on people in desperate need. Trusting in their compassion, Belamus gathered everyone and explained the situation: who the Alraunes were, what had happened to them, and why they had come.

As he'd hoped, no one objected. Not a single goblin or orc spoke out against sharing their food.

Later, the villagers began preparing meals for the Alraunes. Though their numbers exceeded five hundred, each individual consumed relatively little. The food reserves took less of a hit than Belamus had anticipated.

After they had eaten their fill, Ellency approached Belamus. Her voice trembled with emotion as she bowed deeply. "You've saved us. Thank you. If not for your people, our entire kind would have perished. Thank you… truly."

Neither the goblins nor the orcs accepted her gratitude with pride or superiority. They simply said that helping those in need was the natural thing to do. There was no boasting—just quiet, genuine kindness.

Once the Alraunes had settled and the atmosphere grew calmer, Belamus turned to Ellency again.

"Ellency… that was your name, right? Earlier, you said your people were driven here by a massive monster horde. Can you tell me more about them? I think those creatures may be the reason monsters have been appearing around here so often lately."

Ellency's expression darkened.

"Have you ever heard of a monster called the Legion Ant?"

"Legion Ant?" Belamus inquired, his eyes narrowed.

"Huh? What's that?" Ugo asked, tilting his head.

"Lord Belamus, is that some kind of monster?" Balbora added, clearly puzzled.

Unlike them, Belamus had heard of it. A chill ran down his spine as the name resurfaced from memory. The implications weren't good.

"It's a highly dangerous monster classified as an S-Rank Threat," Belamus said grimly.

"What kind of monster is it?" Balbora asked, his tone uneasy.

Belamus narrowed his eyes as he began to explain.

Legion Ant.

A terrifying creature resembling a bipedal ant, it lived underground much like ordinary ants. At a glance, a swarm of them might have seemed like thousands of individual monsters—but that wasn't the case. All of them were fragments of a single entity.

At the heart of the swarm existed the Ant Core—a central lifeform responsible for generating all the other ants. If the Ant Core were destroyed, all the Legion Ants would collapse. It consumed nutrients to produce more of itself, birthing new ants in an unending cycle.

The first ant of the core always created was the Queen Ant, an intelligent and powerful entity tasked with commanding the rest. Since the core lacked consciousness and could only produce, it needed a leader to coordinate the swarm.

Following the Queen's orders, the Soldier Ants would venture out to gather nutrients and bring them back to the core. As the colony grew, new types emerged—General Ants, Leader Ants, and others, each more specialized and dangerous than the last.

The Legion Ant started small, only slightly larger than a regular insect. But as it evolved—without the need to consume specific monsters like others—it would grow in size simply by increasing its numbers. Once the swarm reached a certain population threshold, it triggered an evolutionary leap. In time, they could reach the size of a human.

Belamus's voice dropped as he asked, "The ones that attacked the Alraunes… how big were they?"

Ellency responded without hesitation. "They were easily as large as your hobgoblins."

"I see…" Belamus muttered after giving it some thought, a chill running through him. "Then, we're likely dealing with a swarm in the tens of thousands."

"T-Tens of thousands?" Ugo repeated, eyes wide.

"That's beyond imagination…" Balbora murmured, stunned.

Even Belamus felt a bead of cold sweat trickle down his temple. This was worse than anything he had anticipated. The threat they

were facing wasn't just serious—it was potentially catastrophic.

"I've heard that when Legion Ants grow large enough to become dangerous, their nests are usually wiped out quickly if they act too aggressively," Belamus said thoughtfully. "Which means, if we're seeing individuals the size of hobgoblins, they're probably from a low-aggression colony that's been quietly growing for years… And yet, they still attacked?"

Ellency nodded gravely.

"Yes. That particular colony has been known for a long time, but because they never hunted openly and only gathered small amounts of nutrients over time, no one saw them as a threat. They were left alone. But then… they suddenly turned violent."

"That's strange. Could they have been deliberately lying low, building strength until they were ready to strike? If so, that would make them unusually intelligent…" Belamus frowned as he contemplated it.

"I don't know what happened, but we were attacked without warning," Ellency said, her voice tight. "Each individual ant is weak on its own, but there were so many. We had no chance. If we hadn't caught wind of their approach and fled when we did, we would've been devoured completely. They're running rampant in the south. Countless monsters have been driven from their homes. It's possible… they may make their way to this village next."

"What…?" Ugo's voice cracked.

"Y-You're serious?" Balbora's face had gone pale, and his voice trembled. Then, trying to steady himself, he asked "U-Um, Lord Belamus? With you here, surely even ten thousand enemies would be—"

"Even I can't handle that many," Belamus interrupted, shaking his head. "If it comes to that, we'll have no choice but to flee."

"Wh… What…?" Balbora's voice faltered.

"If they reach this village… it'll be the end," Belamus said bluntly.

Balbora's expression crumpled as though the world was collapsing around him.

"But… let's not assume the worst just yet," Ellency interjected gently. "There's no guarantee they'll come here. Please… don't lose hope." Her voice was calm, a quiet effort to soothe the growing fear.

"Even if we can't be certain they're coming," Belamus said, his expression grim, "we can't just sit and wait. We need to take action."

"What do you plan to do?" Balbora asked, tension in his voice.

"If we destroy the Ant Core," Belamus explained, "no matter how many Legion Ants there are, they'll all be wiped out instantly. I'm going to infiltrate their nest and destroy it myself."

"Is… Is that even possible?" Ugo asked, incredulous.

"That's insane!" Balbora burst out.

"They're all outside attacking, aren't they?" Belamus replied calmly. "If so, the interior of the nest should be less guarded. That gives me a chance."

His tone was so matter-of-fact that it left little room for argument. But Ellency still stepped forward, her brow furrowed.

"Are you serious? Even if most are outside, there are still *thousands* inside the nest."

"I won't need to fight them all," Belamus replied. "If I can find a route with fewer patrols, I can slip through. Around the Ant Core, there will be elite guards, no doubt—but dealing with them is something I *can* handle alone."

Ellency fell silent. His confidence was overwhelming, almost absurd. And yet, something about it made it hard to argue.

"I-I'll go with you!" Balbora blurted out, forcing the words past his fear. His voice shook, but the courage behind it was real.

Belamus shook his head gently. "I appreciate the offer, but this will be a stealth operation. Going alone means a lower risk of being discovered. You can help more by defending the village in my absence."

"Understood…" Balbora said, bowing slightly despite the lingering fear in his eyes.

"I'll leave in five hours," Belamus continued. "I used some magic earlier to calm the Alraunes. Better to let my magical power fully recover before I move. I'll rest for a bit until then."

With that, he turned and quietly made his way back home to rest and to prepare for what could very well be the most dangerous mission of his new life.

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Unbeknownst to Belamus and the others, three pairs of eyes were watching— and also listening from the shadows nearby.

Delarosa, Navasha, and Medello had overheard the entire conversation.

"Did you hear that?" Delarosa whispered, eyes gleaming.

"Heard it loud and clear," Navasha whispered back with a sly grin. The two shared a mischievous look, both obviously thinking the same thing.

"Y-You don't mean…" Medello's face had gone pale. She had caught every word—about the Legion Ants, the possible destruction of the village, the infiltration of their nest, and the need to destroy something called the Ant Core. She already knew what conclusion the other two were about to reach.

"Let's go smash that Ant Core thing ourselves!" Delarosa declared boldly.

"Huh?!" Medello yelped in shock.

"Hey! Keep it down!" Navasha hissed, glancing around nervously. "You'll get us caught!"

Before Medello could object again, Delarosa clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Mmmph—! Ah!" Medello gasped once she wriggled free, her voice rising in panic. "No! Absolutely not! This is way too dangerous! I mean it—this isn't a game! You heard what they said! Thousands

of monsters, the village could be destroyed—and you want us to go in there?!" She stared at the other two, desperation in her eyes.

Unfortunately, Delarosa and Navasha weren't listening—not really. They had that familiar fire in their eyes. And Medello, despite all her fear, was already bracing herself for what she knew was coming next.

"But I'm telling you," Delarosa said, her eyes shining with determination. "If I take out that Ant Core, Belamus will have to admit he underestimated me."

"Exactly!" Navasha said with a grin, practically vibrating with excitement. "Just imagine how strong I'll be after wrecking something like that! I'm getting pumped just thinking about it!"

"No, no, no!" Medello cried, throwing her hands up. "You're both way too optimistic! This isn't a maybe—you'll definitely die! Do you get that? You'll die for sure!"

Medello's panic did nothing to shake Delarosa's resolve.

"Medello, you worry too much. We're not gonna die. Why? Because I'm going to protect you! So, it's fine!"

"S-Saying it all cool like that doesn't make it okay!" Medello stammered. "Besides, you can't go outside without knowing the password, remember? They never told us. If we can't open the gate, then there's no way out!"

"Gah! That's right!" Delarosa froze. "Maybe we can get someone to tell us…?"

"There's no need," Navasha smirked. "I already know it. I eavesdropped on one of the guards the other day—just in case something like this came up."

"You genius!" Delarosa cheered. "Then let's go! Right now!"

"Yeah, we've gotta leave before Belamus does," Navasha agreed. "If we wait too long, we won't get the credit!"

Without hesitation, the two bolted toward the gate.

"Wait! Stop! This is seriously a bad idea!" Medello cried, sprinting after them in a panic.

"To the Ant Core!" Delarosa shouted triumphantly.

But just as she did—

"Delarosa, what are you doing? Don't run around shouting like that," came a stern voice from nearby.

"Gah! Mom!" Delarosa skidded to a halt.

"What's with that reaction?" Arèsa asked, eyeing her suspiciously. "You're not up to something, are you?"

"N-Nope! Nothing at all!" Delarosa said quickly, her eyes darting everywhere except her mother's face.

"Listen up," Arèsa said firmly. "Don't you dare go outside. If you're going to play, do it inside the village. Got it?"

With a final glance, she walked off, leaving the girls in tense silence.

"Phew… that was close…" Medello sighed with relief.

"All right, let's move!" Navasha said instantly.

"Stop already!" Medello wailed. "Even Arèsa told us not to go! Ughhh!"

In the end, no matter how hard she tried, Medello couldn't stop them—and unwilling to let her friends go alone, she was dragged into the reckless adventure herself.

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Five hours had passed. Belamus, fully recovered and ready to set out for the Ant Core, was just about to leave when a panicked voice reached him.

"Belamus! Something terrible's happened!"

It was Arèsa, rushing toward him, her face pale and on the verge of tears.

"What is it, Mother?" Belamus asked, his brow furrowing as he saw the distress on Arèsa's face.

"It's Delarosa—she's gone!" Arèsa cried, her voice trembling with panic.

"What?" Belamus froze.

According to Arèsa, Delarosa had been missing for some time. When she didn't come home, Arèsa had searched the village but found no sign of her anywhere. What's more, Ugo had also been looking for his sister, Medello, who had disappeared around the same time. And Navasha's mother was reportedly searching for her daughter as well.

Belamus's expression darkened.

"No… Don't tell me they left the village?"

He recalled Delarosa's strong desire to go outside—how she'd been itching for action. It wasn't hard to imagine her dragging the others with her.

"T-They must've left… Delarosa… I told her not to go outside!" Arèsa cried.

"Is there any clue as to where they might've gone?" Belamus asked sharply, trying to suppress the growing urgency in his voice.

"No, nothing… Oh—wait!" Arèsa suddenly struck her palm with her fist, as if remembering something. "I think she said something about going to destroy an 'Ant something-or-other'? I didn't understand it at the time, so I didn't think anything of it…"

That was all Belamus needed to hear.

They overheard me and Ellency talking… and decided to go destroy the Ant Core themselves? Unbelievable…

If that was true, the situation was beyond dangerous. The Ant Core wasn't just deep in hostile territory—it was guarded by a swarm of monsters in the thousands.

Belamus stood up swiftly.

"Their destination is likely the same as mine. I'm going after them."

"Wait—what do you mean? Belamus, hold on!"

He was already moving, hurrying out the door. He made his way directly to Balbora and urgently requested that he gather the village leaders.

