

EPILOGUE

A NEW ARTIFICE

Several days had passed since Charybdis’s defeat. The land of Tempest was calm once more. A lot had happened, certainly, but our nation was finally starting to get recognized, and I couldn’t have been happier.

We were now on friendly relations with the Armed Nation of Dwargon and the kingdom of Blumund. The road between us and Dwargon would be opening up soon, and my official invitation had already arrived. I needed to make my report, but they were planning more to receive me as an official state guest.

Over in Blumund, Fuze was doing a lot for me by going around royal and noble circles and convincing them that given how this latest crisis had turned out, it’d be much more to their advantage to work with us, not against us. Blumund wasn’t a large nation, so “noble circles” didn’t encompass that many people, as he said. None were putting up a lot of roadblocks against him, so I doubted I had much to worry about.

“Oh, trust me, I’ve got so much dirt on the nobles that the carrot-and-stick approach’ll work just fine with them,” he had told me as he left. And given the sneer on his face, I felt safe in leaving all that to him.

Kabal and his cohorts seemed pretty intent on staying here, but they still had a job to carry out—escorting Fuze back home.

“Can we visit again?”

“Yeahhh, I’m not sure I can live without Shuna’s cooking any longer.”

“You can say no all you want; we’ll be back soon!”

They very reluctantly left, taking Fuze along with them. I wasn’t going to turn them away; they were more than welcome to return, and I set up bed space for them and everything.

And there’s another nation I shouldn’t be forgetting—the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. If our talks went well there, that’d be one more nation to build formal ties with. We got put through the wringer, but we sure earned a lot from it. There was no telling how our discussions would turn out yet, but building a formal friendship with one of the bigger demon lords was a major coup. I wanted to see it succeed.

So we gained a lot, and if anything I, personally, gained just as much. The Charybdis-specific skills Magic Interference and Gravity Flight, for one. That, and Resist Magic, the ultimate ace in the hole against any magic thrown at me. I was having the Great Sage analyze all these to the hilt, so I was sure it’d be connecting them to other skills before too long.

That was one other reason why I asked Milim to keep Phobio alive. I mean, I did want to wrest Charybdis away from him, but it’d also be nice, I figured, if I earned a few new skills as a side effect. With all the trouble he put me through, I felt I deserved to reward myself a little.

So what were we doing now?

Thus! Swishh! Thwam! Bash!

I think the ambient noise speaks well enough for itself.

Benimaru, Soei, Shion, and I were being pummeled.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Save your breath!!”

The woman laughing shrilly at us was, of course, the demon lord Milim. She was training us, which I thought appropriate given how unfairly strong she was. It was four of us against the one of her, but it was hopeless. The Dragon’s Eye from her saw completely through every trick and attack we attempted.

That’s Milim for you. She’s incredible, I thought, more intensely than ever before.

Milim was wearing a Dragon Knuckle around her fist—the weapon present I had promised her long ago. Such knuckles were originally meant for punching with your bare hands without hurting yourself, boosting the force of your strikes in the process. Not this one—this was the exact opposite. Put this on, and it restricted your punching power by around 90 percent. The magisteel at its core applied the Reduce Speed and Power Drain inscription magics to the wearer.

When I gave it to her, she peered at it with intense curiosity, then gladly accepted it. She’d been wearing it every moment since—including during meals, which I had to warn her about, much to her whining chagrin. I was glad she liked it, but she had to learn the right time and place.

This Dragon Knuckle did a whole lot to save us all. We’d been engaging in mock battles every morning with Milim since that day; it had become a regular part of the routine. Her power was just ridiculous, her agility practically cheating, her stamina inexhaustible. Thank heavens she was on our side.

Only Hakuro could put up any real fight against her, which taught me all over again how important actual technique was, instead of relying on physical strength and skills. Of course, even with Hakuro’s technique, a Milim who took the fight seriously would offer him no chance.

Technique was important, but it wasn’t enough. What I lacked most of all, however, was battle experience. These morning combat sessions were my attempt at playing catch-up.

Why was I going through this? Easy. Compared to my past life—my past world, really—there were far too many issues that were solved here by duking it out. The orc lord. Charybdis. I was on good terms with Carillon, but the other demon lords could be a different matter. Plus, I had that vendetta against Leon.

After meeting two demon lords in person—Milim, then Carillon—I realized there was no way I could take on one of them right now. So I was working hard, taking the steps I needed to improve on that.

I stayed busy otherwise, too. Training with Milim occupied my mornings; after lunch, I did my rounds in each section of the town. It was an orderly, scheduled life, and I stuck to it for many weeks.

Having a nice, nutritious meal after a training round was always pleasant, too. Fried chicken, steak, hamburger, croquettes. Fried shrimp, too—or at least, an animal that looked kind of like shrimp. It was called ebiira, as well, which was frighteningly close to ebi, the Japanese for shrimp. Funny coincidence.

