INTERLUDE

A LATE-NIGHT MEETING

At midnight, after the banquet wrapped up, we held an impromptu emergency meeting.

“Right,” I said, looking at the attendees. “Sorry to get all of you here this late. I know we’re tired out, but just hang in there a little more, okay?”

First, I wanted to thank Shuna for tonight’s performance.

“Shuna, you really helped me out. Your food was excellent, and you even succeeded where Milim failed and convinced Middray to change his mind. Seriously, thank you.”

Shuna gracefully smiled back. “No,” she demurred, “our menu succeeded tonight thanks to the support Mr. Yoshida gave me. Besides, Sir Rimuru, considering the great praise you had for Hakuro’s seafood, I feel like he stole the show.”

When it came to preparing fish, cutting sashimi, and even whipping up sushi for hungry customers, Hakuro was far better than Shuna. It was almost like a second calling for him, so I didn’t think Shuna was slumming by comparison…but she seemed a little peeved nonetheless, although she did accept my earnest thanks.

Next, I addressed Mjöllmile, my main man behind the scenes.

“Mollie, how are the merchants doing? You run into any problems?”

A wide variety of products and goods was flowing into town from nations worldwide, for sale or use in our many pavilions. Rigurd and Lilina were managing it all, and Mjöllmile was tasked with handling the merchants coming to town with it.

“It’s been nothing but smiles from them so far, sir. Seeing a town as majestic as this for the first time is dumbfounding all of them—and our attendees tonight were smacking their lips at the spread. We’re seeing a great deal of farmers coming from nearby nations as well, so I think our efforts are really paying off. They’re bringing a lot of fine goods, too, and I think we can build rather good ties with them…”

Mjöllmile glanced at Rigurd, who nodded back at him.

“Yes, as Sir Mjöllmile said, they’re bringing fresh fruits and vegetables, smoked beef and fish, and assorted rare handicrafts. Some are bringing livestock with them as well. I think we’re well prepared for the festival along those lines.”

Rigurd seemed assured that shortages wouldn’t be an issue.

“We plan to use some of these imported goods,” Lilina added, “for our meals at the evening banquets starting tomorrow.”

“Ah, that shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”

“No, I don’t think so. However… No, no, it’ll be fine.”

Hmm? Mjöllmile seemed about to say something before he clammed up. If he had qualms, I wished he’d follow through and talk about them.

“Whoa, whoa, say whatever’s on your mind, all right? Because if you stop yourself midway, it’ll weigh on me even more.”

Benimaru and Soei nodded in silent agreement. The pressure made Mjöllmile scratch his head before he spoke again.

“Well, it may just be my imagination, but I am recognizing rather few of the tradespeople working here alongside the large merchants I have close ties to. I have a knack for remembering people’s faces, you see, so it made me curious. So I did a little research…”

As Mjöllmile put it, while it seemed odd at first, there was no actual problem to speak of. He’d asked some of his merchant friends, and they’d replied that, yes, there had been some new blood entering the business. But none of them had heard any scuttlebutt about these tradesmen; they were model businessmen, offering quality products at low prices. Mjöllmile said his friends laughed at him for worrying too much—and when he himself called on a few of these unfamiliar faces, they were all affable and sociable with him.

“Perhaps,” he reflected with a grin, “being given such a large task has made me a tad high-strung.”

“Hey, are you really all right? It’s not too much work, is it? I don’t want it to affect your health…”

His workload had ballooned to epic proportions as of late, indeed. This time, though, he really did laugh off my concerns. “Ha-ha-ha! No need to worry. But I have even more important news for you! It turns out that the Hero Masayuki intends to join the battle tournament tomorrow! The whole town’s alive with rumors about it. People are already placing bets at the taverns.”

As Mjöllmile put it, he was too excited about the work he tackled to grow tired of it. More pressing to him was the news that Masayuki had decided this past evening to join the fight.

“Exactly,” interjected Soei. “That is why I wanted all of us to discuss this matter.”

