

PROLOGUE

THE DEMON LORD SUMMIT

It was a vast, gorgeously designed chamber, the floor covered in a luxuriant carpet that must have taken a team of artisans several years to weave.

The table in the middle featured wood carved from a fragrant tree, providing a pleasant, woodsy smell. It was large, round, and could comfortably seat a dozen or so—but despite the size of the room, only three chairs were placed around it. They were all the height of luxury, of course, the sort that even higher-end nobility would have difficulty procuring.

One wall featured a mural of a fantastical scene—but was it really a mural? The elegant, deliberate artwork for the otherworldly creatures on it almost made it seem like they stirred slightly in their poses, from time to time. It was as if they could leap out from the wall and manifest themselves in this world at any moment. Which made sense—it was all the work of Bismarck, one of the great artists of the demon lord–controlled realms. He specialized in creating so-called Artifacts, visual masterpieces that were so realistic, it was as if his brush literally trapped these mythical beasts in a living state on the wall.

Selling even one of the items that adorned this room would allow someone to live like nobility for a decade or so. Such was the quality instilled into each piece, enough to overwhelm anyone that walked into the chamber. But even as it did, the sort of person to visit this place knew the power of money—they had enough to buy any high-grade magic weapon they wanted or hire the best mercenaries in the land. They reveled in the assets they held, and a room like this was meant less to impress and more to rob the visitor of any desire to resist the will of their host.

That was the role of this chamber, but the invitees assembling in the space in a few moments were not the type to be fazed by such public displays of wealth.

This room was owned by a handsome man. He was thin, slender, and his eyes exuded intelligence even as they suggested he was rather high-strung. Even so, the demon lord Clayman had the force of will to make almost anyone follow his orders.

His eyes slid across the room before he gave a satisfied nod and sat upon one of the chairs provided. There was a mask on the table with a smile molded on it; he picked it up, ran a hand across it lovingly, and placed it carefully away in a pocket. Every movement betrayed the methodical approach he took to all aspects of his life.

He knew that his guests would be coming soon. Demon lords, the same rank as himself. And Clayman’s goal today was to rein in these self-willed, wayward creatures, showing them enough of an enjoyable time to bring them under his full control. He had selected an ostentatious-looking white dress suit for the occasion, and now he was checking the time on his pocket watch.

Just as he thought that the appointed hour was near, he suddenly realized that someone was occupying another seat.

“Yo, Clayman. Gelmud doin’ well for you?”

He had his legs crossed as he calmly leaned his large, muscular frame back into his seat and casually engaged Clayman. But every move of his was just as supple and elegant as Clayman’s. This was no muscle-bound dolt—he presented the air of a battle-proven military hero. His own formal outfit was obviously a tad worn, but it didn’t make him seem unclean at all. If anything, it emphasized his wild side, building an atmosphere that made one hesitate more than a little to go near him.

His unrefined manner of speech would seem to be a poor match for that, but it only served to make the man all the more charming. His well-maintained short blond hair, meanwhile, paired perfectly with the masculine contours of his face. His sharp, hawk-like eyes were burrowing into Clayman—he was keenly focused, perhaps out of distrust for his fellow demon lord.

“Carillon?” Clayman asked. “You’re early, eh? I was planning to brief you on that today, actually. Certainly wasn’t expecting you to arrive first, though.”

The man called Carillon shrugged. “No need for that treatment, now. I’m sure our little lady is busy with her own preparations,” he said with a smirk.

Carillon was, indeed, a demon lord—perhaps more often referred to as the Beast Master, thanks to being king and leader of the lycanthrope race.

“Heh. ‘Lady,’ now, is it? Hmm… Yes, maybe so. Ah, but we’d better not say any more of her for now. After all…”

“She’s rather sensitive to people bad-mouthing her, yes.”

The two gave each other a look, exchanging a slight laugh. Just as they stopped, the door to the chamber was suddenly thrown open. A single young woman stood there, looking around the room for a moment before realizing only Clayman and Carillon were there.

“Were you guys just spreading rumors about me?”

She was young, very young, oddly so for someone participating in a summit like this. Fourteen or fifteen, perhaps, and while appearances were often deceiving for magic-born people like her, she looked woefully out of place.

There was a brace on her right shoulder, shaped somewhat like a dragon’s claw. But not “on” it, exactly—it was actually floating in the air, leaving a slight gap between it and her body. Said body was, for the most part, barely clothed—just a loincloth and pair of undergarments made of thin cloth, along with a chest piece to cover the faintest suggestion of a still-developing pair of breasts. Whether meant for ease of movement or some other purpose, it exposed as much skin as the typical swimsuit would.

Her large, strong-willed eyes shone blue, even as they revealed a bit of the immature youth left in her. The strength in them proved to the other two that this was no woman to be trifled with. Her platinum-pink hair was tied into two flowing pigtails on either side of her head, and there was a bold, dominant smile on her face. Jutting her modest chest outward, she glared at the demon lords she shared the chamber with.

“Yo, Milim!” Carillon said with a hearty laugh. “No, no rumors. You’re usually so punctual with these things, is all. We were worried about you!”