We never had to worry about food getting contaminated, either. Shuna’s hygiene and disinfection habits were perfect, and besides, I could Analyze and Assess anything presented to me, so I knew my stuff was safe. I still wasn’t exactly sure if monsters got food poisoning, but…

All this variety to the menu was lifting Milim to ever-higher heights of ecstasy. “Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! How can cooking the same meat produce such amazing food?!” That was her reaction to her very first steak.

Every day brought her new joy.

With the fried shrimp, she gobbled it all up instantly, not exchanging a word at the table. I suppose trying to recreate foods popular with kids paid off well, and Shuna was polishing her skills more than ever.

Glad Milim’s such a fan. She’s repaying me with her training, so I’ll want her to stay in high spirits if I can.

So the days passed by, all of us growing even stronger than before.

Hakuro’s skill set was already complete, so he didn’t grow as quickly, but everyone else? You could hardly recognize them. If Treyni decided to pop in right now, Benimaru or Soei could give her a serious run for her money.

I was growing, too.

“You’ve certainly improved, Rimuru! If you declared yourself a demon lord now, I sure wouldn’t complain!”

If Milim was putting it that way, I must’ve been improving by leaps and bounds. I kept telling her I wasn’t interested in the role, though. Plus, she whipped the four of us again today. Trying to join the Demon Lord Club right now would result in nothing but trouble for me.

“By the way, why did you become a demon lord, Milim?” I asked to change the subject.

“Ooooooooooh… Hmm. I’m not sure? Something really bad happened, and it got me so angry that I became one?”

“Why are you asking me…?”

“Well…I don’t remember. It was a super-long time ago, so I forgot!”

Despite her cheerful reply, I wondered if maybe something bad had happened after all. It’d be rude to prod her any further about it.

“All right. If you forgot, you don’t have to try to remember it or anything.”

I ended the conversation there.

Milim looked and acted like a child, but inside, she was a full-fledged demon lord. One of the oldest, in fact. She’d probably lived far longer than I could even comprehend. Maybe she didn’t have any friends, thanks to her expansive life span separating her from her companions over time.

I decided to ask about something else I had wondered about.

“Hey, so… Do you have any, um, family, or people you’re looking after? You’ve been here this whole time, but are you sure you don’t need to get in contact with anyone?”

“Mm. I have people who take care of me, but I’m not worried about them. I’m the strongest one out there, so it’d be too intimidating for people if I showed them some care, even, you know? That’s why you’re my only friend.”

The sudden declaration made me pause a little. Maybe BFF, the way she defined it, meant a lot more to her emotionally than I had thought. I’d better take that seriously and try to live up to it.

“Yeah. Well, let’s hope we keep it that way for a while, Milim.”

I gave her a pat on the head. She just looked so childish, I couldn’t help but feel like she was some family relative.

She gave me a happy smile.

“You bet!”

Several days later…

“Okay, I’m off to work!”

Milim made a sudden declaration.

“Huh? That’s kind of sudden, Milim. Right now?”

“Mm? Well… This isn’t, like, the last time I’ll see you or anything, so yeah, I’m headin’ out!”

With that, she changed back into the bikini-ish outfit she’d first arrived in. She used Change Dress for the job, a bit of magic that was so helpful that I had her teach it to me. It’s recommended to anyone with a lot of clothing, although you need to learn spatial magic first (for clothes storage), which actually makes it tough to learn.

In her original outfit, Milim turned to me and smiled. “I’ll be sure to tell the other demon lords not to lay a finger on this place, okay? You’ve got nothing to worry about, Rimuru!”

“Oh? Great. So you’re off to meet them?”

“Mm-hmm! That’s my job!”

She puffed out her chest proudly.

There was apparently some kind of conference among her, Carillon, and the assorted other demon lords out there. The concept kind of scared me—a secret tryst where the demon lords of the world wove their sinister conspiracies in private. The whole orc lord thing resulted from one of those meetings, so I felt I had a personal stake.

But—hey, if it means the other demon lords leave me alone, then great. Perfect.

The group Milim was affiliated with, by the way, reportedly didn’t include Leon in its ranks. Leon was one of the newer demon lords, so Milim didn’t know too much about him, either. Carillon didn’t seem like such a bad guy, though—what were the rest of them like? I was a tad worried, but it wasn’t like Milim couldn’t handle them. She was cunning, and she was on a whole different level from the demon lord pack.

I did warn her, at least, to watch out for other people trying to deceive her. “Oh, you worry too much. I’m really smart, Rimuru, so nobody’s gonna trick me!” she replied with a smile.

Yeah, it’s that confidence of yours that I’m worried about …

“Well, I’ll be back soon!”

And she was off—into the air. So sudden, just like when she came. And in another moment, she was silently breaking the sound barrier (no shock wave, oddly) and falling out of sight. She said the site was pretty far-off, but at that speed, she didn’t have long to travel.

“Hmm? Did Lady Milim go somewhere?”

Shion looked concerned. They had become rather good friends.

“Yep. She said she had work.”

“Work?”

“She had promised to meet up with a few other demon lords.”

“Other demon lords…? I hope they don’t trick her…”

See? That’s what you’d totally think. Shion had the exact same worry I did.