Time was now their enemy, and the children's lives were on the line.

“I’m about to head out to destroy the Ant Core,” Belamus said, standing before the gathered village leaders. “But there’s something I must tell you before I go.”

“What is it?” one of them asked, concern rising in his voice.

“If a swarm of Legion Ants heads for this village, you must abandon it and run. Don’t worry about me. Just go. I’ll say it again: no matter what happens, you must escape.”

He made sure his words were firm and unambiguous, leaving no room for debate.

“We’ll be fine,” Balbora said with a forced smile. “Those ants won’t make it here. You’ll take care of the Ant Core before that happens, won’t you, Lord Belamus?”

“That’s right,” another orc nodded. “If it truly comes to that, we’ll do as you say. So go with a clear heart.”

“Understood…” Belamus replied. “I’ll try to eliminate them before they can reach the village.”

With those final words, he turned and strode toward the southern gate. The heavy doors creaked open, and without looking back, Belamus stepped into the vast wilderness all by himself, his sights set on the hidden nest of the Legion Ants.

Chapter 9

"Those've gotta be Legion Ants, right…?" Delarosa muttered.

The three girls had walked south for quite some time after sneaking out of the village. Eventually, they spotted what could only be described as their target—massive black ant-like creatures, each the size of an adult hobgoblin. The ants wielded spears, clearly using them as weapons.

There were a *lot* of them. Too many to count. The entire swarm was marching in a long, orderly line across the open terrain. From their vantage point—safely off to the side—the girls observed the advancing horde.

"They're ants for sure, no doubt about that," Navasha said. "So, they've gotta be the Legion Ants. But, uh… they're totally headed straight for the village, right? That's… bad."

"Ohhh… what's gonna happen to the village?" Medello asked, hugging herself anxiously.

"No worries!" Delarosa declared, fists on her hips. "We're gonna crush the Ant Core, remember? Problem solved! We just follow that line of ants—they'll lead us right to the nest!"

With that, the three carefully began trailing the swarm from a distance, taking care not to be spotted.

Before long, Delarosa paused and pointed ahead. "Huh? There's some kind of hole here."

"What is it?" Medello asked, peering down cautiously.

The hole was surprisingly large—easily wide enough for an adult hobgoblin to pass through.

They didn't have long to speculate. Without warning, a Legion Ant burst up from the tunnel entrance, antennae twitching and mandibles clicking.

"Wah!"

"Hyah!"

Delarosa and Medello jumped back in shock, but Navasha reacted instantly. She drew the sword from her hip with practiced ease and, in a single clean motion, slashed the ant apart.

"Whoa, Navasha, that was so cool!" Delarosa cheered, eyes sparkling.

"If you're still getting startled by *this*, you've got a long way to go, Delarosa," Navasha said smugly.

"What was that?!" Delarosa shouted, flustered and glaring at Navasha, who was still holding her sword with an annoyingly smug grin.

"H-Hey," Medello interrupted nervously, pointing back toward the tunnel. "Can we focus, please? This hole might be…"

Her voice trailed off. All three of them stared at the dark, gaping tunnel in silence.

They had found an entrance to the Legion Ants' nest.

"It's gotta be the Legion Ants' nest," Delarosa declared, peering eagerly down into the tunnel. "All right—let's go in!"

"Wait! What?! Already?!" Medello yelped, panic clawing at her voice. "It might be super deep! There could be a ton of Legion Ants down there!"

Her warning fell on deaf ears. Without the slightest hesitation, Delarosa leaped into the hole. Navasha, grinning like she was entering a joyous festival rather than a monster-infested tunnel, followed right after her.

"You've *got* to be kidding me…" Medello groaned, frozen in place and wringing her hands. She didn't want to go down there. Not at all. Unlike her fearless friends, Medello had a very clear sense of danger, and this *screamed* danger.

"Hey, Medello! What are you doing up there?" Delarosa's voice echoed from below. "It's not scary! Nothing down here!"

Encouraged by the call, Medello started muttering to herself. "It's safe down there… It's safe down there…" Her voice was shaky,

her hands trembling.

Then, squeezing her eyes shut, she shouted, "Okay!" and jumped.

Fortunately, the drop wasn't as deep as she feared. She landed without injury and opened her eyes slowly. The chamber was dim, but Delarosa had already cast a light spell, illuminating their surroundings enough to see. They had landed in a wide subterranean space. Several tunnels branched out from it, leading in different directions.

"Which way should we gooo?" Delarosa asked with casual cheer.

"Who cares? They all go somewhere," Navasha replied with a shrug.

"Okay then… that one!" Delarosa declared, pointing at a tunnel without the slightest sense of caution.

"All right! Target: Ant Core! Let's gooo!" Delarosa shouted with a grin, thrusting her fist into the air as she charged ahead into the tunnel.

"Yeah!!!" Navasha chimed in with a laugh.

"I wanna go home…" Medello mumbled behind them, her deep sigh drowned out by her friends' reckless enthusiasm.

A short while later, the trio encountered their first group of Legion Ants.

"*Fireball*!" Delarosa shouted, hurling a blazing orb of flame down the tunnel.

The explosion blasted through several of the ants. The ones that survived the blast didn't get far—Navasha charged in and cut them down with swift, decisive strikes.

Between them, the reckless charge toward the heart of the Legion Ant nest had begun.

"These guys are way too weak," Delarosa said, sounding almost bored as she casually stepped over a fallen ant.

"Yeah… there's just no challenge at all," Navasha added, flicking some ant ichor from her blade with a sigh.

“Ugh… why did I even come?” Medello muttered under her breath, dragging her feet behind them. “They’re already dead before I can do anything… Honestly, I should’ve stayed home.”

The truth was, Delarosa and Navasha had grown remarkably strong. A handful of Legion Ants were nothing to them now—barely even worth casting a spell or swinging a sword. Every skirmish ended before Medello could so much as raise a hand.

“This just means stronger ones are coming,” Navasha said over her shoulder. “You’ll get your turn to fight when something big shows up.”

“I don’t want to be *useless*,” Medello grumbled. “But I *also* don’t want something stronger to show up. Why is this my life?”

Today’s just not my day, she thought with a groan, trailing after the other two.

They pressed deeper into the nest, wandering through the tunnels with no real plan. None of them knew where the Ant Core was—not that Delarosa or Navasha seemed to care.

“It’s fine!” Delarosa had declared earlier. “If we keep walking, we’ll get there eventually!”

It was an absurdly optimistic strategy, but Medello, lacking any better idea, had given up trying to argue. With a resigned sigh, she followed them.

They ran into more Legion Ants along the way, but it was always the same story—swift, easy victories. Medello barely got to warm up before the fight was over. Just as she was beginning to reflect, once again, on her lack of purpose, a new sound reached them.

Thump… thump… THUMP.

Heavy footsteps—dozens of them, maybe more—echoed through the tunnel. It wasn’t five or ten. There were a *lot* of ants.

“A *lot* of them are coming, huh?” Delarosa said, sounding more curious than worried. “Eh, whatever.”

“Oooh, finally! Something with some punch, maybe?” Navasha said, cracking her knuckles. “I’ve been getting bored!”

“Eeekkk… so now I do have to fight? I don’t like this anymore…” Medello whimpered, clutching her staff.

“They’ll be here any second. Get your magic ready, Medello,” Delarosa ordered, eyes fixed ahead.

“R-Right…!” Medello said nervously.

The thunderous footsteps drew closer and closer. The three girls braced themselves—Delarosa and Medello with spells at the ready, Navasha with her hand on her sword hilt, poised to strike.

The Legion Ants advanced steadily, finally coming into view.

The moment they caught sight of the creatures, Delarosa and Navasha murmured in astonishment.

“They’re here… Wait, what?”

“What is that thing?”

Their surprise was justified. The ant at the front looked nothing like the ones they had fought before. Its body was both taller and broader than a typical Legion Ant, and its eyes gleamed with a piercing intensity. While ordinary ants wielded a single black spear, this one carried four long, black swords, taking full advantage of its anatomy, with two legs and four arms.

It was a powerful variant among the Legion Ants: a General Ant.

“This one’s different from the rest,” Delarosa muttered warily.

“Looks pretty damn strong, doesn’t it?” Navasha said with a grin that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I-I don’t like this at all…” came a trembling voice from behind.

A sizable swarm of regular Legion Ants followed close behind the General. The General Ant barked a command in an incomprehensible language, signaling to its subordinates. Naturally, Delarosa and the others couldn’t make sense of the words.

“No idea what it’s saying, but we don’t have time to stand around talking!” Navasha shouted, launching herself forward in a powerful leap and striking at the General Ant.

Her swift swordplay, which had never once been properly countered by the regular ants, was effortlessly blocked. The General

Ant, armed with multiple swords, counterattacked, forcing Navasha into a dangerously tight spot.

"Navasha! *Fireball*!" Medello shouted.

Surprisingly, it was Medello who reacted first. Without hesitation, she cast a fireball, hurling it toward the General Ant. The creature broke off its attack and leaped backward, narrowly evading the blaze.

The moment the General retreated, its subordinate Legion Ants surged forward in a coordinated assault. Delarosa met them head-on, unleashing a barrage of magic—*Fireball, Rock Blast, Ice Spear*—scattering the swarm in a brilliant storm of destruction.

Realizing that its underlings were no match for their enemies, the General Ant gave a sharp command to pull them back. Then, it charged forward alone.

The situation had turned into a three-on-one standoff. The three girls had expected to finish the fight quickly, but to their surprise, they found themselves struggling. The General Ant used all four of its arms with masterful precision, deflecting their attacks and striking back whenever it found an opening.

Despite their strength, Delarosa and her companions couldn't land a decisive blow. Though each of them was individually powerful, they had never truly faced an opponent whose abilities matched their own. As a result, their real battle experience was surprisingly shallow. In contrast, the General Ant fought with a fluid, deliberate rhythm—its movements showed a clear understanding of combat.

"It's really strong!" Medello cried, her voice strained.

"Ggh! I can't believe this bastard is blocking all my attacks so easily! This is seriously pissing me off!" Navasha raged, her frustration boiling over.

"Ugh… how *do* we beat this thing—huh? Wait… are those footsteps again?" Medello asked, tilting her head.

Just as she'd said, a new wave of footsteps was thundering toward them. The sound was heavy, unmistakably the march of a

large number of Legion Ants.

"You've got to be kidding! This one's already bad enough!" Delarosa exclaimed, her voice cracking under pressure.

"We've got to finish this one off, fast!" Navasha growled.

"This is real bad, real bad, *real* bad!" Medello wailed.

As the three of them began to panic, something strange happened. They noticed that the General Ant also seemed distracted by the incoming noise, which was odd. If the reinforcements were allies, they wouldn't be reacting that way.

Just as that thought crossed their minds, the new group of Legion Ants came into view.

"Huh?" Delarosa let out a confused sound, eyes narrowing as she stared at them.

The reason became immediately clear: their color.

They were white.

Their bodies and shapes were identical to the other Legion Ants, but their exoskeletons gleamed a stark white. There were dozens of them, and from the moment they appeared, the General Ant's demeanor shifted. It now stood tense, adopting a threatening posture, as if trying to intimidate the newcomers.

It was clear these white Legion Ants were not its allies.

Then, parting the ranks of the white Legion Ants, a uniquely shaped figure emerged: taller, with a sleek, slender frame, wielding a single thrusting rapier—a white General Ant.

In a blur of motion too fast to follow, the white General Ant lunged. Its rapier drove straight into the chest of the black General Ant, which stumbled forward, collapsing lifelessly in a single, devastating instant.

Delarosa, Medello, and Navasha stood frozen, wide-eyed and speechless as they witnessed the swift and unexpected execution.

"The white ant… just took out the black one," Medello murmured in disbelief.

"W-What does this mean?" Delarosa said, eyes darting.

"Some kind of… civil war?" Navasha offered, still stunned.

The white General Ant turned its head and looked at each of them in turn. The trio instinctively tensed, unsure if it would attack them next. Medello stepped back slightly, her body trembling as she braced herself.