“Exactly, Milim,” Clayman added as he elegantly ferried a cup of tea to his lips. “Of course, I would never worry about you, myself.”

They were both used to her, enough that they knew making bald-faced excuses was pointless. It would just rile Milim up even more. Instead they took pains to relax their approach, ensuring they prodded her no further. The two shared a slight sense of nervousness with each other over her, and nervousness was what it clearly was.

There was a reason for this: Despite her looks, Milim was powerful. This sweet young demon lord, Milim Nava, was a member of the dragonoid race—one that bore the simple but effective nickname of Destroyer.

With an annoyed sniff, she gave Carillon, then Clayman a dirty look. “Well, so be it,” she muttered when neither reacted. In the next moment, she was sauntering into the chamber—and someone else was behind her. A harpy—one with large, eagle-like wings.

“Well, well, Milim,” Clayman admonished, eyebrows arched downward. “I believe I’ve made it clear that none besides demon lords are allowed in here. I’m afraid I can’t allow you to have your attendant accompany you inside. Even for you, there are certain rules that have to be—”

“It is good to see you again, Clayman,” came the dejected reply. “I am not Milim’s attendant. I’m not here because I want to be, but if it’s a demon lord you want, then it’s a demon lord you have.”

The harpy stood strong, not at all cowed by the powerful beings before her. She looked like a graceful woman, but anyone near her would immediately pick up on the unnervingly substantial aura that she exuded at all times.

She was, after all, a demon lord herself—

“Whoa, what are you doing here, Frey?”

—Frey the Sky Queen, ruler of the harpy race. Just like Clayman, Carillon, and Milim, she was one of the pillars of strength that supported the entire world they lived in.

“Hello, Carillon. And yes, you are correct. I had turned down the invitation because I was busy, but Milim…well, you know…”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, what’s the big problem? She was acting all moody and grumpy about something, so I brought her over to let off some steam. You don’t have a problem with that, do you, Clayman?”

“No, not if that is the case…”

This was the Milim that Clayman knew—eternally pushing her own desires on other people. But there was no reason to openly defy her. In fact, the optimist in him saw this as something to be welcomed. Once he told everyone about how his efforts with Gelmud were a complete failure, he was sure Milim would suddenly be quite a bit less cheerful. Frey should help smooth things over a little once he had to drop the bomb.

So Clayman began to devise a new strategy.

“Well? Can we have another chair for Frey, please?”

Clayman nodded at Milim’s order. With a flick of a finger, a chair materialized where none was before—a perfect match for its surroundings, as if it had always been there and everyone just failed to notice. Milim and Frey each took their seats, sensing nothing unusual about this.

There were four demon lords assembled around the table. Now it was time for Clayman, the Marionette Master himself, to flex his muscles a bit. He had a gift for controlling people, making them do whatever he liked, and now there was the hint of a smile on his face as he began to speak.

The demon lord summit had begun.

Clayman opted to kick things off with a plain and frank rundown of events. Gelmud was dead, killed by someone or other, and his plan had failed.

“That bastard wanted things to go too quickly for his own safety, hmm?” Carillon offered. “Even if Veldora is gone, was there any need to move this operation up, really?”

“You may say that, Carillon, but mayhem was bound to result sooner or later with Veldora, the supreme ruler of the forest, out of the picture. If a promising new seedling was fated to be plucked from the ground, wouldn’t it be far more satisfying for all of us if we were the ones who controlled that fate?”

This made sense to the large man. With all the assorted influential races calling the forest home, there was never any guarantee that their own pawns would win the match. They also knew that actively cultivating an orc lord gave them the greatest possibility of victory.

Another among them, however, was more dubious.

“What?! So what happened to making the orc lord into a demon lord next?”

“What I’m saying, Milim, is that we’re back to the drawing board on that. We needed Gelmud to control the orc lord, and now he is dead.”

It hurt Clayman just as deeply to abandon this strategy. But as long as nobody noticed the connection between him and Gelmud, he would never hear about it later. At this point, the idea of hatching a new plan to handle either the orc lord or the magic-borns—whichever had survived—sounded far more interesting to him. And if he could interest the other demon lords in it, he could use that to add another effective card or two to his hand.

Carillon sat silently, eyes closed, as he listened on. He must have his opinions, Clayman knew, but was apparently ready to listen to the entire story before making a final judgment. He was much more careful about these matters than the short-tempered Milim was.

And it turned out, much more prudent.

“But that’s so boring! And here I thought we’d have a new toy to play with before long. And remember all that bragging that bum Gelmud gave us, once upon a time? Too bad he turned out to be such a profound dolt, isn’t it?!”

“Now, now, Milim, no need for such anger. Clayman hasn’t finished his story yet. Why not wait until then before you shout at him?”

Just as Clayman expected, the sad news was enough to make Milim seethe at him. He was expecting to expend a great deal of effort soothing her from now on, but Frey seemed to be doing a good job at it. It came as a relief.