The group that came to greet Milim outside of town apparently hadn’t heard the news. Benimaru, among others, turned his eyes to Soei, silently asking for some details—but Shion answered first.

“That boy drives me up the wall! He went on about how he’d defeat Sir Rimuru, among other nonsense. I wanted to dispatch him myself, but…”

“Yes,” Soei replied, “and I stopped you. There were people watching. And if you cause trouble right now, it could affect the whole festival.”

That explained why Shion was being relatively well-behaved. I thought she was maturing a bit, but we couldn’t let our guard down yet. Good thing Soei was around.

“Well, I’m glad you were there to do that. He was with my friend Yuuki, besides. And if people spread rumors that I picked a fight with a Hero at the entrance to town, that’d invite all sorts of suspicion I don’t need.”

I sighed as Benimaru nodded his agreement.

“Quite true. Shion, can you please keep your head cool for us?”

“Ha! You don’t need to tell me. I was just a little riled; I didn’t plan to actually start a fight.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… I fully understand you, Lady Shion. You cannot stand by idly while someone belittles our master, right? And you, Sir Benimaru—if you were there to see it, would you have reacted in another way?”

“…No, Diablo. I am always fully composed.”

Benimaru paused a little before answering, eyes darting around. I wasn’t sure I could count on that.

“So,” Diablo continued, “are we here to discuss what to do with this Hero? If you can leave matters in my hands, I could have him vanish without a trace before the sun rises…”

Whew. Scary. And I knew he meant it and could pull it off without a second thought.

“We’re doing nothing like that. Nothing hasty, all right? No matter what.”

After making sure everyone was clear on that, I moved on to my main concern tonight.

“So this is the question: Can anyone here on my staff join the battle tournament starting tomorrow?”

This offer wound up being one powerful bombshell.

“Hohh?”

Benimaru’s eyes lit up.

“I see…”

Shion flashed a fearless smile. It seemed like they were conspiring over something; should I stop them? Maybe turning the topic toward fighting made them forget their promise from a moment ago.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Interesting. Truly interesting.”

Diablo, too, was grinning from ear to ear.

“I would be glad to offer myself. My skills should prove useful.”

Even Geld was ready to go. And the little snicker from Soei told me he, too, was volunteering. Hakuro, too. He remained silent, but I could tell he was getting fidgety. At least Gabil, with his own presentations to run, had no choice but to bow out, as chagrined as he looked at this prospect.

…So yeah, about what I figured. The only one who didn’t react was Ranga, and that’s because he was sleeping in my shadow. That was fine—I didn’t want him to join in anyway.

With a cough, I quieted the crowd before they started arguing over who deserved to sign up.

“Hold on. There are agents all over town right now. Do you really need to go all out in the battle arena? You don’t, do you?”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh. I hardly need to, to trample over our foes—”

“Whoa! Easy. Let me just say in advance—Benimaru, Shion, Diablo, Soei: All of you are out.”

“Wha—?!”

“What do you—?”

I raised a hand to quiet their protests. “First, Soei, you’re our Covert Agent, all right? You can’t fight while you’re running surveillance amid the crowds.”

The thought didn’t seem to have occurred to Soei until now. It must’ve convinced him, though, because he fell silent after that. At least he didn’t suggest competing in disguise. But just to seal the deal…

“Instead, I have a new job for you.”

“A job?”

“Yeah. I’m leaving all spy operations in our nation to you, but I’m also officially appointing you the head of what I’ll call the ‘Oniwaban,’ our intelligence operation.”

This was the name of the group of secret agents who patrolled the streets of old Tokyo during the samurai era and reported news back to the shogun.

“In addition, I am assigning the name ‘Kurayami’ to your personal team. That includes Soka and your other agents, but don’t let those trainees of yours call themselves that yet, all right?”

“Yes, my lord! Thank you very much!”

That wowed Soei more than I expected. It was basically a pretext to keep him from joining the tournament, but if he liked it that much, superb. Soei was overseeing several hundred people these days, besides, so if he liked to assemble his elites under the Team Kurayami name, all the better.