The white General Ant made no move to strike. Instead, it turned its back on them, raised an arm, and beckoned as if to say, "Follow me," then walked off with composed elegance.

"Does that mean it wants us to follow?" Medello asked, trying to read the gesture.

"What should we do? Think we should go after it?" Delarosa asked.

"It could be a trap," Navasha warned, narrowing her eyes.

"I don't think it is!" Delarosa replied quickly.

"Why not?" Medello asked, confused.

"Intuition!" Delarosa declared with absolute confidence.

"*Intuition*?! That's your big reason?!" Medello exclaimed, incredulous.

Despite the absurdity of it, Delarosa followed the white General Ant without a moment's hesitation.

"Well, to be fair… Delarosa's gut feelings are usually right," Navasha muttered, then jogged after her.

"W-Wait up!" Medello called out. Though her nerves screamed at her to stay back, she found herself swept along with the others.

They followed the white ant to an unknown destination.

The white General Ant approached a section of the wall and uttered something in its strange language. In response, the wall began to shift. It was a hidden door—obviously not automatic, as it seemed to have been opened from the inside by another Legion Ant.

"Looks like some kind of hideout," Medello observed, narrowing her eyes.

"What is going on here…?" Delarosa muttered, puzzled.

The ant stepped through the hidden door, and Delarosa and the others followed without hesitation.

Beyond the door lay a surprisingly spacious chamber, filled with dozens of white Legion Ants.

"Whoa… there are tons of white ants," Navasha said, eyes wide.

"Are we really safe here? I mean… they don't seem hostile," Delarosa murmured cautiously.

Indeed, there was no indication that the white Legion Ants intended to attack. Instead, the white General Ant turned to the three girls and gestured to them to wait. It then walked off somewhere deeper into the chamber.

After a short while, the General returned, but Delarosa and others weren't focused on it.

Their attention had been entirely captured by another presence standing nearby.

A pure white Legion Ant.

Her form closely resembled that of a human woman. Her immaculate, snow-colored body radiated an otherworldly beauty—so striking that it seemed to transcend species, evoking awe and admiration from any who looked upon her.

"She's beautiful…" Medello whispered in awe.

"Wow…" Navasha murmured, her voice barely audible.

"She really is…" Delarosa agreed, unable to take her eyes off her.

Then, the white Legion Ant, who could only be the queen, began to speak.

"Pleased to meet you. You are children of the hobgoblins, aren't you? And it seems we have a Magic Goblin among you as well."

"She's speaking Goblin!" Medello gasped.

The queen spoke fluently and with poise, her goblin language smooth and precise.

"I am Medina, Queen Ant of the Legion Ants who reside here," the white queen said with graceful composure. "I understand the three of you were fighting the black ants. I would like to ask for your help."

At her unexpected request, Delarosa and the others exchanged confused glances.

"Hey," Navasha whispered to Delarosa, leaning in, "didn't she just say she's the Queen Ant? That's probably someone important, right? Doesn't that mean she's the one controlling all these ants?"

"So, you're the one who sent those ants to attack the village!" Delarosa suddenly shouted. "What the hell is going on here?!"

"I see… so the black ants have reached the goblin villages as well… I sincerely apologize. But I no longer have the power to stop them," Medina replied solemnly.

"What do you mean?! You said you're the Queen Ant, didn't you?!" Delarosa shouted, incredulous.

"That's correct. But tell me, how much do you know about the Legion Ants?" Medina asked calmly, her expression unwavering.

"They're ant-type monsters, right?" Medello offered. "Scary ones. There are lots of them. And there's something called an Ant Core, which is a place they all come from."

"Yeah, and if you destroy the core, all the ants disappear," Navasha added. "That's what we heard, anyway."

"You seem to know a fair amount," Medina said, nodding. "But did you know… that Legion Ants were originally white?"

"Huh?" Delarosa blinked.

"But there are black ones too!" Navasha insisted.

"Those are Legion Ants whose control has been seized by a malevolent being," Medina explained, her voice tinged with sorrow.

"Seized…? What do you mean?" Medello asked warily.

"As Queen Ant, I should possess absolute authority over all Legion Ants. But I can no longer command the black ones—they are beyond my control now." Medina said, her voice tinged with quiet frustration.

"Huhhh…" Navasha muttered, eyes narrowing.

"Then, who is controlling them?" Delarosa asked.

"I… do not know the full details," Medina replied quietly. "But the one who wrested command of the Legion Ants from me gave a

name.”

She paused for a moment, her tone darkening.

“Hereldyne.”

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It was about a year earlier.

The Legion Ant nest had been a peaceful one. That was largely thanks to Queen Medina’s gentle nature. She disliked conflict, took only the bare minimum of food needed for survival, and gradually expanded the nest at a modest, deliberate pace. She made a conscious effort not to disturb the other monsters living in the surrounding wilderness, building her domain patiently and humbly.

Legion Ants had incredibly long lifespans—some could live up to ten thousand years—so this slow progress was never a burden. The colony kept growing steadily and without disruption until it finally exceeded ten thousand members. At last, the nest had matured to a scale comparable to a human city.

And then, it happened.

Without any warning, Hereldyne appeared inside the nest.

There had been no signs—no sound, no tremor, no hint of invasion. One moment, everything was as usual, and the next, a man wreathed in a dark, ominous aura stood beside the Ant Core.

“W-Who are you?! How did you get in here?!” Medina demanded.

“I am Hereldyne,” the man replied in a low, dreadful voice that echoed like a curse. “My apologies for the sudden intrusion… but I’ve decided to take your power for myself,” Hereldyne added in a low, menacing voice that chilled the air.

With that, Hereldyne reached out and touched the Ant Core. In that instant, the once-pure-white core began to darken. Slowly, its light was swallowed by blackness—and as it changed, so did the Legion Ants.

One by one, they turned black, their bodies mirroring the corrupted core. Hereldyne took control of the darkened ants with ease. They no longer obeyed Medina's voice. No matter what she said, they would not respond.

With only a handful of untainted Legion Ants left, Medina fled for her life. Barely surviving, she led the few who remained loyal into hiding within the very nest they once ruled.

There, deep underground, she constructed a hidden refuge—and for the past year, she had waited, watching for a chance to strike back.

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"That can't be…" Delarosa murmured, appearing stunned.

"So that means our village is in deep trouble too—all because of this Hereldyne guy," Navasha said, scowling.

"T-This is terrible…" Medello added, her voice wavering.

The three of them listened closely to Medina's explanation.

"Hereldyne must not be allowed to go unpunished," Medina said firmly. "And right now may be our one chance to strike back. According to reports from our scouts, a large number of Legion Ants have moved away from the nest. This may be the perfect opportunity to defeat Hereldyne. You see, the only General Ant still loyal to me—Ragna—told me that you are all very strong. Would you lend us your strength?"

"Sure! We were planning to destroy the Ant Core anyway, but taking out Hereldyne works just as well, right?" Delarosa replied with a carefree grin.

"Ah—if the Ant Core is destroyed, we… we'll all vanish, so please spare us that fate…" Medina said hastily. "However… if Hereldyne truly can't be defeated, we may have to consider that as a last resort."

"Well, I don't care either way," Navasha said with a grin. "As long as I get to fight someone strong."

"Then… does that mean you'll help us?" Medina asked, hope rising in her voice.

"Yep!" Delarosa replied cheerfully.

"You got it! Leave it to me!" Navasha said with a confident nod.

"Um, I… I-I'll help too…" Medello muttered, clearly reluctant but unable to go against the tide after seeing the others' enthusiastic responses. Watching Delarosa and Navasha answer so eagerly, she gave in with a sigh of resignation.

"Thank you all!" Medina said, her voice bright with relief. "Now, let us go at once! Our destination is the place where Hereldyne resides. Please, follow me!"

And so, Delarosa and her companions joined forces with the white Legion Ants, setting off to defeat Hereldyne.

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Having left the village and headed south, Belamus spotted the Legion Ants advancing toward it. He immediately noticed something strange.

Black? Aren't Legion Ants supposed to be white? What's going on here?

Though their color troubled him, white or black didn't matter—he couldn't allow a swarm of that size to reach the village. He resolved to destroy the Ant Core as quickly as possible. While he briefly considered searching for Delarosa and the others first, he concluded that if the Ant Core was destroyed, everything would be resolved anyway. There was no time to waste.

He hurried to locate an entrance to the nest but found nothing. Despite its vast size, the Legion Ants' nest wasn't buried especially deep underground. Belamus decided to take a more direct approach:

use detection magic to locate the underground cavities, then dig his way in with earth magic.

Casting his detection spell across the ground, he quickly sensed a large open space beneath his feet. Without hesitation, he dug downward, forcing his way into the nest.

The area he emerged into was teeming with Legion Ants. But Belamus didn’t panic.

"*Light Sword.*"

Two glowing swords formed instantly in his hands. With dazzling precision, he spun and slashed through the swarm, cutting the Legion Ants apart like paper scraps. Nearly fifty of them were annihilated in mere seconds.

"No time to waste. Let's move," he said coolly.

Then Belamus activated enhancement magic, flooding his body with power and pushing his physical abilities to their peak.

In his youth, he had specialized in close-quarters combat infused with magic. On the battlefield, he had earned a fearsome reputation—some had even called him a demon. Now, channeling those memories and skills, he tore through the Legion Ants without pause, dashing deeper into the nest in a whirlwind of unstoppable force.

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"So, you've come… Mercles."

Hereldyne stood motionless in a chamber steeped in pure blackness, his presence at the very heart of the darkness. He could sense it—his sworn nemesis had entered the nest.

At last, the moment he had dreamed of had arrived.

So long, *so* long he had waited for this day.

At last, I can make him taste despair.

Hereldyne's mind drifted back to memories long buried.

As a human child, he'd had a constant companion, an old friend who, in every endeavor, was always one step ahead, perpetually beyond his reach.

There was only one thing Hereldyne loved more than anything else: magic. And with that single focus, he trained endlessly, desperately, trying to surpass his friend in just that *one* field. He gave everything—endless hours, sleepless nights, training until his hands bled. But it was never enough.

His friend eventually earned the title of Great Sage, a figure revered by all. Hereldyne became a respected mage in his own right, but he could never catch up. The world favored his friend. Even worse, he knew it best of all—he could never defeat him. No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, his talents would never be enough.

That bitter awareness consumed him. What had once been a pure, simple desire to win gradually twisted and darkened.

Gradually, he began to nurture hatred, which grew even deeper with time. Eventually, that hatred became a black, festering need: to destroy everything his old friend held dear.

Killing the Great Sage—surrounded by countless disciples—was no easy task. Hereldyne tried several times, but each attempt failed. And as he aged, he feared that he would die still carrying that unbearable bitterness.

Then, one day, he learned something: his old friend had created a new spell.

Reincarnation magic.

A spell to begin life anew. His rival planned to leave this life and be reborn.

The moment Hereldyne sensed that, joy flooded through him like madness.

In the next life, he thought, *I'll do it. I'll take everything from him. I'll bring him unimaginable despair and agony.*

And so, Hereldyne cast a forbidden spell upon himself—one that severed his humanity. It transformed him into a being of darkness: a demon. A wicked existence that commanded dark power and wove terrible sorceries.

Becoming a demon nearly eliminated the limit on his lifespan. With time no longer a concern, Hereldyne cast the forbidden spell on himself—and waited. He waited patiently for his childhood friend, Mercles, to be reborn through reincarnation.

At first, he had considered killing him immediately, while he was still an infant. But that would have been no fun.

No… it'll be far more satisfying to let him build up everything he holds dear—and then destroy it.

Not just kill him. I'll make him watch as everything he loves is shattered. Only then will I end him.

Thus began Hereldyne's grand plan.

His conquest of the Legion Ants—his corruption of the Ant Core—was only one part of that larger scheme. A means to an end.

"You there—escort Mercles here," Hereldyne commanded the General Ants standing nearby.

"The time has finally come, Mercles. Now, you will taste despair—true despair!" Hereldyne declared, his voice trembling with twisted anticipation.