“Well, she said she’d be back once her work was done, so there’s no point worrying much about her.”

“Quite true. Rather rude of us, I’d say, worrying about someone so much stronger than any of us.”

“True…”

“I’m going to grow stronger—and when she comes back, I’m sure going to surprise her!”

“Better train harder than ever, then.”

It didn’t seem right, feeling all sad about someone like Milim, but losing her so suddenly like this did make one feel lonely. Thinking about it, she had really become a big part of this town. The way she could take over your mind like that… She was one mysterious demon lord.

For now, though, let’s focus on what the ogre mages want to be stronger. And let’s see if we can’t shock Milim when she’s back.

So before long, I resumed my training under Hakuro, my mind refocused on my mission.

It was a broad, expansive, and decadently decorated room. The demon lord Clayman was taking a moment to drink some wine and take in the elegance. Across from him, Frey the Sky Queen was seated, looking out the window and acting depressed.

“How did things turn out, then?”

“Apparently quite well, Frey. We took advantage of a servant of Carillon who was disgruntled about Milim to set Charybdis on her.”

Clayman smiled broadly.

“Milim defeated the beast, according to our observers. You have nothing to worry about now, yes?”

Yes, everything went exactly as Clayman wished—including the results of the battle. Milim was clearly going to win; there was no doubt about that between the two demon lords.

“But none of this angered Carillon himself at all?”

“Why would it? There’s no evidence linking any of this to me. If Carillon’s angry at anyone, it’s either Milim or that mystery pack of monsters. Or perhaps he’ll point it toward those jacks-of-all-trades that tricked that Phobio gentleman, but as long as he doesn’t learn that I hired them, that’s not a problem.”

Another light chuckle.

The Moderate Jesters, his true friends, were a group shrouded in mystery. There was no way Clayman’s involvement with them could ever come out. Carillon had no way of contacting them, no way to figure out where they were—he couldn’t touch them.

Still, though …

Clayman recalled the final set of images Mjurran gave him.

Milim, pulverizing the all-powerful Charybdis in a single instant. Her—and someone else.

“This magic-born, though. The one who defeated Gelmud. It attempted to take on Charybdis solo. Very powerful, indeed; I can see why Milim is so preoccupied with it. If we aren’t careful, it may grow to become as strong as us demon lords.”

“Heh-heh! That’s a pretty funny thing for you to say, Clayman.”

Frey didn’t sound terribly interested. Instead, she changed the subject to the main issue at hand.

“So about your compensation, then. What am I supposed to pay you?”

She turned her eyes to Clayman. This was why the two of them were here today.

“You don’t have to be so wary of me, Frey. This time, if you could just listen to a request of mine, that is more than enough. I helped you out, and in exchange, you can do the equivalent.”

“All right… I’ll do that, if I’m capable.”

“Thank you very much. I was sure you would say that.” He gave a satisfied smile at the deal.

Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. This should help make things go my way at the next demon lord summit. It’ll also let me approach my other goal—hmm? Wait a moment. If this goes well enough, I could even take control of Milim. Yes, with that certain item I was provided …

Clayman almost found himself shaking at the thought. With Frey now on his side of the chessboard, the idea he had just come up with no longer seemed so impossible.

“However,” he said, stopping Frey as she tried to leave the room. “this now means that the only thorn in your side at the moment is Milim alone. Having superiority in the air means nothing against her, doesn’t it, Frey? I would be happy to discuss matters with you, so if it’s something I can help with, don’t hesitate to mention it. You can contact me at any time.”

Behind the friendly face, a new artifice was beginning to formulate itself. Frey didn’t notice, or pretended not to if she did. “I’ll be glad to when the time comes,” she said as she offered her good-byes and left Clayman’s castle.

Alone in his room, Clayman was deep in thought.

If I could obtain Milim’s power, there would be no need at all to incite the other demon lords. I will need to take the time to seriously consider this. And I hope you’re looking forward to it, Milim …

He removed a mask from his pocket and placed it against his face. He could feel his heart relaxing itself. To Clayman, he only felt like his true self with this mask on.

But still … This mystery magic-born cannot be ignored, no. We’d best be careful with it, just like Laplace and Teare warned. I could assign Mjurran to infiltrate their base of operations—it’d be a fine chance for her to restore her good name.

Mjurran’s intel helped a lot more than he expected. He had thus decided to use her as much as possible, until there was nothing left.

Besides, this infiltration job was right up Mjurran’s alley. If it went well and she curried their favor, great. If not, and Mjurran was rubbed out, Clayman had the perfect excuse to get personally involved. It would provide the best pawn to replace Mjurran with.

That mystery magic-born needed to be watched, but compared to bigger things on the horizon, it was still a small presence. He just had to wait, gather information, and use it when the time was right, just in case the monster interfered with the plan he was hatching.

He was not giving it his full attention, perhaps, but regardless, the demon lord Clayman was not watching Rimuru and his city.

An ashen sort of joy erupted across his heart, a smile running across Clayman’s face as he worked out his new artifice…