That left three other people to handle—the three strongest members of my staff. Letting any of them join the tournament would be nothing but trouble—and, knowing that, I already had plans worked out for them.

“Okay. Everyone else, listen up. I’m establishing a new committee that’ll be responsible for handling our dignitaries from the Western Nations. I’m going to call it the ‘Big Four.’”

“The Big Four…”

“Heavens—”

“I see…”

It brought all three to rapt attention. Talk about taking the bait.

“The three of you are far more powerful than the rest of my staff. Thus I’d like to name Benimaru the head of the Big Four. Out of the other three posts, I’d like to name Shion and Diablo to two of them.”

Benimaru had the most leadership skills out of the three. He was, after all, a man who could substitute for me when I needed it. He was uniquely qualified to lead the Big Four—whatever this shadowy cabal was supposed to be doing. I tried to make it sound important, but the post was purely ceremonial—again, a pretext to keep them out of the tournament.

“Me as leader… I humbly accept this post!”

Great. He’s on.

“I’m not sure I agree with Benimaru as leader, but hopefully you will reconsider after seeing my performance on the job. I will be happy to call myself part of the Big Four, Sir Rimuru!”

Shion was happy enough with it, too. I wasn’t sure why the post gave her so much confidence, but if she was cool with it, we’d just leave her be.

“The ‘Big Four’? I aim to be strictly number one with you, Sir Rimuru, but I am still a new participant in your endeavors. I know it will not do to be greedy. For now, I will do whatever I can to approach your glory, Sir Rimuru!”

Hmm. Was that a yes? Diablo could be such a handful sometimes. Regardless, they were all Big Four material now.

“Thank you for accepting my appointments. Now, you may be wondering why I banned you from joining the tournament, but your Big Four posts are actually related to that.”

“How so, sir?”

“Well, you see, I’m having trouble picking someone for the fourth and final spot. I thought Soei would work well, but he’s our Covert Agent and it wouldn’t do to expose him in public, so I fear he’s not quite the right fit.”

I gauged my audience’s response. They seemed convinced enough. I saw a few nods.

“Thus I thought we could have a friendly competition. The rest of you here may join the tournament—and whoever wins the championship can call themselves one of the Big Four, in both name and substance. How about that?”

I pressed them for an answer. The meeting hall grew silent, everyone gauging how everyone else would approach this. But then I heard something unexpected from the crowd.

“Hmm… I wanted to join, but tomorrow I must meet with Momiji for an outing—er, so I may guide her around town… But, ohhh, if you order it, Sir Rimuru…”

Hakuro, the guy I was counting on the most, recused himself out of nowhere. Someone as technically skilled as he was would be perfect for the job, but I guess the timing just didn’t work out—and I wasn’t about to order him to the arena. He really would’ve been the best person to gauge Masayuki’s talents, but if I got in the way of a day out with his own daughter, he’d hate me for it.

“Oh, no, that’s quite important, Hakuro. If you break your promise with Momiji, she may never speak to you again.”

“Um, well…”

I had a boss once who ditched an outing with his daughter for work reasons. He wailed about how it took a week before they were on speaking terms again. And here, meanwhile, we had a father and daughter who had only just reunited! If he broke a promise that early on with her…

“Besides, you’re more like Benimaru’s military adviser than Big Four material. A vice general of sorts. There’s no urgent need for you out there.”

Hakuro nodded, the praise deeply moving him. Thus, for his own sake as well, I excused him from the tournament.

So which candidates remained?

“I have our science presentation to run,” lamented Gabil, “but Sir Geld is stronger than I regardless. I will gladly leave this to him!”

Yeah, Geld was my last bet, wasn’t he? Gabil, busy with his own work, regretfully had to decline—instead, he was placing his hopes and dreams on Geld.

“Very well. I will tap my full strengths to prevent the victory of this upstart Masayuki!”

He briskly nodded, answering the call.