Thank the heavens she brought Frey along with her, he thought, maintaining a breezy smile the whole time. And he meant it. As her Destroyer nickname implied, once Milim broke into a violent spree, there was no containing her. It would require Clayman to expend his full energies in response—and by that point, any dream he had of manipulating these demon lords without a fight would be lost. Milim’s behavior was easy to predict, at least, which meant he could steer her. But to Clayman, she was a double-edged sword. Steer her in the wrong direction, and he knew he’d face the brunt of the fallout.

At least Milim bringing along her own tranquilizer in the form of Frey should make things much smoother for him. Plus, not only did she have no hand (or wing) in this operation, but she seemed to have no interest in it at all. That was key. Any other demon lord would’ve demanded a detailed rundown of the plan, from start to finish. Frey, meanwhile, was much more cooperative.

“Milim,” Clayman said, “I feel Frey is correct. Take a look at these first.”

He took out four spherical crystals, an eerie light burning in his eyes. His lips curled into a smile, anticipating how this would astound his fellow demon lords. Then he projected images into all four spheres, watching their reactions carefully as he did. Just as he thought, they were all enthralled by what they saw. The final crystal in particular—showing Gelmud’s perspective—captured their complete attention.

“Very impressive indeed, Gelmud, leaving these fancy baubles behind for us!” Milim happily shouted, voice booming across the room. The images left no clue about the orc lord’s final fate, but the way they suddenly cut off indicated to them all that Gelmud was gone.

“All right. So this means Gelmud screwed up and got himself killed, yeah? Just like you said. But you didn’t tell us about these magic-born on purpose, eh?”

Clayman nodded at Carillon’s observation. “Fascinating, isn’t it? And with Gelmud dead, there is no telling what may come after. But with all these high-level members of the magic-born races in one place, I feel it is safe to say the orc lord met his match, too. However—”

“However,” Frey interrupted, “if he survived, he totally evolved into a demon lord, right?”

She had taken the words right out of his mouth. Clayman knew she couldn’t have known about the plan, but she was intelligent enough to guess most of it.

Well done, Frey … I must be careful around you, unlike these two si m pleton warriors.

He eyed Frey carefully, squinting a little. She acted distant, unaffected, but she was looking into a crystal sphere, as if pondering something. He couldn’t tell what was going through her mind, but it was clear she was no longer annoyed at Milim forcing her to tag along.

This is a threat … but Frey looks like she has her own troubles to consider. She acted completely uninterested a moment ago, but now …

Now Frey was starting to interest him. As far as their positions went, Clayman was right—she was more of a tactical leader than an on-the-battlefield fighter. Controlling her would be far from simple. She was too smart to be deceived that easily. But if whatever troubled her could be used to exploit some weakness… A new and sinister plan quietly unfolded deep in his mind.

“Okay, so what now? You want one of us to go down and check it out?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! First come, first served, is it?”

“First come, first served for what, Milim?” Clayman interrupted. Figuring out what to do with the magic-born had to come first. He turned his thoughts elsewhere. “I doubt you would be satisfied simply with observing the scene, hmm? Everyone, calm down for a moment. We are dealing with the Forest of Jura, a region that is strictly off-limits.”

“Oh? What’s that matter? It’s not like we’re actually doing anything in there. You just want to hop on over and scout out any magic-born who look decent enough to join our team, don’tcha? Though who’s to say what kind of unfortunate accidents may befall anyone who refuses. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“No getting a head start on this, Carillon. If what I have been hearing from you all is true, your aim was to create a new demon lord that you could use as a faithful pawn, yes? And if you’ve failed at it once, then why not just recognize one of those magic-born as a demon lord and have it serve us?”

“Wow, Frey! You saw right through our scheme!”

She had demystified the core of Clayman and his fellows’ plan—to birth a demon lord that was putty in their hands. And Milim just went and admitted it. Now Frey would think she was right—and that was fine. It was still within what Clayman expected. If Frey was part of today’s summit, he had already assumed it would happen. No point hiding things, if Milim was wholly incapable of subterfuge.

“But we do need to investigate, yes,” he ventured. “Not to speak for Carillon, but there is no guarantee they will be cooperative with us. If the orc lord did win, however, he might be rampaging out of control now that his father Gelmud is gone.”

He wanted to keep the other demon lords from traveling over there before he was ready. Now, he watched them mull it over.

An investigation did seem to be necessary. Whether it was the orc lord or the other magic-born, the side that won the battle would now be more powerful than ever. It’d be nice if the demon lords could make them swear fealty, but losing any chance at that with some untoward gesture was out of the question.

They needed to assume that, at the very least, something at a sub–demon lord level of strength was now born. If they were to set up the board so they were guaranteed to dominate it, that was a tall order even for them. It would give them a leg up on the other demonic rulers of the land, but they also had to consider the substantial consequences if it didn’t work out. And if whoever survived the fray decided to call themselves a “demon lord,” there would be no choice but to give it up and punish that insolence. But now wasn’t the time for that.

The four demon lords glanced at one another, attempting to read one another’s minds.

Carillon, the Beast Master, had a good feeling about this.