A wild, unhinged laughter burst from his throat, echoing through the halls of the Legion Ant nest: "Heeheehee… HA HA HA HA HA HA HAAA!!!"

His deranged laughter rang out for several seconds, reverberating off the blackened walls.

Then, slowly regaining his composure, he muttered to himself, "I suppose before dealing with Mercles, I'll need to deal with those little rats sneaking around."

With that, he sent a new command to the Legion Ants.

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The white Legion Ant unit, accompanied by Delarosa and her companions, continued their advance through the nest.

"This is strange," Medina murmured suddenly.

"What is?" Navasha asked.

"There should be more enemies around… yet we've seen almost none. I wonder why that is," Medina said, her brow furrowed with concern.

They had already traveled a fair distance from the white Legion Ants' hidden base, yet not a single black Legion Ant had appeared.

The lack of opposition made Medina uneasy.

"Maybe Belamus showed up?" Navasha suggested. "All the ants might've gotten distracted by him."

"What?! Seriously?! Belamus is here?!" Delarosa gasped, breaking into a flustered panic. "We've gotta hurry! If we don't beat that Herel-whatever before he does, it's all over!"

"Belamus… who is that, exactly?" Medina asked, tilting her head.

"Umm, he's Delarosa's younger brother… or at least, I think he is…" Medello replied, clearly unsure how to phrase it.

"You think he is…? What do you mean by that?" Medina asked, puzzled by Medello's hesitant explanation.

"He is my little brother," Delarosa answered, arms crossed, "but he's super smart and way stronger than me, and I can never beat him at anything!"

"I see… so, does that mean you don't want to lose to him? Is that why you want to defeat Hereldyne first?" Medina asked gently.

"Hmmm? No, that's not really it," Delarosa said, shaking her head.

"It's not?" Medina asked softly, tilting her head.

"Nope. It's not about winning or losing with Belamus. It's just—he treats me like a kid, even though I'm his older sister! That really gets to me. I mean, he works so hard, and I just want to help him more. That's why I want to beat that Hereldyne guy. I want Belamus to see that I can fight too, that I can be useful," Delarosa replied, shaking her head firmly.

Those were Delarosa's true feelings that she had carried all along. Even in her childish way, she had watched Belamus pour everything into his work. And deep down, she had wanted nothing more than to be his strength—to help him in whatever way she could.

"I see. So, you really care for Lord Belamus, don't you, Lady Delarosa?" Medina said with a gentle smile.

"Yep! I love Belamus *so* much!" Delarosa replied brightly, her face beaming with pure joy. There wasn't even a hint of embarrassment in her expression. If anything, it was Medello—ever so slightly precocious—whose cheeks flushed red.

"I like Belamus, too!" Navasha chimed in. "If it weren't for him, I'd probably still be weak. Right, Medello? You like him too, don't you?"

"Huh? Um… y-yeah," Medello stammered. "I really like Belamus. He's the kindest person I know, and he's helped our village grow so much. The goblins and orcs living there… everyone loves him."

"Exactly!" Delarosa said, nodding emphatically.

As the goblin girls chattered warmly about Belamus, Medina watched them with a serene smile.

"To hear you all speak of him so fondly… he must truly be a remarkable person. I'd like to meet him one day," she said softly.

"If he's in the nest somewhere, we might just run into him sooner rather than later," Navasha offered.

"Yes… I do hope I get the chance," Medina said.

Just as they were enjoying the conversation, a low rumble of footsteps echoed toward them—many footsteps.

"Enemies approaching! Everyone, prepare for battle!" Medina called sharply.

"Got it!" Delarosa shouted.

"Bring it on!" Navasha yelled.

"R-Right!" Medello stammered, trying to steady her nerves.

Each gave their reply, readying for combat. They quickly moved into battle formation, waiting for the enemy to arrive.

Moments later, the black Legion Ants appeared—dozens of them. Leading the charge were five General Ants.

"Five General Ants at the front… It seems Hereldyne is serious about eliminating us this time," Medina said grimly.

"It doesn't matter! We're smashing through them!" Delarosa shouted and hurled her signature spell. "*Fireball*!"

The blazing magic surged toward the approaching General Ants, exploding into their ranks.

"Follow Lady Delarosa!" Medina shouted. "The time has come—prepare for battle!"

With that, the clash began: Delarosa, Navasha, Medello, and the white Legion Ants versus the swarm of black Legion Ants.

Fortunately, the General Ants leading this group seemed weaker than the one they had first encountered. Delarosa and the others were able to handle them one-on-one, barely managing to hold their ground.

To their surprise, Medina herself proved to be a formidable fighter. As queen, she wielded the wind-element spell *Wind Slash*, conjuring blades of air to slice through the enemy. With calm precision, she tore through the black Legion Ants with spell after spell.

An hour passed. Though the white Legion Ants had suffered considerable losses, the group ultimately succeeded in wiping out the enemy force.

"All right! We got them!" Delarosa cheered.

"Ugh… I'm exhausted…" Medello groaned, slumping forward.

"Seriously? You're wiped out already? That's pathetic, Medello," Navasha said with a grin.

"You're all very impressive," Medina remarked, looking around at the battlefield.

"You're no slouch either, Medina!" Delarosa said with a bright smile.

"I am the queen, after all. Now then, let us move—" Medina began, but was suddenly cut off.

From ahead, heavier, louder footsteps echoed through the corridor.

"Ugh… you've got to be kidding…" Medello whimpered.

"So what? We'll just crush them too," Navasha said, rolling her shoulders.

"Whyyy?! I'm soooo tired already!" Medello wailed.

"How many more are coming? Well, I expected as much," Medina said with a quiet sigh.

Once again, the battle against the black Legion Ants began anew.

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"Found it."

Belamus murmured the words as he ran through the Legion Ant nest.

He hadn't been running blindly, as he had a plan. All this time, he'd been searching for one specific kind of Legion Ant: the ones that carried food.

Like any organized colony, Legion Ants were divided by role—some defended the nest, while others traveled outside to collect nutrients and deliver them to the Ant Core. These worker ants always moved toward the core, and by trailing them, Belamus knew he could eventually reach it.

Staying hidden, he shadowed a group of food-carrying Legion Ants, careful not to be spotted. His skill in stealth paid off—the ants remained unaware of his presence as he followed them through the twisting tunnels.

After a long pursuit, the narrow corridors opened up into a vast chamber.

There, deep within the room, he finally saw it.

The blackened Ant Core.

Something was wrong…

No guards. Not a single Legion Ant defended the area. Stranger still, there was no sign of the Queen Ant, who would ordinarily never leave the Ant Core unprotected. The absence of both defenders and the queen was highly suspicious.

A trap, Belamus thought. He proceeded with extreme caution, inching forward.

“So, you’ve come, Mercles.”

The voice echoed from near the core, deep and unmistakable.

Belamus froze. He had heard that voice many times in his past life.

No way…

He turned to face the speaker.

“Hereldyne…?” Belamus whispered, disbelief tightening his voice as he stared at the figure beside the Ant Core.

“It’s been a long time, Mercles,” the man replied, his voice chillingly familiar. “You may have changed, but I am just the same, aren’t I?”

Standing beside the blackened Ant Core was Hereldyne, Belamus’s former childhood friend and current mortal enemy.

His appearance was precisely as Belamus remembered from their youth, yet the sage instantly knew: this was no longer the same man. The familiar form now housed a pervasive, malevolent darkness; the presence, the energy, the very being radiating from within was something else entirely—a grotesque metamorphosis had taken place.

“What are you?” Belamus glared at him with seething suspicion. “Hereldyne was human. He was most certainly not some… thing like you.”

He couldn’t believe that the creature before him was truly Hereldyne.

A low chuckle escaped the creature’s lips. “Heh heh heh… It’s really me, Mercles. Born in Minston, remember? We grew up together. Though I suppose we stopped seeing each other around the time I hit forty, didn’t we? Still, there’s no doubt. I am Hereldyne.”

Belamus didn’t want to believe it. However, from the way he spoke, the small mannerisms, it all seemed to match the Hereldyne he had once known.

“I don’t care what you are anymore…” he said coldly. “All that matters is destroying the Ant Core. If you get in my way, I won’t

hold back."

"Don't be so hasty, Mercles. The real show is just beginning," Hereldyne replied with a smirk, snapping his fingers.

At his signal, two General Ants dropped from above.

One was a massive figure wielding four enormous swords. The other clutched something resembling a staff. Both radiated a twisted, ominous aura. These weren't ordinary General Ants—Belamus was sure of it. Hereldyne had done something to them.

"Let's see what your strength looks like now," Hereldyne said.

The sword-bearing General Ant lunged at Belamus.

That thing—whatever it is—can control Legion Ants? Where's the Queen Ant? No… This isn't the time to be thinking.

Shutting down his thoughts, Belamus activated his *Shining Saber* spell. Twin blades of radiant light materialized in his hands. With both sabers gripped tightly, he didn't just block the General Ant's strike—he cleaved straight through its massive sword.

After slicing through the enemy's blade, Belamus moved to strike at its neck. But before he could land the blow, a magical attack came hurtling toward him from the other General Ant, the one holding a staff. He quickly raised a barrier spell to block the magic—

"*Shining Cross*," Belamus intoned sharply.

—unleashing *Shining Cross*, an offensive spell that projected a burning cross of radiant light, scorching anything it touched. The staff-bearing General Ant failed to dodge and was struck head-on, disintegrating without resistance. Belamus followed up by cutting down the remaining General Ant with his twin *Shining Sabers*, effortlessly dispatching them both.

"Well, well. You're still pretty strong, even in that body. So, the General Ants were useless after all," Hereldyne remarked, his voice as composed and condescending as ever.

Belamus ignored him and continued advancing, determined not to let him control the pace of the confrontation.

"Still as careless as always, though," he added with a sly grin.

The moment he spoke, the two fallen General Ants began to melt into a thick, black sludge. The viscous substance suddenly sprang to life and surged toward Belamus. Caught off guard by the unexpected resurrection, he was a beat too slow to react. As he moved to evade, the black mass expanded rapidly, cutting off all escape routes.

Belamus tried to cast a light-based spell, but it was too late. First his wrists, then his ankles were ensnared by the black tendrils.

"Guh…!"

He struggled, but the viscous black restraints held him fast, lifting his small body helplessly into the air.

"Hmph. Binding my wrists and ankles means nothing," Belamus muttered defiantly. "I can still cast magic."

Yet, as he attempted to focus, a terrifying realization struck: he could feel no magical power. His mana, his very essence of magic, had been utterly sealed away.

"Heh heh heh… What's the matter? No magic?" Hereldyne taunted, smirking.

"You… What have you done?" Belamus growled, glaring at Hereldyne as the realization of his powerlessness began to sink in.

"Ever heard of Magic-Sealing Fluid? Didn't think so. It's a rare substance. I made it just for you."

Magic-Sealing Fluid—Belamus had never heard the term before. But he could tell from the eerie material binding his limbs that it was suppressing his mana. He strained with all his might to break free, but the restraints were unbelievably strong. No matter how much force he applied, there seemed to be no way to escape.

"Heh heh heh heh…" Hereldyne watched Belamus struggle, with pure delight etched across his face.

"You look like you're in pain, Mercles. Good. Suffer more. Feel my rage—my hatred—let it sear your very soul!" Hereldyne shouted, his face twisted with sadistic glee as he watched Belamus struggle.

His eyes burned with venomous loathing, the sheer intensity of it crashing over Belamus like a wave.

“I became a demon for the sole purpose of making you suffer! I waited—waited for you to be reborn. When I sensed your reincarnation, I thought it was too early to kill you. No, I let you live so you could build something precious in this world. I mean, something worth destroying. And once you did, I would crush it and watch your spirit break!”

Hereldyne’s voice rose to a furious pitch as his face twisted into madness, the fury he had suppressed now erupting uncontrollably.

“Are you truly Hereldyne?” Belamus asked, his voice low and disbelieving. “Why do you hate me so deeply?”

“You’ll never understand!” he roared. “You’ll never comprehend my hatred! The humiliation of never once defeating you! The wretchedness of my life spent in your shadow! You’ll never understand!”