I had no issues with Geld’s strength, of course. But as part of the Big Four? And all the glamor and glitz that suggested? I wasn’t wild about that. I appointed Benimaru to lead the two problem children under him, but it seemed kind of mean to Geld to have him take the rear. But I’d worry about that later. For now, if he could just spar with Masayuki and see what he was capable of, perfect.

As I thought about this, Rigur suddenly stood up and spoke.

“I can think of someone else suitable for Big Four membership!”

Yes, you never knew what could happen in a tournament, depending on who you got paired with. Maybe having more than one participant on our side would be preferable—and if it was an A-ranker like Rigur making the recommendation, I could rest easy.

“Um, sure. I think Geld will be just fine, but who do you suggest?”

“Sadly, my security duties prevent me from joining, but there is someone second only to me in terms of strength…”

Second to him—? Oh crap…

“…and that is Gobta!”

Oh, great. Him. Just as I feared. But the suggestion made Rigurd nod vigorously.

“Yes, I’d have no complaint with Gobta representing us.”

Come on.

“Hee-hee! He has proven to be quite a fine apprentice of mine. He’s quick on his feet, and there is a vivid crispness to his moves. His core physical strength has not grown with his other traits, but using this tournament as an opportunity to grow could prove very exciting for him.”

Even Hakuro was pushing for him. My core staff had no reaction.

I thought about asking the man himself what he thought about it, but…

“…Zzzz…zzzz…”

Ah, good. Rarin’ to go. No issues, then. Gobta was in the tournament.

I wanted to end our meeting there, but someone else spoke up before I could.

“Master, I would like to join this test of skill as well!”

Ranga, who had woken up when I wasn’t paying attention, popped his head out from my shadow, wagging his tail.

“You really can’t, Ranga. This is mainly about armed combat, you know…”

“Ah yes,” Mjöllmile added. “We do have at least one summoner in the mix, so a summoned creature or two is not out of the question, but I still think Sir Ranga’s participation presents a few issues…”

This tournament was a test of strength and skill, and there was no questioning Ranga’s qualifications there. But his entry would deviate from the spirit of the competition a bit too much.

Ranga looked reproachfully at Gobta as Mjöllmile echoed my judgment. I knew he was downhearted, but I couldn’t help him. I had to reluctantly put my foot down.

“In that case, I will give Sir Geld and Sir Gobta a bye in the first round and place them in the quarterfinal seedings. We have over two hundred participants in this tournament, so I think we’ll begin by dividing them into six groups and staging a battle royale for each one.”

Wow. Over two hundred sounded like a lot.

Tomorrow was the qualifiers, and the eight people who emerged at the top of them would make it to the elimination round the next day. The plan, at first, was to divide the participants into eight groups and have each one duke it out all at once, the winner earning a quarterfinal seed—we couldn’t devote a huge amount of time to the first round, after all. With Geld and Gobta guaranteed spots in the quarterfinals, however, we’d whittle that down to six bouts.

“All right. I’ll be guiding visitors around for much of tomorrow. Mollie, keep up the good work with this tournament.”

“I’m on it, sir!”

I nodded back. That was good to hear. I knew I could rely on him.

And one more thing:

“Diablo, you’re pretty well-known to the international press by now, right?”

“Yes, my lord. I’ve invited them to the Founder’s Festival and am preparing measures to have them paint us in a positive light.”

I was always impressed with Diablo’s thoroughness. There was no need to hide the guy (or his powers) any longer. In fact, a scary demon serving as referee for this tournament might even improve his reputation a little.

“Well, sorry for the trouble, but I want you to referee the matches. If I got Masayuki, Geld, and Gobta in this, I’m a little worried about having a hobgoblin as ref.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Certainly!”

Perfect. If anything weird happened in the arena, I was sure Diablo would work something out.

“Right. Sorry to take up all of your time. I know it’s late, but for now, get as much sleep as you can!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

This time, for real, the meeting came to a close. We all needed to get some sleep. The real thing was starting tomorrow.