He had spent several centuries ruling the lycanthrope race, waging several major battles that went well enough for him to expand his influence. That performance had earned him the endorsements of the dearly departed Accursed Lord and the demon lord Milim, ensuring his own promotion to the demon lord post. Leon, the one who defeated said Accursed Lord, assuredly had some objections about that, but he seemed to bear no anger or disgust toward the appointment. Survival of the fittest was the only ironclad rule here—and it had just been applied once again. Leon had no right to protest.

Besides, Leon was more than strong enough himself. Even after attaining his current post, he had never ceased to hone his skills. Carillon understood that Leon had several new, and powerful, allies on his side as well. Even as a newcomer to this echelon, there was no underestimating what this relatively recent demon lord could do.

Carillon had a taste for power—and powerful people. That was why he so readily accepted Leon. But that didn’t mean he stood by idly while Leon accrued more and more force. As a demon lord, he felt an obligation to retain an ample supply for himself. Enough that he didn’t have to submit to anybody else. Enough to protect the kingdom he controlled and smash anyone who dared to oppose it.

This was less about Carillon being nervous about his position and more him following his natural instincts toward increasing his strength. But the end result was the same. It made him a force to be reckoned with. One who constantly sought to take in more strength, never satisfied with what he had now. And now, Carillon had a very enticing offer dropped in front of him.

He had accepted Clayman’s invitation to the summit, figuring it would be a good way to kill some time. Three demon lords working in collusion could certify a new demon lord anytime they wanted—and if this new lord was willing to do all their bidding, it would grant them a decisive advantage over any other demon lord out there.

So Carillon was more than willing to go along with Clayman’s guidance. There were several reasons for this, but the main one was the absence of any rule stating demon lords needed to be friends. There were always disputes among them, and everyone knew that Clayman and Leon’s ran particularly deep. It was a given that they constantly schemed to undermine each other, taking pains not to leave any evidence behind. Their public faces were one thing, but under the surface, they were constantly trying to check each other’s movements.

Thus, Carillon was sure, there was no need to worry about Clayman going turncoat. Whether he could trust him was another matter, but in terms of using each other for the common good, he thought they had a nice give-and-take going. Clayman wasn’t dumb enough to lay hands on a cooperative demon lord, and the same could be said of Carillon.

As for the other two in the chamber? Carillon didn’t see much to worry about there. Frey, queen of the harpies, probably wasn’t interested. She had to be dragged in here by Milim, and she wasn’t even part of this plan from the beginning.

Besides, harpies were unique. Their society was completely classist, with winged creatures up top and everyone else down below. No matter how powerful an upper-level magic-born one may be, if they were wingless, they could not expect preferential treatment over there.

It looked like there was one winged figure among the magic-borns in the crystals…but Carillon didn’t think that would be enough to make Frey take action. Besides, he thought, if it’s just one, Frey can have it for all I care. Assuming it’s still alive. There were other fish to fry, other magic-born to lure. They didn’t know what had happened to the orc lord, but Carillon was pretty sure he lost—hell, if Frey wanted one of those guys, she could have them.

That just left Milim. Carillon thought about this for a moment. In terms of their personal interests, Clayman likely thought of her as an enemy, but what about Milim? She had a short fuse and you could read her like a book, but she was just as cunning as any other demon lord. But more than that, she was ever faithful to her own desires. She let her emotions carry her, making decisions practically on a whim. In a way, it was difficult to predict her next move.

Carillon did owe her, perhaps, for recommending him to the demon lord post. But, he thought as he gave her a look, I don’t know. I just can’t read her.

Milim appeared to be bursting with confidence, looking in utter awe at one of the crystal spheres. She was undoubtedly the demon lord most interested in this tale. It was apparently the magic-born Gelmud who approached Clayman with this idea of crafting a new demon lord—Carillon didn’t know if that was true, but it didn’t matter anyway.

Basically, if something piqued his curiosity, he leaped at it, and Milim was likely the same. She had been alive for a long time, and she hated tedium. If an enticing prospect came along, she’d greedily jump on it, not caring if the story were true or not. Plus, her power was the real thing, enough to let her avoid a certain level of countermeasures simply by steamrolling over them.

“Destroyer” was right—as a demon lord, Milim was the personification of pure force, almost unfairly so. And because of that, no matter how simpleminded she was, her moves were still hard to read. It was obvious she wanted to go off to investigate the scene. Her opponents’ strengths, and the danger involved, was no big deal to her. If whomever survived that battle won her heart, she’d be recommending them as a new demon lord—and if they didn’t, she’d kill them.

But she couldn’t do that this time. This was all unfolding in an inconvenient place. Simply entering the Forest of Jura presented political problems. Even Milim would have trouble indulging her curiosity if every other demon lord in the world was against it. A full investigation would be coming first.

Carillon knew that Milim didn’t give a fig about boosting her own powers. The question was what Clayman would gain out of this. In his eyes, Clayman used his gentlemanly demeanor to hide his true intentions at all times. It was hard to tell what he was thinking—and even harder to trust him completely.