“You… never won against me?” Belamus scoffed. “Is that it? How petty. Just jealousy? I never thought you were such a disgraceful man. Release me.”

“Heh heh heh… Of course, you wouldn’t understand. You never could. Not until you’ve tasted the despair of a loser… Now, Mercles—watch this!” Hereldyne snarled, his eyes gleaming with malice.

The moment Hereldyne spoke, darkness swelled around him and then reshaped itself into a large, round mirror.

At first, the mirror reflected Belamus’s image. But slowly, it began to shift, revealing something else entirely.

Narrowing his eyes as he stared into the shifting image within the mirror, Belamus began to understand its meaning and murmured, “What is this…?”

The image in the mirror showed a village populated by goblins and orcs. It wasn’t just a silent vision; sounds came through clearly. The calls of birds and the rustling of creatures moving through the forest all filtered into the space around them with vivid realism.

“This is a real-time feed—both image and sound,” Hereldyne said with grim satisfaction, eyes gleaming as he gestured toward the mirror. “It may look peaceful now, but soon my Legion Ants will

descend upon that village. And you? You'll just sit there and watch. I wonder what kind of face you'll make… When your precious village is torn apart, when the people you care about are slaughtered—what then? Will you scream and cry? Or will you go mad with rage? We spent a long time together, Mercles, but honestly, I never could tell. That's why I want to find out."

"I've already told them to flee," Belamus said quietly, his voice steady.

"Heh heh heh… Flee, huh? How quaint," Hereldyne sneered. "But I've given my Legion Ants very clear orders: ignore everything else, and hunt the villagers. No matter how far they run, the ants will follow relentlessly. I wonder… will they be able to escape? I can already see that the more they run, the more gruesome their deaths will become. Ah, and don't worry. The mirror doesn't just show this one location. It's enchanted to track them automatically. So, you won't miss a single second of their end—you'll get to watch every last moment."

"Hereldyne… you bastard…" Belamus growled, glaring at him with a fury he rarely showed.

Hereldyne grinned wickedly at the sight.

"Yes… that face. That's the one I wanted to see. We were together for so long, and yet I never saw you make that expression until now. Suffer for me, Mercles. Suffer more. Now then… my Legion Ants should be arriving any moment now."

Inside the mirror, the image shifted again—Legion Ants were approaching the outskirts of the village. The moment Belamus saw them, he began struggling against his restraints with frantic desperation.

He poured every ounce of his strength into his arms and legs. But without magic, Belamus's physical power was barely above that of an ordinary six-year-old child. No matter how he strained, the bindings wouldn't budge.

Belamus would not give up. He continued to struggle, thrashing against the restraints with unwavering determination.

I will break free. I will defeat Hereldyne. I will destroy the Ant Core and wipe out the Legion Ants. Until then… please, just stay alive. Run. Do whatever it takes—just survive!

Clenching that vow in his heart, Belamus fought with every ounce of will, every shred of strength. He struggled desperately and relentlessly without pause.

"Well now… how far do you think your precious people will make it?" Hereldyne taunted, casting a glance at the mirror. "Hmm?"

Instead of showing fleeing goblins and orcs, the image displayed something entirely unexpected.

As the Legion Ants neared the village gates, goblins unleashed a coordinated barrage of magic from atop the walls. Orcs, too, could be seen hurling rocks down with all their might. Even the Alraunes had joined the battle, fighting alongside the others in defiant unity.

"W-Why are they fighting? I told them to run!" Belamus exclaimed, visibly shaken.

"They're fighting, all right," Hereldyne said with a smirk. "Doesn't matter to me, of course. It just means they'll die even sooner."

Shaken, Belamus cried out. "Run! You'll die! Please, run!"

Unfortunately, his voice could not reach them. There was no way it could. He was bound and powerless, screaming into a magical image. No reply came.

And yet—by pure coincidence, perhaps nothing more than a miracle—he heard them.

"We're not letting some ants destroy the village Belamus helped us build!"

"That's right! If it's Lord Belamus, he'll definitely stop them! Until then, we'll protect this village no matter what!"

Their shouts rang out, as if in answer to Belamus's desperate plea. The voices of the villagers echoed with courage and resolve, piercing through the silence between worlds.

Chapter 10

After Belamus had left, a serious discussion was held. The topic was simple but weighty. It was about the arrival of the Legion Ants, and whether the villagers would run or stand and fight.

Every villager had gathered for the meeting. Standing before them all, the village elder addressed the crowd.

"Belamus told us to flee," he said solemnly. "But listen… If we flee the moment the Legion Ants arrive, this village will be destroyed. This place, which Belamus poured his time and effort into building and nurturing, will be trampled underfoot by those monsters. I ask you—is that truly what we should do? I want everyone to think and decide together."

The village broke into murmurs, clusters forming, discussions rising and falling. The debate continued for some time.

Eventually, the elder raised his voice again.

"Silence, please. Let's settle this by a show of hands. First—those who believe we should run?"

No one raised a hand.

"I'll ask again. Who believes fleeing is the right choice?" the village elder said firmly, scanning the silent crowd with a grave expression.

Still, not a single hand moved.

"Belamus told us to flee. He likely fears our deaths more than the fall of this village. I believe nothing would grieve him more. So, I ask one final time: who thinks we should run?" the village elder asked quietly, his voice heavy with sorrow as he looked into the eyes of each villager.

No one answered. No one raised a hand.

“Very well. Now—who believes we should stay and fight?” the village elder declared, his voice rising with resolve.

In that instant, every hand shot into the air.

“I won’t let the Legion Ants have their way with the village Belamus built!” Arèsa shouted, her voice full of fire. Cheers and agreements erupted from the goblins around her.

“That’s right!”

“We’ll fight for him!”

“Forgive us, Lord Belamus,” murmured Balbora, bowing his head. “This time… we’ll disobey your order. But please understand—we *will* protect this village. No matter what.”

“Alraunes… will you stand and fight with us?” the village elder asked, turning to Ellency.

“Of course we will,” Ellency replied without hesitation. “We are neither cowards nor ingrates who would refuse to fight for our benefactor. The lives you once saved—we will now offer them in your defense.”

“I see,” the village elder said with a nod. “Then if the Legion Ants come, I’m counting on you.”

“Aye. Though there’s still a chance Lord Belamus will take them down before they reach us,” she added calmly.

“That would be ideal,” the elder said with a hopeful smile.

Several hours later, the village detected the approach of the Legion Ants. How? By their sound. The deep, reverberating noise of countless insect legs rustling through the forest echoed all the way to the village, a sound that grew louder and louder by the minute.

At the southern gate—the direction from which the swarm would likely attack—Balbora stood beside the village chief, both of them watching in silence.

“Are you afraid? Or is it battle nerves?” the village elder asked, glancing at Balbora’s visibly trembling arms.

“I’d like to say it’s just nerves,” Balbora muttered, forcing a crooked smile. “But nah… I’m scared outta my damn mind.”

"Well, that's no surprise. Just from the sound alone, we can tell there's an absurd number of Legion Ants heading our way," the elder said gravely.

Balbora glanced over. "Your hands aren't shaking, Elder. Are you not scared?"

"I'm an old man. Not much life left to lose," the elder replied with a dry chuckle. "But don't be fooled by appearances—inside, I'm trembling with fear."

"Really?" Balbora asked quietly, glancing sideways at the elder with a mixture of surprise and doubt.

"It's not fear of my own death," he said softly. "It's the fear of losing what I hold dear. That's far more terrifying."

"Yeah…" Balbora said after a moment. "Same here. I'm not afraid of dying. But the thought of seeing everything important to me destroyed… That's what scares me."

The sound of the ants marching was now just outside the gates. And then, strangely, Balbora's trembling began to subside. His breathing steadied. His eyes sharpened.

"They're here! Get ready for battle! We're going to protect this village—together!" Balbora shouted.

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"You bastards aren't getting through here no matter what!"

"Everyone—hold the line until Belamus takes care of things! We *will* protect this place!"

"Show them what Alraune power looks like! Let those Legion Ants see for themselves!"

The mirror showed a fierce and unified defense—goblins, orcs, and Alraunes standing side by side, fighting desperately to hold back the advancing swarm of Legion Ants. Each and every one of them fought with all they had. Because they believed in Belamus. Because

they wanted to protect the village he had built. Because they refused to let it fall.

They fought with everything they had—with faith, with purpose, with determination.

"Aha ha ha ha ha! What a bunch of idiots!" Hereldyne laughed, clutching his stomach. "They actually believe in you! You, who are bound and helpless! Maybe they'll keep believing right up to the moment they die!"

Belamus said nothing, but the scene unfolding before him sent a surge of strength through his soul.

They believe in me.

That truth alone reignited his will. He could not betray that trust. He had to break free, no matter what it took.

With a face contorted in raw desperation, Belamus threw himself into the effort, more determined than ever to tear off the restraints. It was an expression unlike any he had worn before—driven, intense, burning with resolve.

His face was drenched in sweat. His body was near collapse. And still, he struggled. Still, he fought. Still, he refused to surrender.

"It's useless! Completely useless!" Hereldyne shouted. "You're too weak now! You'll never break those bindings with your strength alone! All you can do is sit there and watch them die! That's your fate!"

Belamus didn't hear a word of it. Hereldyne's jeers faded into the void as he focused entirely on one thing: the people of his village. For their sake, he kept struggling.

"Tch… These pests are persistent," Hereldyne muttered, watching the mirror. "You'd think one of them would've died by now."

Still, the goblins, orcs, and Alraunes held the line, refusing to let even a single Legion Ant breach the village. Wave after wave came, and still the defenders struck them down, one by one.

"Five General Ants down already…? Tch. What are those idiots doing? Kill them. Make Mercles despair now!" Hereldyne snarled, his

expression twisting with frustration as he glared into the mirror.

Even as the battle dragged on, not one Ant had broken through. The difference in numbers was staggering—but so was the villagers' resistance. It was, Hereldyne had to admit, a terrifying display of endurance.

"It's useless! All your resistance—it's meaningless!" Hereldyne shouted, voice rising in frustration. "Look at Mercles! He's completely powerless! You will all die!"

His words rang out with venom, but beneath them was something else—an edge of panic. Logically, he knew victory was inevitable. The villagers would fall, and a broken, despairing Mercles would follow. No amount of resistance should change that.

And yet… the sheer force of the villagers' will, the sight of Belamus still struggling—still refusing to give up—gnawed at Hereldyne. It pressed against him like a weight he couldn't cast off.

"Mercles! Why won't you give up?! You know it's hopeless! You know you can't break free!" Hereldyne screamed, his voice cracking with a mix of fury and disbelief as he watched Belamus continue to struggle. "Hah… hah… HAH!"

Belamus didn't answer—he just kept fighting against the restraints, eyes blazing with relentless determination.

"Don't look at me like that!" Hereldyne shrieked. "That look—it's the same as back then! Like you know, you're going to win! Stop it! You should be breaking down in despair right now! There shouldn't be even a shred of hope left for you!"

"Hah… hah… Hereldyne," Belamus panted, lifting his gaze, "do you know why you never beat me—not even once?"

"What?" Hereldyne snapped, his eyes narrowing as confusion flickered across his face.

"There was never a difference in magical talent between us. But I always won because I never gave up. You did. I constantly pushed myself to surpass those stronger than me. I trained until I reached them, and eventually surpassed them. One day, people started calling me the *Great Sage*, and there was no one left to chase. But

you stayed beneath me and gave up. Somewhere deep down, you stopped believing you could surpass me. That's why you never could," Belamus spoke with quiet intensity, his voice steady despite the strain, as he met Hereldyne's gaze with unwavering resolve.

"Don't give me that!" Hereldyne snapped, his voice trembling. "You're saying I just needed to try harder? That's ridiculous! There are things no amount of effort can overcome. Look at yourself—do you think you'll break those shackles by sheer willpower? Tell me, Mercles! Do you honestly believe that?!"

"I'll say one thing," Belamus said, drawing in a deep breath. "I am not Mercles. I'm Arèsa's son and Delarosa's little brother."

