

EPILOGUE

THE STRING-PULLER IN THE SHADOWS

The anger was writ clear upon the demon lord Clayman’s face. He had come so far, and now one plan after another was falling apart on him.

He schemed to have Carillon be attacked by Milim—and then she just flew over, declared war, and flew on back. Learning of Farmus’s ambitions, he ordered Mjurran to wreak even more havoc—only to have Rimuru, leader of the monsters, return to the scene and erase the Farmus military from the face of the Earth.

Clayman planned to use all this chaos to awaken himself and become the “true demon lord” he knew he could be. But none of this made sense to him.

Damn all of them! And after that kind benefactor set everything up for my awakening…

The frustration made him grind his teeth. But his efforts weren’t a complete failure. Mjurran, one of his pawns, had been killed by Rimuru—and he could always use that as a pretext to declare war. That was the original plan, and Mjurran was always meant as a sacrifice toward that end.

Now, though, there was another problem:

In the end, can I actually win?

That was a serious issue. Among the weak human states that dotted the continent, the Kingdom of Farmus was among the more decently powerful ones. For this campaign, they had a legion of nothing but knights, numbering twenty thousand strong—a figure not even Clayman could afford to ignore. And it took just one magic-born, one Rimuru, to slay them all.

The unbelievable news left the demon lord in a daze for a few moments. Even worse, Pironé—the little finger of the “five fingers” that formed Clayman’s closest, most faithful confidants—had died in the midst of an espionage operation. Unlike Mjurran, the ring finger, Pironé had been eminently useful when it came to infiltrating deep into human society.

How annoying this is. Of all the coincidences, the Nuclear Cannon strike that demon deflected landing a direct hit on my own agent…

The unexpected loss of a vital pawn in his strategy irked him. But the next ebullient dispatch he received made all the dark clouds in his mind evaporate away.

—The demon lord Milim had dispatched Carillon, putting an end to the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania.

Now, finally, Clayman had something to rejoice about. He hadn’t managed to bring Carillon under his own control, but in terms of daunting the other demon lords, this would serve well enough. Any demon lord who didn’t bend to his will was just trash in his way. Milim alone was powerful enough to overwhelm someone as strong as Carillon, and with her on his side, he doubted he needed to beef up his offenses any further.

The news came by way of the demon lord Frey, elegantly sipping her tea as she delivered her tidings. There was no reason to doubt it. The demon lord Carillon was dead. Milim Nava had had no problem dealing with him. And now she was Clayman’s.

Ten demon lords controlled the vast majority of power in this world. Three of them, counting himself, were now on the same side, and one was out of the picture. It pained Clayman that his planned “awakening” had failed, but Milim had more than made up for this shortcoming.

“Heh-heh-heh… I think we can alter my plans to point matters back in a beneficial direction.”

“Oh, you think so? Well, glad to be of service, then.”

With that less-than-heartfelt endorsement, Frey stood up.

“I have nothing further to report—and with that, I’ve fulfilled my duty to you. I’m going home, but what are you going to do with Milim? She’s so worked up about the battle that she ripped apart the magic-born sent to take care of her.”

Clayman responded with an exasperated grunt. “Then you take care of her. She’s our friend either way.”

“As I told you,” Frey coldly replied, “I’ve fulfilled my duty. I helped you trick Milim, and I have no obligation to aid you any further.”

But Clayman simply gave her a thin smile. “Heh-heh-heh… You appear to be mistaken, Frey. Listen to me. I am giving an order to you. Go back, take Milim with you, and take care of her. Or would you like to be Milim’s next opponent?”

Frey gave him a stern look in response. She had anticipated this, in a way, and it didn’t disturb her.

“…Aha. I see. So that was your goal from the start, was it, Clayman?”

“Haaa-ha-ha-ha! Well spotted. So I imagine I know the answer I should expect…?”

“…All right. I don’t want to wind up like Carillon, no.”

“There you go. Very good. That’s very intelligent of you, Frey. I will leave Milim in your hands, then. Take her along with you. Wouldn’t want my own castle destroyed in the process, now would we?”

Frey gave this an exaggerated rolling of her eyes. “And you think I want my home wrecked? Not that you’ll listen to me…”

“I’m glad we have an understanding, then. You may go.”

The attitude indicated to the world that he no longer saw the demon lord Frey as an equal. He was calling the shots, and she carried them out. Frey voiced no great displeasure at this as she gave Clayman a final cold glance and left the room.

Once he saw she was gone, Clayman closed his eyes and began to think.

The situation had changed so extensively now that he would have to revise his plans. Losing his chance at an awakening hurt, but it wasn’t an issue. With Milim’s powers, he decided, he could ram headlong into any human force and expect a likely victory out of it. Her strength would spread death and destruction across the land, reaping souls the entire way. That, Clayman thought, should be enough to elevate him to true demon lord status without lifting a finger.

His original plan—to set up an orc lord as a new demon king, providing him with all the backing he needed—was nice, but this was much more interesting. With Milim, the ultimate trump card, in his hands, there was no longer any need to fear his fellow demon lords.

Heh-heh… Now I can finally get Leon out of the picture.

Simply picturing it made a joyous smile creep across his face.

But before Leon—

He would have preferred to put his own priorities first, but that wasn’t going to happen. He needed to evaluate matters and see what required the most urgent attention. After all, it was what motivated his benefactor that mattered the most.

Their enemies could be divided into three camps: the demon lord Leon, his rival these many years; the leader of the Forest of Jura, proving more powerful than he first guessed; and the ever-enigmatic Western Holy Church, along with the Holy Empire of Lubelius that existed above it.

At the moment, direct conflict among demon lords was prohibited. The downfall of Carillon would likely be filed as yet another case of Milim going crazy. Maybe some of them would notice Clayman lurking in the shadows, but he didn’t picture any of them making a public issue out of it. Anyone who pursued that question would quickly be making Clayman their enemy. These demon lords were all far too selfish to work together as a group. And if anyone did pursue him, he could handle it. The ultimate trump card made none of them seem worth worrying about any longer.

The real issue was the Western Holy Church. Clayman’s sworn friend Laplace was still planted in their bureaucracy, and this incident provided both of them with immense backing. The magic-born Rimuru killed twenty thousand Farmus soldiers, something the Church couldn’t afford to ignore. So why not pit them against each other on the battlefield and profiteer from the results? They could wait until both sides reached the limits of their fatigue, toss Milim in there, and bam —they’d both be gone, practically without a fight. Clayman could awaken himself that way, too, maybe.

That scenario was exactly what his benefactor wanted—the only master Clayman ever truly served in his life. And if Clayman could pull it off, he could then declare war on Leon and stamp out that anxiety for good.

The smile on his face widened. Several mistakes had been made, but fixing them wouldn’t be a problem. Now he just had to report back to his benefactor and await the final decision.

He laughed loudly and boldly, there in his room, already picturing his lifelong dream finally coming true.