This would be a battle of wits, and on that score, Milim was too easily deceived to be much of a concern. Frey would follow whatever Milim did, so no point fretting over her. That just left Clayman. It was the natural conclusion for Carillon to make.

He licked his lips as he thought over his strategy.

Now, how to kick this off …

Frey, the queen of the harpies, had had enough of this. This wasn’t a conference she had any reason to be in. Milim had just forced her along for some inscrutable reason. “Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You need to relax a little bit!” she had said, not bothering to ask what Frey thought about it—to say nothing of the other demon lords.

Frey knew there was no point worrying about that, since it wasn’t like Milim would. But she didn’t like how she had been silently appointed as the demon lord to clean up the messes that followed wherever Milim went.

Besides, the timing couldn’t have been worse. One of the harpy priestesses had just prophesied the revival of a long-past calamity. A prophecy by name, perhaps, but it had already been confirmed. Reading the flow of magicules and the twisting and warping of space, she had confirmed the coming arrival—the arrival of the harpies’ natural enemy. The revival of Charybdis, the calamity-level monster that a long-lost hero had sealed away in time immemorial.

Charybdis was a great magical creature that ruled the skies in antiquity—one that could summon the shark-shaped megalodons to execute its bidding and make its tyranny complete. It would die and be reborn on a cycle of every few centuries, and Frey had been a demon lord for only a short time when it last resurrected, laying waste to a hefty chunk of her territory. In the end, thanks to the “hero” who wanted to put a final end to the cycle, Charybdis had been spirited away to a locked region of space, somewhere inside the Forest of Jura…and now that seal was about to come undone.

Having a hero’s seal unravel like this was unnerving enough, but Frey couldn’t shake the thought that Veldora’s disappearance was intimately related. Charybdis was a different creature from the norm, a so-called “crystallization” of evil thoughts. A sort of spiritual form created from a cloud of magical energies that sought to sow the seeds of destruction.

As the legend put it, it could resurrect itself temporarily inside a corpse whenever a great die-off occurred across the land—or so the legends went. In other words, it needed a bodily receptacle in order to be reborn…

Ugh, this is so annoying. Spreading chaos across the Forest of Jura and using it to give birth to a new demon lord? If I’d known about that, I would’ve put a stop to it before this happened …

She didn’t know what caused it, but Frey reasoned that the conspiracy Milim had engineered with the others was one primary factor in this. It irritated her to no end, thinking about it—but could she have stopped Milim, even if she tried? That wasn’t easy to answer, and there was no point dwelling on the question.

Frey had to come up with a response. Even a megalodon was an A-minus in terms of the danger it presented. The Charybdis it served was on a whole other level. It was far beyond what an A grade could even express, a force truly worthy of being called a calamity. Even the human nations had awarded it the rank of S, terming it the equivalent of a demon lord. It had no mind of its own, simply acting on its instincts, and that was really the only reason why it wasn’t called a demon lord itself.

And all right, maybe these were mere humans awarding these rankings, but it still annoyed Frey to be placed on the same rung of the ladder as this thing. But there was a reason for that rank. Those “instincts” were painful. It floated freely around the sky, randomly killing anything that grabbed its attention. Whenever it grew hungry, it would attack a city and eat its way through, consuming both human and monster at once. It was a menace on a level beyond what any orc lord could present.

The harpies were the rulers of the skies, and Frey had enough force to be termed their Sky Queen. Her magic was a force to be reckoned with, and her skills in aerial combat were outstanding. She was proud that she had never lost to any earthbound foe.

Combining these skills with Magic Interference—an ability unique to her race—she had the ability to annul any flight-based magic on the battlefield. That alone meant any foe not flying with physical wings would immediately be sent plummeting to their deaths. Even that may not be enough to kill a higher-level monster, of course, but for a human, the chances of survival were pretty slim. Even if one did, they only had so many ways of attacking a target that was high up in the sky. Meanwhile, she could rain down attacks upon those helpless ants below—an obvious tactical advantage.

Anything that couldn’t fly was no threat at all to her. Except for Charybdis.

It was massive, dozens of feet in diameter, and Magic Interference didn’t work on it. To put it another way, Magic Interference was an intrinsic skill to it as it was to harpies. The race’s flight skills gave it an insurmountable advantage in battle—losing that advantage was a telling blow. It made sense that the harpies saw Charybdis as their natural nemesis.

Of course, simply lying low and praying that this threat would never come to greet them grated on Frey’s pride as a demon lord. She wanted to do something about it, but attempting a full-frontal attack would result in unacceptably heavy casualties. That was what troubled her, and it was why she arrived at this summit in such a foul mood. If it weren’t for that resurrection, maybe she’d be a bit more eager about the whole-new demon lord plan, but…

She had noticed one winged figure in the crystal spheres. It made her think about the possibility that the magic-born had survived and grown more powerful, but she quickly dismissed it. Having one more magic-born means little, she thought. We have no idea how powerful it is in battle. A high-level magic-born has no chance against a demon lord–class foe. Even if it’s grown into a sub-demon, there’s no guarantee it’ll be friendly to our advances. What a pain. This would be so much easier if I could fight without all these … things holding me down …

Frey let out a dejected sigh. As a demon lord, she could no longer personally lead her armies into battle as queen. She had a responsibility to keep her land and people safe, and that meant more than simply racking up victories on the field. No matter the sacrifice involved, Frey was strictly prohibited from joining a battle. Only when victory was assured could she take center stage.

