

VILLAIN 198

Chapter 198 The Beginning of the Victoriad

– Frey Starlight's POV –

Today...

The first day of the tournament.

"Huff... huff..."

Sweat streamed down my face as I continued doing push-ups without pause.

"500... 501... 502..."

I moved without stopping, determined to shake off the sluggishness clinging to my muscles.

I had to be in peak condition if I wanted even a sliver of a chance to win—especially when my opponents were the best of the best.

Last night, I returned to the Temple in secret.

I stayed awake all night, working with Carmen to restore my body.

I didn't need sleep anymore. I had already slept for nearly a week.

And today...

I would face Seris Moonlight.

I hadn't seen her in a long time—and ironically, the moment I did, I'd be forced to draw my sword against her.

I kept moving.

Today, that part of the Temple would finally be opened.

The World Arena—the place that would host the finals of the Victoriad.

It resembled a colosseum, but on a much larger scale. A massive space that gave warriors full freedom to fight.

It could hold over 300,000 spectators, and the upcoming matches would be broadcast to every corner of the world.

I wasn't used to these grand, performative battles—but that didn't change what I needed to do.

The matches would begin soon—an hour from now, to be precise.

Mine was the last, which only made the wait worse. So I drowned the tension in an endless stream of push-ups.

"Hooof..."

I exhaled deeply.

"Calm down..."

I needed clarity.

I reviewed everything I had.

All my techniques... every trump card I had left.

I didn't know if they'd be enough.

Even my strongest weapon—Ignition—was now a last resort.

Using it with a weapon other than Balerion would significantly weaken it... and the weapon itself would shatter from the strain of channeling my body's aura.

In other words, if my opponent somehow survived it... it would be over for me.

At the very least, I couldn't afford to use it until the final round.

Speaking of Ignition... I remembered the overwhelming amount of aura Balerion absorbed last time.

I closed my eyes and focused—

Moments later, I found myself floating above the endless sea of aura inside me.

There, I saw a massive crater in the middle of that violet ocean—slowly refilling over time.

Even after drawing out all that power... the overall aura pool inside me had barely changed.

In other words, I still couldn't wield this power properly.

This body of mine was a mystery in itself.

Even the Shadow Adaptation had refused to respond until the very end.

All of it... questions without answers.

Even the system's advice—words I'd repeated to myself over and over—meant almost nothing by now.

"Look into the mirror... and understand its reflection."

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

I wished I knew before it was too late.

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6:00 PM.

The drums roared.

The earth trembled beneath the deafening noise of over 300,000 spectators.

In the heart of the World Arena, the colossal stadium stood ready for battle.

The arena was surrounded by four towering stands that stretched into the sky, showcasing the peak of this generation's architecture.

Above the colossal bleachers, four massive screens hovered mid-air, displaying a rotating stream of images and data. They'd broadcast every upcoming fight to make sure no moment was missed.

Two portraits appeared on those screens now.

A young man with black hair and crimson eyes ...

The other, however, had become the talk of the hour — the center of all attention. His face had already turned into the unofficial symbol of the Empire itself.

Snow Lionheart vs Dawn Polaris.

The first quarterfinal match.

The atmosphere was electric.

This was no ordinary event—it was monumental.

In every section of the arena, there were VIP boxes prepared for the most influential figures in the empire: the top-ranked powerhouses, the guild masters, and the heads of noble families.

The mages had worked around the clock to prepare everything. A top-tier protection barrier—classified S—was erected to prevent any attacks from leaking outside the stage.

Everything was arranged to give the spectators the most immersive experience possible.

Most eyes, however, were fixed on one particular VIP section—one reserved for the titans of the empire , the leaders of the great houses... and the largest seat of them all:

The throne of the Emperor, who would personally attend this event.

The family leaders had arrived.

Frost Moonlight, representing the fractured Moonlight family.

A young man who took the mantle simply because no one else was left. He had just broken through to S rank recently, and rumor had it he did nothing but train day and night.