He threw his head back and shouted with everything he had: "My name is Belamus! Remember it!"

At that very moment, he gathered every ounce of strength in his body and wrenched against the shackles.

But the restraints didn't break.

"Aha ha ha ha ha! That was your full strength, wasn't it?! And still, you couldn't break free!" Hereldyne laughed triumphantly, his voice echoing with manic glee. "Give up, Mercles! Fall into despair! That's what I wanted you to taste—pure despair!"

Just as his triumphant cry rang out, a girl's voice suddenly cut through the air.

"Belamus!"

W-What… those voices… They're from the group that broke in, and the survivors who fled into the nest earlier. I sent a whole swarm of Legion Ants after them… I should have wiped them out. Don't tell me… they fought through all of that? With just those numbers?! Hereldyne's thoughts raced in stunned panic. That flicker of unease didn't go unnoticed.

"*Fireball*!" shouted Medello, launching a blazing sphere of flame directly at him.

Then Navasha charged forward at full speed, closing the distance in a heartbeat and slashing with her blade. All around, the

surviving Legion Ants turned on Hereldyne, unleashing a coordinated assault.

"It's your job to save Belamus—Delarosa!" Navasha cried out as she struck.

"I know already!" Delarosa shouted back, sprinting toward her brother. "*Fireball*!"

She launched her own fireball straight at the black bindings on Belamus's wrists. The sphere struck its mark dead-on.

Though the Magic-Sealing Fluid could suppress mana within the body, it had no defense against magic that had already manifested. Once struck by the fireball, the substance sizzled and burned away in an instant. Belamus dropped from the air.

Delarosa darted forward and caught him as he fell, then quickly removed the restraints from his ankles as well.

"Delarosa, you…" Belamus began, still catching his breath.

"Hee hee! Your big sister came to rescue you!" Delarosa said, puffing her chest out with exaggerated pride.

Belamus gave her an exasperated look.

"You reckless idiot… What were you thinking, coming out here?" he scolded.

"Heyyy! And here I was, feeling good about saving you!" Delarosa huffed, puffing out her cheeks in mock indignation.

"Delarosa," Belamus said firmly.

"What?!" she shot back, still sulking.

"That black figure over there—I want to defeat him. Lend me your strength," Belamus said firmly, his eyes locked on Hereldyne with unwavering resolve.

The moment Belamus made his request, Delarosa froze for a beat, her face blank in surprise as if trying to process what she'd just heard.

"Okay!" she replied cheerfully, beaming with a smile as bright as ever.

"Wah!"

"Eeek!"

Suddenly, the voices of Navasha and Medello rang out in distress. When Belamus looked toward Hereldyne, he saw both of them—and the Legion Ants that had been attacking alongside them—get sent flying through the air.

"You pests dare to defy me?!" Hereldyne roared, his voice seething with rage. His expression was twisted with fury, and a thick, malevolent aura surged around him, more intense than ever before.

The sight overwhelmed everyone present, except Belamus.

"You think without the Magic-Sealing Fluid, you can defeat me?" Hereldyne growled. "Naive. Pathetically naive."

With a snap of his fingers, something massive came crashing down from above.

A colossal General Ant slammed into the ground.

"L-Luth!" Medina cried out in shock at the sight of the giant creature.

"Luth? What's that?" Delarosa asked.

"The strongest of all General Ants," Medina explained quickly. "And judging by its aura… it's been enhanced by Hereldyne."

"Whoa, that thing looks crazy strong," Medello muttered, eyes wide as she stared.

While Medina, Medello, and Navasha exchanged hurried words, Belamus stepped forward.

"And you are?" he asked, looking directly at Medina.

"You must be Lord Belamus," she answered, bowing slightly. "I am Medina, Queen Ant. Hereldyne has taken control of the Legion Ants from me… but there's no time to explain. Let us join forces and fight."

Belamus nodded. She didn't seem to be an enemy… for now.

"Listen," Belamus said firmly, his voice cutting through the tension. "All of you—handle that giant General Ant together."

"What about you, Belamus?" Delarosa asked, turning toward him with concern.

"I'll take care of him," Belamus said calmly, his gaze fixed on Hereldyne with unwavering resolve.

“Got it!” Delarosa shouted without hesitation. “All right—Navasha! Medello! Medina! Let’s go!”

At her rallying cry, the battle began.

“It’s you and me, Hereldyne,” Belamus said, stepping forward.

“Hmph. Fine by me,” Hereldyne sneered.

Belamus advanced steadily, eyes locked on his enemy.

“I’ll neutralize you here and now,” he said coldly, “then watch your plans fall apart. The villagers—you won’t get to see them die. Not the children either. They’ll survive. Everything you’ve plotted will be for nothing.”

“That’s if you can neutralize me,” Hereldyne shot back. “You think you can defeat me with that body?” he scoffed, eyeing Belamus with disdain as a cruel smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“You’ve spent too much energy on your little performance,” Belamus replied. “The illusion spell, the Magic-Sealing Fluid—none of that can be summoned lightly. You’ve drained yourself, haven’t you?”

“And what of it? I still won’t be beaten by a child,” Hereldyne spat, his voice brimming with contempt.

“We’ll see about that,” Belamus replied coolly, his stance firm.

“Hmph… Come then, Mercles!”

“The name is Belamus!”

The final battle began in earnest.

Belamus struck first.

He opened with *Light Arrow*, launching a sharp projectile of pure light toward Hereldyne. Among the wide array of spells he could cast, light-elemental magic was his specialty—and his most powerful. Though proficient in all elements, nothing matched the destructive potential of his light-based attacks.

Hereldyne had become a demon. And demons, by nature, were weak to light.

Belamus had counted on that advantage. But the result wasn’t what he’d hoped for. *Light Arrow* struck its target dead on—yet Hereldyne didn’t even flinch; no reaction, no damage, nothing.

"*Dark Blaze!*" Hereldyne roared.

Hereldyne unleashed a dark-element spell. A black sphere of shadow shot outward and exploded violently the moment it struck the ground. Belamus dodged swiftly, but before he could recover, Hereldyne cast *Dark Blaze* again.

This time, it wasn't just one.

Belamus looked up to see dozens of dark orbs scattered across the sky. There was no way to dodge them all. Assessing the situation instantly, he conjured *Magical Shield* for himself. The barrier softened the impact, but not completely—he still took noticeable damage.

Hereldyne launched yet another wave of *Dark Blaze*, refusing to let up.

In response, Belamus chanted, "*Shining Sword!*"

A brilliant, elongated blade of light materialized in his hand. Then, with another spell, he enhanced his physical abilities, channeling magic into speed and reflexes.

As the dark orbs descended toward the earth once more, Belamus sprang into motion. Anticipating their trajectory, he slashed at each of them midair with the glowing blade. One by one, he cleaved through every orb before it could touch the ground.

When struck by the *Shining Sword*, the *Dark Blaze* spells were neutralized, vanishing without exploding.



With the momentum from his last strike, Belamus closed the distance and lunged at Hereldyne with his shining blade. The first swing was dodged, but he didn't stop—he kept slashing, each movement faster than the eye could follow. One of the strikes finally connected, cutting across Hereldyne's body.

"Guh…!" Hereldyne groaned in pain, staggering from the blow.

He quickly retreated, leaping back to create distance. Then, raising his right palm toward Belamus, he muttered, "*Gravity.*"

A sphere of darkness bloomed in Hereldyne's hand—and in that instant, Belamus's body was yanked forward with tremendous force, pulled straight toward the source like a magnet. The pull was too strong to resist.

As Belamus hurtled forward at blinding speed, Hereldyne began gathering magic in his left hand. He wasn't just drawing him in—he was preparing a strike. He was going to land a direct hit the moment Belamus arrived.

Realizing what was about to happen, Belamus quickly cast *Magic Defense Enhancement*. But even with the boost, the impact came with crushing force. Hereldyne's left fist shot forward in a brutal straight punch, slamming into Belamus's stomach.

"Gahhh!" Belamus gasped, the blow driving the air from his lungs. Despite the enhanced defense, the sheer velocity at which he'd been pulled made it impossible to block fully. He staggered, clutching his abdomen.

He hadn't simply taken the hit—he had struck back at the same moment.

"Ugh… Mercles…" Hereldyne hissed, clutching his face.

At the very instant Hereldyne landed his punch, Belamus had cast *Shining Hammer*, a light-based striking spell. It had smashed directly into Hereldyne's face—his most vulnerable spot—and with his demonic weakness to light, the pain was immense.

"Haaah… haaah…" Belamus panted, barely keeping his balance.

"Hhh… hhh…" Hereldyne breathed heavily as well, his expression warped with pain and rage.

Both were badly damaged now, and fatigue was setting in. But Belamus, already worn from his earlier struggle to break free, was nearing his limit. Just being able to stand was a feat. And yet, not for a moment did he think it was over. Not once did he believe he was at a disadvantage or that he might lose.

I will defeat him. That's all that matters.

Belamus focused everything on that single thought. Nothing else existed.

"Haaahhhhhh!"

At that moment, Hereldyne let out a thunderous roar. A torrent of magical energy surged around him—it was immense, monstrous. Belamus could feel it clearly: this would be *the* decisive blow. Hereldyne was channeling everything he had into one final attack.

Belamus made his decision without hesitation. He would meet it head-on. He poured every drop of magic left in his body into a single spell.

"*Abyss Blaster*!" Hereldyne bellowed, thrusting his hand forward as the swirling darkness erupted from his palm.

"*Saint Breaker*!" Belamus shouted, his voice unwavering as he unleashed a blinding surge of radiant power from both hands.

From Hereldyne's hand erupted his ultimate dark-element spell —*Abyss Blaster*. From Belamus's, his most powerful light-element spell—*Saint Breaker*—blazed forth.

The two spells collided in the space between them. For a long, tense moment, they clashed in equilibrium, light and dark violently locked together.

"Mercles! This is where you vanish!" Hereldyne roared. "It's a shame I won't get to see the face of your despair—but it ends here!"

"The one who'll vanish… is you, Hereldyne!" Belamus shouted back.

"It's useless!" Hereldyne screamed, his voice cracking with madness. "For decades—centuries—I have hated you! Hated, hated, hated, hated, hated you! That hatred is everything! That hatred cannot be defeated! It will not lose!"

Slowly, inch by inch, Hereldyne's dark magic began to push back the light. His hatred, poured into every ounce of his spell, carried terrifying power.

"I will not lose!" Belamus roared, voice burning with righteous fury. "Not to your selfish, meaningless grudge!"

Though the darkness began to press against him, Belamus refused to yield. His resolve blazed as fiercely as his spell, and his voice rang out with such force that no one could believe he was at a disadvantage.

"I have something to protect! People, I have to save!" Belamus roared, his voice cutting through the chaos like a blade. "Hereldyne! What do *you* have? Nothing but hatred! You can't defeat me with that! I'll never lose to something so empty!"

His scream carried every last ounce of his will, his determination, his refusal to surrender. And slowly—but surely—the light began to push back the darkness.

The tide turned.

Bit by bit, the radiance of *Saint Breaker* overwhelmed *Abyss Blaster*, until it was clear which force would prevail.

"HAAAAAAHHH!"

With one final cry, Belamus poured everything into the spell. His light surged forward, swallowing Hereldyne's darkness completely.

"MERCLEEEEEESSSSS!" Hereldyne screamed as the blinding light engulfed him. The divine radiance tore through him—a demon struck directly by the highest tier of light magic, his elemental weakness.

He was dying.

Even in the end… he had lost again.

As the light consumed him, Hereldyne understood.

He had died… and failed… again.

In his final moments, memories flooded back.

It had all started so simply. He had once admired Mercles—just wanted to become like him. For decades, he had chased after that ideal.

At some point… that pure feeling had twisted.

When had it happened?

Was it when I realized I could never become like Mercles?

Was it the moment I gave up, believing I never could?

He wasn't sure anymore.

As the light wrapped around him, peaceful and final, Hereldyne let go of everything.

If I can finally be free from this… from these feelings… then maybe… it's okay.

Belamus collapsed to his knees the moment the spell ended.