There was just one sure method of defeating Charybdis. It was the first thing she thought of after receiving the prophecy she dreaded so much.

But…that?

Frey took a peek at Milim.

She was eagerly peering into a sphere, this demon lord on such a different level from the towers of strength around her. Carillon and Clayman don’t know what she’s really like. They’re too deceived by her external youth to read her true nature. And while she was technically a demon lord just like them, Milim was inherently different.

Milim Nava was special. Not like Frey and the other demon lord newcomers. She was one of the most senior demon lords out there, and she was from the dragonoid race. A dragon-born. Which made her a special S grade. The “Destroyer” name wasn’t just window dressing—it was said she literally destroyed a kingdom single-handedly, in the past.

She could fly, as well, using her own wings that she normally kept stowed away. Her body was strong—naturally, not by magic—and her skills in battle were almost unfair. Something like Magic Interference would never work on her. Milim was just as much a nemesis to Frey as Charybdis—and once again, she had dragged her over to something she wanted no part of. Frey just couldn’t defy her.

The whole summit was a distraction as she racked her brain for some way to deal with Charybdis. She provided a few hollow observations along the way, hoping the conference would end soon.

But at the same time, she had another thought: If Milim could work with her, would that be enough to defeat Charybdis? She was impervious to Magic Interference, after all.

But it wouldn’t be easy. Demon lords were hardly one big happy family. You couldn’t just saunter up to one and ask a favor like that. They were more about using and abusing one another than asking nicely. They say the rich are smart enough not to get into street fights, and while that didn’t describe them exactly, they couldn’t be overtly hostile to one another. It’d just give space where the other demon lords could drive a wedge. It wasn’t worth the risk, and it could even provide that moment of weakness that would lead them all to their doom. That was the whole reason the demon lords had signed nonaggression pacts with one another in the first place.

Under those circumstances, there was no way she could ask a fellow ruler to slay a demon lord–class monster for her. And it wasn’t realistic to expect Milim to agree to that. There was never any telling where her own desires lay. There was a nation of people who worshipped her as the child of a dragon, and she granted it her “divine” protection. It was a peaceful, bountiful, and also deathly boring place. They had no military might, but Milim provided all the power they needed—no nation was brazen enough to challenge a kingdom under the direct protection of Milim.

In other words, Milim already had it all—power, riches, glory. She had no interest in conquering new lands, no motivation to forge alliances with other nations.

If I could just find something to make Milim take action, Frey thought, I think I could find a solution to this … but that’s easier said than done …

What Milim wanted more than anything was something to make the boredom go away. And Frey had no idea what that could be. But look at her now—her attention was wholly captured by what she saw in the sphere.

Maybe I could take advantage of this.

Maybe she could move Milim after all.

No. More than that. I have to take advantage of this. Charybdis needs to be out of the picture.

She took a deep breath, her decision finally made.

With a polite smile, Clayman observed the three demon lords before him.

Clayman was the one who had directed Gelmud throughout the entire operation. If that became public knowledge, it wouldn’t be very good news for his position—but that was no concern now. The moment Gelmud breathed his last, all traces of evidence disappeared with him.

Carillon had his suspicions, maybe, but he wasn’t one to verbally pursue them very much. He was safe. Frey provided other concerns, but with no evidence at hand, he could talk his way out of whatever she said.

This was an attractive offer to the other demon lords, besides, and Clayman was hardly the only one to blame here. The scheme didn’t work, but it wasn’t like anyone was terribly hurt as a result.

Now was no time to think about the past. Instead, Clayman focused on a new plan. Some way to investigate who survived—and find a way to use them. Was that the best thing for him? It gave him pause.

Fortunately, the other demon lords were showing a clear interest. To Clayman, the fates of the surviving magic-born really didn’t matter much at all. If they fulfilled their potential as bait to lure in the other demon lords, that’s all he needed. Certainly, if there was a sub–demon lord among them, recruiting the lucky bum would be quite the boon for his own forces. But if force was all he wanted, Clayman had other outlets for that. He had the money to hire any mercenary he wanted.

A full demon lord who faithfully did whatever he wanted was one thing—but your run-of-the-mill high-level magic-born? Clayman had no need for them. Thus, placing his own priorities on the scales, he decided to change his mission. He wanted to have Milim and Carillon owe him a favor, and he wanted them to trust him. In addition, he wanted their backing just in case something happened later on.

Or so he thought. But…

Milim and Carillon respect my strength, like I figured. They’ve happily taken the bait. But Frey is proving to be a wild card. She seems concerned about something; perhaps it’s some weakness that I can grasp. It might be interesting to examine this.