His body was drenched in sweat, his limbs trembling from exhaustion. He had nothing left—he had poured out everything.

Still, somehow, he forced himself to stand, swaying on unsteady legs.

And then—

"Mercles…"

A voice reached him.

Hereldyne's voice.

Belamus looked up.

Far ahead, Hereldyne lay slumped on the ground.

At a glance, Belamus knew that he was no longer a demon.

Even if only for a moment… Hereldyne had returned to being human.

Belamus slowly walked over to Hereldyne. The once-fearsome figure now lay sprawled on his back, arms and legs stretched wide. His body had aged drastically—his hair was completely white, his face deeply lined with wrinkles. He looked like nothing more than an old man.

"It's been a long time, Hereldyne," Belamus said gently.

"Yeah… it has, Mercles. Or should I say… Belamus now?" Hereldyne replied, a faint smile touching his lips.

They fell silent for a while, simply gazing at each other—two men who had once shared a past now standing at the end of a long, tangled road.

“In the end, I never managed to beat you… not even once,” Hereldyne murmured, his voice tinged with wistful resignation.

“There was one time,” Belamus said quietly.

“When was that?” Hereldyne asked, his brows drawing together slightly as he searched his fading memory.

“You remember? We had one more childhood friend,” Belamus said quietly, his gaze steady and his voice tinged with nostalgia.

“You mean… Asha?” Hereldyne asked, his voice softening.

“Yes. The woman who became your wife,” Belamus replied, his tone also soft.

“What about her?” Hereldyne asked, his voice low, almost wary.

“She was my first love. When you won her heart… that’s the one time I truly thought I’d lost,” Belamus admitted, his words calm but sincere.

“Heh… I see. She was a good woman. Can’t blame you.” Hereldyne gave a faint chuckle, his expression relaxing into something almost boyish.

“So, I did win… at least once… I see… I see…” Hereldyne murmured, his voice growing faint as a peaceful smile settled on his face.

With that satisfied smile still on his face, Hereldyne’s life slipped quietly away.

“Goodbye… Hereldyne,” Belamus whispered.

Barely able to stay on his feet, he turned and staggered away, leaving the past behind.

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“Is it… still not done?!” the goblin shouted, his voice rising in desperation.

In the village shared by goblins and orcs, they had been holding out with sheer determination, but the situation had turned dire. The defensive walls, battered from repeated assaults, looked like they

could collapse at any moment. The defenders could no longer cope with the onslaught coming from all directions.

"Damn it! We can't hold out any longer if this keeps up!"

"Lord Belamus…!"

Finally, the gate shattered. A swarm of ants poured into the village.

"I-Is this the end?!"

Just as that despair set in—

"Eh?"

The Legion Ants suddenly began to crumble, turning into black sand.

"Huh?"

The villagers stared in stunned silence, unable to comprehend what had just happened. But soon, the realization dawned on them —there could only be one reason the ants had collapsed like that.

"Could this be…"

"Maybe…"

"Did he do it?"

"Belamus…"

"Lord Belamus!"

In that moment, a roar of celebration erupted.

"Man, that was way too close! I thought we were done for!"

"I believed in Belamus all the way!"

"As expected of Lord Belamus! Still, I wish he'd come a bit sooner because I almost peed myself."

The villagers erupted into a jubilant uproar, their relief from surviving the crisis washing over them.

"Everyone, silence!"

The village elder's voice rang out. Instantly, the crowd fell quiet.

"You all did well! We protected this village until Belamus arrived to save us! Let's celebrate our victory with a feast! We'll begin as soon as Belamus returns. So, start preparing now!"

Though everyone was exhausted from the battle, not a single voice of objection was raised.

Almost in unison with the elder's proclamation, the villagers let out another thunderous cheer.

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"Aaahhh!" Delarosa's anguished cry echoed through the battlefield. "We were this close to finishing it off, and then it just turned into black sand and *disappeared*! What the heck was that?!"

She stamped her foot, her voice thick with pure frustration.

"Lord Belamus must have defeated Hereldyne," Medina said calmly. "Most likely, with Hereldyne gone, all the Legion Ants he controlled simply collapsed. The Ant Core appears intact, returned to its pristine white state."

"*Uuuugh*, that's so unsatisfying," Delarosa grumbled, cheeks puffed out in a pout.

"Right? *I* wanted to be the one to cut it down for the finish!" Navasha added, equally annoyed.

"C-Come on, a win's a win, right?" Medello offered, trying to ease the tension.

Delarosa and Navasha were frustrated that they didn't get to land the final blow on Luth, the giant General Ant. Both of them pouted like children denied a treat.

"You guys okay?" came a familiar voice.

"Ah!"

"Belamus!"

There he was—Belamus, stumbling back into view, barely upright, his body swaying with exhaustion.

"Whoa! You look like a total wreck, Belamus! Are you even *alive*?"

"I've never seen you in that state before…" Navasha said, wide-eyed.

"I'm fine… No fatal injuries…" Belamus mumbled.

And then, with a sudden sway—

He collapsed.

"Belamus!"

Delarosa caught him just in time, panic rising in her voice.

"Are you okay, Belamus?!"

"N-No way… Belamus?!"

"Belamus! Hang in there!"

Delarosa quickly checked his condition.

"He's just asleep…" she said with a sigh of relief.

"Huhhh?!"

"You've got to be kidding me!"

Belamus had used every last drop of his strength and now lay peacefully asleep, his breathing calm and steady.

"Hmm… when he's like this, Belamus's actually kind of cute," Medello murmured, watching him with a gentle smile.

"Yeah, really," Navasha said with a teasing grin. "He never changes his expression, always so stiff, totally lacking in cuteness. But whoa, his cheeks are so soft!"

She poked at Belamus's cheek repeatedly with one finger, clearly enjoying herself.

"Belamus was *way* cuter when he was little, you know," Delarosa chimed in, now gently stroking his hair.

"Um… everyone?" Medina interjected hesitantly. "Perhaps we should return soon? You must all be quite exhausted…"

"Ugh… Y-Yes, you're right," Delarosa said reluctantly. "It *is* a little hard to leave, though. But… let's go home."

"Yeah, let's," Navasha agreed.

"Time to head back," Medello added with a nod.

With that, Delarosa hoisted Belamus onto her back.

"Delarosa," Navasha offered, "I'm stronger than you. Want me to carry him instead?"

"No thanks," Delarosa replied with a smile. "Carrying Belamus is my job."

"Fair enough… Yeah, makes sense!" Navasha said with a shrug, smiling as she stepped aside to let Delarosa carry Belamus.

Just as they were about to leave the Legion Ant nest, Delarosa turned and asked, "Oh—what about you, Medina? What will you do now?"

"I… hm…" Medina paused thoughtfully. "I want to repay all of you for saving me, but I'm still not sure how."

"Then you should come to the village with us!" Delarosa said brightly. "I'd be a little sad if we had to part ways so soon."

"The village…?" Medina murmured. "That might be best. If I serve the villagers as a way to repay my debt… Yes. But would I be welcome there?"

"Of course! If we explain everything properly, they'll understand, I promise!" Delarosa said confidently, flashing Medina a reassuring grin.

"You think so…? Very well. Then, I shall accompany you." Medina replied with a small nod, her voice calm but touched with gratitude.

Medina, along with the remaining Legion Ants, agreed to join Delarosa and the others on their journey back. She handed the restored Ant Core to one of the ants for safekeeping.

"All right—let's head home!" Delarosa called.

And so, the group began their journey back to the village, the long battle finally behind them.

Chapter 11

By the time Delarosa and the others returned to the village, night had already fallen. Belamus was still fast asleep, gently breathing as he lay slumped on Delarosa's back.

As they approached the gate and it creaked open, they were immediately met with a loud, enthusiastic welcome.

"Welcome back, Belamus! Hey! Delarosa! Medello! Navasha!—Wait, hold on! Are those Legion Ants?! What's going on here?!"

A sizable crowd of goblins and orcs had gathered to greet them, but the moment they spotted Medina and the other ants, murmurs and alarm spread quickly.

"Ahhh, about that…"

Delarosa stepped forward and quickly explained the situation.

"I am called Medina. It is a pleasure to meet you all," she said politely, bowing her head with grace.

"Well, we *were* just fighting them a few hours ago, so yeah, it's a surprise… but she doesn't seem like a bad one, so I guess it's fine," one of the villagers said with a shrug.

No one seemed inclined to object to Medina's presence.

"More importantly—what about Belamus?!"

"He's sleeping right here," Delarosa said, patting his back lightly.

"He's… asleep?"

"Yup! Totally wiped out," she confirmed. "And hey, can you all keep it down a little? You're gonna wake him up!"

"Ah, right… Good point."

With that, the celebration was postponed until the next day to let Belamus rest undisturbed.

Medello and Navasha were soon led away by their families, returning home with warm reunions and relief.

“Belamus! Delarosa!”

“Ah—Mom!”

Arèsa came rushing toward them, her voice filled with joy.

“Aaah, I was so worried about you two…” Arèsa said, her voice trembling as she wrapped her arms around Delarosa and Belamus. Her eyes glistened with tears. “I’m so glad you made it back. Well done, Delarosa. You carried Belamus all the way here. I’ll take over now. Leave the rest to me,” Arèsa said warmly, pulling her daughter and son into a gentle embrace.

“Huhhh?! But I was supposed to carry him the whole way!” Delarosa protested.

“As his mother, this is my duty,” Arèsa said firmly.

“Ugh…”

Hearing the word “mother” made Delarosa pause. She hesitated, then reluctantly handed Belamus over. Arèsa cradled him gently in her arms.

“It’s been a long time since I held him like this,” she murmured. “He’s gotten so much heavier…”

From his weight alone, Arèsa could feel how much Belamus had grown.

“Well then… let’s go home,” Arèsa said softly, turning toward the path that led back to their house.

“Yeah,” Delarosa replied with a nod, her voice quiet but content as she walked alongside her.

As they walked back to their house together, Arèsa suddenly turned to Delarosa with a sharp glance.

“Oh, that’s right. Delarosa—you went outside the village, didn’t you? I distinctly remember telling you to stay put,” Arèsa said, her tone suddenly sharp as she glanced over her shoulder.

Delarosa’s face slowly contorted into a look of pure dread.

“When we get home… you know what’s coming, right?” Arèsa continued, her voice low but deadly.

“Ugh… b-but! If I hadn’t gone, Belamus would’ve been in real trouble! I mean, it’s thanks to me that the village was even saved!”

Delarosa protested, flailing her arms in frantic defense.

"No excuses, you little rascal! When we get home, you've got two options: no dinner, or two knuckle sandwiches. Which do you want?" Arèsa snapped.

"Neither! Come on, I'm telling the truth!" Delarosa wailed, her eyes wide with panic.

For the record, Delarosa was starving, and skipping dinner was not an option. So, in the end, she chose the two knuckle sandwiches.

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After sleeping the entire day away, Belamus finally opened his eyes.

"Ah… home…" he muttered, blinking slowly. "How long was I out?"

He glanced around, moving only his eyes at first. It was his house, and neither Delarosa nor Arèsa were present.

He sat up.

"Ow…!" Pain shot through his body, no doubt the aftermath of his battle with Hereldyne. But his magic reserves had recovered. With a quiet chant, Belamus cast a healing spell on himself. Wounds mended almost instantly, and the aches began to fade.

He took a few moments to stretch, loosening his limbs, and then stepped outside to get a sense of the village's condition.

It was already fully night.

How long was I asleep? He couldn't say.

From the direction of the village plaza, he could hear voices—laughter, chatter, the clatter of plates. Something was going on. As he approached the plaza, he found the villagers gathered there, eating, talking loudly, and generally making merry.

"Ah! Lord Belamus! You're awake!!" Balbora ran up to him, eyes wide with delight.

"What's going on?" Belamus asked.

"Ah, well… we were going to hold a victory feast after the battle," Balbora explained, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. "But since you were still sleeping, we decided to wait. Only… you slept so long we couldn't take it anymore, so we ended up doing one *anyway*. But then we said we'd do another one *after* you woke up!"