Clayman had to chuckle at the unexpected results. He was hoping to get Milim and Carillon on his side, but now, perhaps, he could take advantage of a weakness on Frey’s part. Having full sway over even one demon lord would be a wonderful consolation prize after losing the orc lord.

Demon lords were shrewd, observant people. They knew that Milim and Carillon had the simplest personalities among their kind. But the two were also gifted fighters. While most found it prudent to hide the full extent of their powers from one another, these two never hesitated to show it off.

Given their battle-oriented specializations, winning their trust was never a bad idea. And having a guaranteed three votes (counting his) at Walpurgis, the grand meeting that all demon lords attended, was huge. Adding Frey to the equation meant that Clayman could make nearly any vote, any proposition, go the way he wanted.

Heh-heh … Excellent. Not exactly my original plan, but this is almost as ideal. It would have been interesting, having an orc lord serving as my puppet demon lord … but this works just as well. And I can even have Frey join in—

Clayman had to stifle the laugh bubbling up in his throat. It was time to show off his skills as Marionette Master. Frey would come first; then Milim and Carillon. Then, Walpurgis would be like a personal court to him. Everything in the world could be his, in fact. It was no longer an idle dream.

The Forest of Jura was forbidden territory. No demon lord was allowed to send an expedition inside. He would need to bring on another unaffiliated high-level magic-born, like Gelmud—and he’d have to ensure this agent wasn’t aware that Clayman was pulling the strings. It would be a delicate operation. But this kind of under-the-table exchange was Clayman’s specialty, something Milim and Carillon weren’t suited for. That’s why he was the one who “handled” Gelmud in his last scheme.

And it’d be just the same this time. Milim seemed to have an extraordinary interest in all this, which was a concern, but it’d likely be Clayman handling the expedition anyway. The situation inside Jura was a total unknown, so he figured his role would be a foregone conclusion.

In fact, I could have this person spy on Milim and Carillon for me before he goes into the forest. Now this is getting interesting …

Clayman smiled a little as he pictured it. He knew he shouldn’t be too greedy. Depending on how things went, it wasn’t impossible. Finding Frey’s weakness was priority one, and if possible, he wanted to take the lead on the Forest of Jura expedition.

His objectives clear in his mind, he leisurely began to gauge the rest of the table.

Milim Nava, the demon lord whose platinum-pink pigtails suited her perfectly, was lost in thought.

If I leave things to these doofuses, I just know they’re gonna let my new toy go to waste. They’re all still newly hatched rookies—they’ve got no way to see how things really are. I’m cool enough and smart enough to take the lead here.

Thanks to her easy comfort as one of the oldest demon lords, Milim felt herself taking a role as leader for the younger generations of rulers, who had only a few centuries’ worth of experience. It was ironic to think that the youngest-looking among them was also the most cunning, but it was the undeniable truth.

After a moment of thought, Milim opened her mouth, then exhibited her full majesty as both the only dragonoid at the table and the most wizened of demon lords.

“Right!” she began, practically bursting with anticipation. “In that case, I’m heading out now and negotiating with whoever survived!”

The demon lords met her with silence. Which made sense. With the current pact covering the Forest of Jura, there was no way to go in without making certain arrangements first. Simply stomping right over, as Milim suggested, was unthinkable.

“Um, Milim… We can’t do that, can we? We have that nonaggression agreement.”

“Yeah! Where’d that idea even come from?”

“Milim,” Clayman interjected, “please take a moment to calm yourself. I will send a full expeditionary force to handle this, and I promise there will not be long to wait.”

She laughed all of them off.

To the demon lords who knew Milim, she was regarded as someone with muscles all the way into her brain. A lunkhead, in other words. But the truth lay elsewhere. She was actually extremely intelligent, and it was only her short fuse that made people think otherwise. She had the full ability to sort right from wrong and process matters strategically—something that often made her leap directly into action, making her seem impossibly imprudent. She was one of the top geniuses among them, in fact, but sadly, very few people noticed this. If anything, they thought she was the simplest, most ill-tempered one.

Utterly ignorant of all this, Milim confidently put her chest forward and revealed her own thoughts to the world. “Who cares about that nonaggression pact?” she said, a world-beating smile on her face. “We should just abolish that thing right now. We got four demon lords here, so it’s easy, right?”

The rest seemed at a loss. They chewed over her words, as if the blinders had just been taken off their eyes. Yes. This was realistically possible. They tried to deny it, but they couldn’t find anything to refute it with. At that moment, every scheme and plan in their minds vanished into dust.

Of course, to Carillon, trying to think up a reason to join the expedition, this was a gift from heaven. It meant he could send his own forces into the forest without bothering to hide them. Too easy.

“Makes sense,” he agreed. “With our signatures, we could provide notification that the agreement’s null and void. It should be accepted, as long as nobody objects to it. I’m up for the idea.”

“I’m with you on that,” Frey said. “My territory abuts the forest, and being forbidden from entering it was never exactly convenient for us.”

To her, agreeing with Milim was the simplest way to get the old demon lord on her side. The bountiful feeding grounds inside the Forest of Jura would also provide good hunting for her own cherished daughters. The wardens of the forest may have issues, but they could worry about that when it occurred.

Milim was beaming at both of her new allies when Clayman spoke up.

“Would it go that easily, though, do you think? Would the other demon lords be so ready to agree to it?”

Risking Milim’s rage wasn’t normally a good idea, but the way Clayman saw it, this wasn’t something he could readily agree with. He didn’t intend to personally join the expedition, but he simply didn’t want the other demon lords griping at him about the whole thing later. The agreement of four demon lords made the annulment a given to pass, but that nonaggression treaty had held over the forest for centuries. It didn’t seem like something that should be abandoned with such impulsive gusto.

If we could rip it up that easily, he reasoned, we wouldn’t need to expend all this effort staying undercover. Is there some reason for this outburst? Such as … Veldora’s disappearance, of all things…?!

Just as the thought occurred to him, Milim grinned once more and nodded. “Mm? Oh, did you notice? Well, you’re right. The whole reason behind that pact was because the territory belonged to this big, mean dragon. We all signed it when Veldora the Storm Dragon was sealed away three hundred or so years ago—just to make sure nothing we did wound up undoing the seal by accident. You guys became demon lords right around the same time, so I guess it makes sense you weren’t aware of that. And I’m pretty sure the first person to back it was…”

Thus began a long, meandering tale of demon lord politics from centuries ago. Milim clearly enjoyed recalling it, and as he ignored it, Clayman realized she was right all along. Veldora was the real problem, and if he was gone, no demon lord would lodge any complaint about abolishing the pact. Even if one did, it seemed unlikely that three would—the number required for a quorum in these conferences.

Perhaps, he thought, instantly casting away his original reasoning, it would be easiest to do what Milim says.

“If that is the case, then I have no objection. We may as well begin selecting our expeditionary force at once for deployment into the forest.”

“Whoa, Clayman.” Carillon flashed a scowling, aggressive smile. “D’you mean we all work together? Or first come, first served, like what Milim said?”

“Um,” Frey said before Clayman could respond, “I was thinking… How about each of us deploys our own forces, and we could have them compete against one another? I could even have my own daughters go in my stead…and besides, isn’t this a rather silly thing to quarrel over?”

The somber way she put it indicated the pointlessness of fighting over an expedition that was meant to boost all their forces. It made total sense. The other three froze for a moment. To all of them, working separately seemed much more palatable than working together. A competition meant not having to consider the needs of anyone else.

They gauged each other’s faces for a moment, then nodded.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! First come, first served, then! No hard feelings!”

“Very well. But I don’t care about some slow, plodding expedition. I won’t hinder any of you guys, but I ain’t helping, either. We got that?”

“Well, so be it. We don’t know who survived the battle, but I suppose we’ll find out soon enough. You participate at your own risk, keep in mind.”

It was decided. The Forest of Jura would soon be the scene of not one, but four different interventions.

“Let the competition begin, then! But no meddling with one another, all right? That’s a promise!”

“Certainly. I will be sure to tell my daughters not to interfere with anyone else.”

“Fair enough. I swear by my name as Beast Master that I’ll abide by it!”

“Understood, Milim. I, Clayman, will not break this agreement.”

“Great! So all the arrangements are made, then. Now let’s get that nonaggression pact annulled once and for all,” a beaming Milim chirped.

Thus, four demon lords agreed to not have their forces meddle with one another inside the forest. Their four signatures, the keys to annulling the treaty, were quickly sent by hidden courier to the other demon lords. The Forest of Jura was no longer neutral territory. Now it would be the stage for some demon lord wargames.

“Well, off I go!”

Milim tore out of the room the moment their declaration was completed. It came so quickly, her final good-bye was still echoing up high in the chamber by the time she was out of sight.

“Looks like we’re already left behind,” an exasperated Frey observed. “Just as self-centered as always, I see.”

Carillon laughed and shrugged his agreement.

Clayman flashed a wry smile of his own, refraining from any verbal comment at first. Then, a thought occurred to him.

“But if the nonaggression pact is a thing of the past, won’t the Forest of Jura require a new ruler?” he whispered.

“Yeah?” Carillon replied. “You want me to take up the role?”

“I would think that was part of the reason why the treaty was signed in the first place,” Frey countered.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! Aw, c’mon. Look, if we find out that the survivor’s up to sub–demon lord class, at least, I don’t see why we can’t have him be king. Then we can resurrect our plan to create a puppet demon lord, yeah?”

“True enough,” Clayman said.

“Well, given that we apparently already got someone with eyes on ruling the forest, guess we better get movin’, huh?”

There was not much planning to be made until they explored Jura. The rest of the demons decided to follow Milim’s lead.

With another pleasant laugh, Carillon opened up a Warp Portal, one of the elemental magics, to return home. Frey was soon gone as well.

Clayman, left alone, smiled weakly as he began to formulate a plan for the future.

“Milim, Carillon, and Frey. Let’s see, then…”

The anticipation was clear on his face as he fantasized to himself, alone.

All too soon, a new threat would be visiting the town Rimuru and his followers called home.