"You all love your feasts, don't you?" Belamus said dryly, raising an eyebrow as he looked over the lively gathering.

"Well, since you're up now, this is perfect!" Balbora grinned. Then, he turned and shouted, "Hey, everyone—Lord Belamus is awake!"

Immediately, voices erupted from the crowd.

"He's awake?! Belamus!"

"Hey, over here! Come join us!"

The villagers waved him over, smiling and calling out warmly. Belamus took a breath and then began walking toward them, answering their invitation.

"Eat as much as you want!" someone called out cheerfully.

A wide variety of dishes had been laid out—roasted Merune fruit, whole fire-grilled cuts of monster meat hunted from the forest, and more.

"Perfect timing. I'm starving," Belamus muttered, then began to eat without hesitation.

"Aaah! It's Belamus!" Delarosa's voice rang out from behind him. Navasha and Medello were with her.

"You're finally up, Belamus," Medello said with a smile.

"You were *so* cute when you were asleep," Navasha teased. "Now you're back to your usual self. But hey, your cheeks are still soft—even when you're awake!"

"What are you doing?" Belamus frowned slightly as Navasha poked him in the cheek again without warning.

Then he turned to Delarosa, squinting.

"You've got a bump on your forehead. What happened?"

"Mom got mad at me! Can you believe that?" Delarosa whined. "I worked so hard, too!" Delarosa whined, puffing out her cheeks.

“Come to think of it… you left the village without permission, didn’t you? That’s how you ended up out there,” Belamus said, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah, but if I hadn’t gone, you would’ve been in serious trouble. So… come on, it worked out, right?” Delarosa argued, flashing a hopeful smile.

“It didn’t. That’s just hindsight talking. And since you clearly haven’t learned your lesson—maybe I should give you a knuckle sandwich too…” Belamus said calmly, his tone too serious to sound like a joke.

“Aaaagh! I’m outta here!” Delarosa turned on her heel and bolted.

“I was joking,” Belamus said flatly, watching Delarosa flee with a sigh of exasperation.

“With you, Belamus, it never sounds like a joke,” Medello muttered.

“Yeah, seriously,” Navasha agreed, laughing as she and Medello took off after Delarosa.

“Belamus!”

“Hm?”

The moment he heard the voice, Belamus recognized it instantly and turned.

It was Arèsa. And when he looked back, she was standing right behind him.

Something was definitely off.

Arèsa’s face was bright red.

“You’re awake, Belamusss. You’re still just as adorable as everrr,” she cooed, abruptly pulling him into a fierce hug and affectionately stroking his head.

“Mother… what’s going on with you?” Belamus asked, frowning in confusion.

Before Arèsa could respond, a nearby goblin leaned closer, eager to explain.

"Ah, apparently the village elder had this drink called 'sake' buried for ages. Arèsa drank some of it, and now… well, she's like that. Frankly, it's a bit frightening, so no one else dares drink it."

Does sake exist in this village?

Belamus was genuinely surprised. In all his time here, he had never seen any sign of alcohol.

"All right, Belamus! Time for uppies!" Arèsa cheered.

"What?!" Belamus said, blinking in disbelief as Arèsa suddenly reached for him.

Before he could stop her, she scooped him up into her arms.

"Mother! What are you doing?!" Belamus protested, struggling slightly as his face turned red with embarrassment. Belamus squirmed and tried to escape, but then— "I was so worried about you, Belamus… I really, really was…" Arèsa whispered, her tone unusually gentle as she continued to stroke his hair.

Belamus sighed.

She's drunk… I suppose there's no helping it, he thought, finally relaxing in her arms.

For a while, he let her hold him in silence. Then suddenly, Arèsa went limp and collapsed forward.

She had fallen sound asleep, softly snoring. Belamus carefully carried her back home and laid her down to rest.

Despite having eaten his fill earlier, he wasn't at all tired—he had, after all, spent most of the day asleep.

Might as well enjoy the rest of the feast, he thought, turning to head back to the plaza.

"Good evening, Lord Belamus."

He turned to the voice.

"You're Medina… right?"

It was the Queen Ant, approaching him with a polite smile.

"Um, I was told by Lady Delarosa… that as a way of repaying you for defeating Hereldyne, I should serve this village and work for its sake. Is that acceptable?" Medina asked respectfully, her tone careful but earnest.

“The villagers have accepted you, didn’t they? Then that’s enough. Personally, I consider the Legion Ants to be powerful allies. Having you here would be a great help,” Belamus replied plainly.

“I see. Understood. Then from now on, I will do my utmost for the sake of this village,” Medina said, bowing deeply in gratitude.

Thus, the Legion Ants officially became the newest residents of the village.

Later, on a whim, Belamus thought he’d try some of the sake everyone had mentioned. But when he went to ask for a cup—“Kids’ll die if they drink that stuff—no way,” he was told flatly.

“It may not be healthy, but I *won’t* die. Just give me a little,” Belamus countered.

“Sorry, but the village elder gave strict orders: *absolutely no alcohol for kids.*”

So, in the end, he didn’t get any.

That left him just a little disappointed.

As he walked away, trying to cheer himself up with the thought that he could try again once he had an adult body, a familiar voice called out to him.

“Lord Belamus.”

He turned.

“Ellency.”

It was the Alraune leader, approaching with her usual graceful composure.

“It’s a joyful celebration, isn’t it?” she said.

“It is,” Belamus replied with a nod.

“I should take this opportunity to thank you again,” Ellency said, bowing her head slightly. “For saving us. Seriously, thank you, Lord Belamus.”

“There’s no need to thank me. The Alraunes fought for this village, too,” Belamus said calmly, his gaze steady and sincere.

“That was only natural,” Ellency replied with a soft smile, her voice graceful and composed.

“And helping the Alraunes was only natural, too,” Belamus added, his tone gentle as the tension between them eased into mutual respect. After that simple exchange, the two of them shared a quiet smile.

“We’re planning to leave the village three days from now,” Ellency said, her expression turning serious.

“Do you have anywhere to go?” Belamus asked.

“No…” Ellency admitted after a pause.

“Then stay here,” Belamus replied without hesitation. “We can expand the farmland if needed, and building more houses won’t be a problem.”

“But wouldn’t that be a burden? There’s no need to go that far for us.” Ellency said quietly, concern flickering in her eyes.

“The Alraunes are powerful beings. To survive safely in the Frazes Great Forest, we need strong allies. Isn’t that right? I’m not saying this out of charity. I’m saying it because I want your strength,” Belamus replied firmly, his voice clear and unwavering.

“You desire our strength…?” Ellency echoed, eyes narrowing slightly in thought.

“Yes,” Belamus affirmed, his gaze steady and resolute as he met hers. “What do you say? Will you stay here and lend us your strength?”

Ellency was quiet for a moment, then offered a small smile.

“Lord Belamus, you are kind,” she murmured. And then, pressing her fist firmly over her heart, Ellency declared, “Consider it done. On behalf of all Alraunes, I pledge our strength to this village from this day forward.”

With that, the Alraunes officially became part of the village’s growing family.

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Time passed, and night settled deep over the village.

Most of the villagers had gone to sleep by now. But Belamus, having already spent most of the day sleeping, remained wide awake. With nothing better to do, he sat in a slightly elevated spot, gazing quietly up at the night sky.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" came a voice beside him.

It was the village elder.

"The stars have always been beautiful," Belamus replied, eyes still fixed above.

"Ho ho… That's an odd thing for a six-year-old to say," the elder chuckled, settling down beside him with a grin.

"You're not sleeping?" Belamus asked.

"Neither are you," the village elder said with a knowing smile, settling beside Belamus.

"I've already slept for quite a long time. I'm not tired now," Belamus replied, his gaze still fixed on the stars.

"Aye, that's true. But I'm so sleepy I can barely keep my eyes open," the elder muttered with a low chuckle.

"Then why stay up?" Belamus asked, turning slightly toward him.

"Because there's something I need to tell you," the village elder said, his tone shifting to one of quiet seriousness.

"What is it?" Belamus asked.

The elder slowly rose to his feet and said:

"This village has changed so much since you came here. Food is plentiful. People wear better clothes. Everyone's grown stronger after evolving into hobgoblins. Thanks to the walls you built, we're much safer from monsters. And now… we have allies. All of this—we owe to you. Words can't express how grateful we are."

"Don't say that," Belamus replied, his tone firm. "Everything I've done was to repay the goblins who raised me. You owe me nothing."

"No," the elder said quietly. "We didn't save you so you could repay us. So let us say it anyway—thank you, Belamus."

Belamus became silent and didn't interrupt. Instead, he simply listened, letting the weight of the words settle in his chest.

Then, the elder added, “I’ve been thinking of stepping down as village chief.”

“What?” Belamus turned to him, eyes widening in surprise at the sudden revelation. Frowning, he demanded, “Don’t joke about that. If you step down as village chief, then who’s supposed to take your place?”

“Why, you, of course,” the elder replied without a flicker of hesitation.

“Me?” Belamus inquired, his brows knitting in surprise as he faced the village elder.

“There’s no one in this village who still sees you as just a six-year-old. Not the goblins, not the orcs, not even the Alraunes or the Legion Ants who’ve joined us. They all respect you, don’t they? There’s no one more fit to lead than you,” the village elder said firmly, his eyes full of quiet conviction as he looked at Belamus.

“I…” Belamus started to protest, but the words didn’t come.

“Well, truth be told, you’ve already been acting as the real village chief in all but name. Now it’s time to make it official. Please —take the title.”

The elder bowed his head deeply in front of him.

“Please, raise your head,” Belamus said quickly, his voice somewhat flustered. He took a deep breath, then added, “All right. I’ll do it. If the former village chief bows his head to ask me, I can’t just turn him down.”

“Thank you, truly,” the chief said, lifting his face with a warm, deeply relieved smile. “With this, the village is in safe hands.” Then he added, as if suddenly remembering something, “Ah, and as your first duty as village chief, why don’t you give this village a name? We’ve never had one, after all.”

“A name…? I see. All right. I’ll think of something,” Belamus replied.

“I’m counting on you, Chief,” the old goblin said with a proud chuckle.

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At Belamus’s summons, every villager gathered in the central plaza the next day at midday. All eyes turned as he stepped forward to address them.

“As of yesterday, I’ve accepted the role of village chief from the former chief. From today onward, I am your village chief,” he announced clearly.

The villagers immediately began whispering among themselves.

“Huh? Seriously?”

“I don’t mind, but does that mean we have to call him ‘Chief’ now?”

“Then what do we call the Old Chief?”

That’s the first thing they ask? Belamus thought, slightly taken aback.

“You may continue to call me Belamus as you always have,” he replied. “As for the former chief, just call him ‘Old Chief’ if you like.”

“Got it! That works,” someone called back, and the crowd seemed satisfied with the arrangement.

“Now, I have an important announcement—so listen carefully,” Belamus continued. “As my first duty as village chief, I have decided on a name for our village. I will announce it now.”

“A name?”

“Come to think of it, we never had one, huh?”

“What’s it gonna be?”

“Balbora,” Belamus called out.

“Yes!” Balbora stepped forward carrying a large stone tablet etched with letters written in the goblin script.

Belamus tapped the surface of the stone with his hand and declared: “This village shall be known as Beresdral!”

A wave of silence passed over the villagers as they absorbed the name.

Beresdral—in the goblin tongue, it meant "land of mutual prosperity." With so many diverse species now coexisting peacefully, Belamus felt it perfectly encapsulated their new home.

"If no one objects, then from today forward, this village shall forever be called Beresdral. Anyone opposed—raise your hand," Belamus announced firmly, his voice resonating with quiet authority across the assembled crowd.

Not a single hand went up.

"Sounds good to me."

"Beresdral's a great name!"

Voices of approval rippled through the crowd.

And so, the village's name was officially decided: Beresdral.

From that day forward, Beresdral would continue to grow from a humble village to a thriving town, and from a town to a grand city.

In time, it would become a vast dominion of monsters, known throughout the world as the Mighty Monster Empire: The Great Magocracy of Beresdral.

Thank you all

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