Behind him stood his mother, Eleanor Moonlight, an SS- ranked powerhouse.

The Moonlight family looked very different compared to the past.

On the other side sat House Starlight, led by Ada Starlight, with Carmen Starlight at her side.

That family had pulled itself from the ashes, now unified under the leadership of that sharp young woman. Thanks to her, they had already risen to the second-highest position among the noble houses.

As for the strongest house currently—it belonged to the old man with the blazing beard.

Iris Sunlight laughed heartily as he looked at the new faces filling the seats.

"Ahh... I feel like a stranger in my own time. Has the age of old men like me finally ended?"

The last time he attended the Victoriad, he sat beside Baylor and Leonides Starlight. Now he found himself surrounded by youths who hadn't even reached thirty.

"Maybe it's time I step down too. Don't you think so, Phoenix?"

Behind Iris stood Phoenix Sunlight.

He understood the layers behind Iris's words and replied with the same answer he always gave.

"As long as I can't beat you yet, you're still qualified to lead, old man. So enjoy it while you can."

"Tsk... Youngsters these days, no respect..."

Iris shook his head, gazing down at the arena.

"But really... who would've thought the Hero would actually appear? Those church bastards have a mighty weapon in their hands now."

With the Hero emerging from within their ranks, it was safe to say the Church had tightened its grip on the people.

And if that Hero were to rise to the level of the legendary Kazis Valerion, then who could possibly stand in their way?

Even if his concerns were only speculation, the Empire was clearly leaning further and further into the Church's influence.

"What are you going to do, Maekar?"

If things continued, the emperor might become little more than a puppet—one controlled by the cunning priests of the Church.

The fact that the Church's seats were positioned separately, on the far side of the arena, was the clearest sign of the growing divide.

The stands were filled to the brim—300,000 people watching the grand spectacle.

And only minutes later, Emperor Maekar arrived, clad in his usual regal robes, with the masked Oliver Khan following behind him.

The moment they entered, the roar of the crowd exploded into madness.

After all, how often did people get the chance to see the Emperor this close?

Maekar raised his hand to the masses, waving with a confident smile.

His expression looked noble and composed—but those close to him knew better.

That look... was not one of joy.

Who could say what the strongest man in the Empire was thinking as he watched from above?

Meanwhile, the first match was about to begin.

Headmaster Ivar stepped forward to deliver the opening speech.

As the world waited to witness the debut of the Empire's second Hero...

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As for me—I walked through the inner corridors of the stadium.

After presenting my identification to the guards, I was escorted to a private room.

It was equipped with a large screen and a spacious warm-up area.

I chose not to watch the first match from the audience seats—I wanted to avoid the chance of running into anyone I knew.

I preferred to remain in the shadows... until it was time for my match to begin.

Minutes passed slowly as the sound of pounding drums and the thunderous cheers of the crowd echoed in my ears.

Finally, the wait came to an end when two young men entered the arena at the same time from opposite sides.

Both of them wore specially crafted armor designed for this event.

This time, Snow Lionheart was clad in the Church's ceremonial white armor—ornately designed, surpassing even those of the noble houses in splendor.

As for Dawn Polaris, he wore the armor prepared for him by the Temple.

Snow still seemed a bit dazed, not fully grasping the weight of his current status, nor used to the overwhelming attention from the crowd.

"The Hero!"

He was the name on every tongue.

Dawn Polaris chuckled awkwardly, watching how the crowd's focus was entirely on his opponent.

"You look like a completely different person now, Mr. Hero."

"Don't bring it up... this whole thing is suffocating."

They spoke casually—after all, they were friends.

To Dawn, Snow was still the same student he'd known before the whole Hero title ever existed.

"You do know losing would cause quite the uproar, right?"

Just imagining the Hero losing after all the hype surrounding him—what a scandal that would be.

It was enough to place immense pressure on Snow.

But he didn't seem the slightest bit bothered... as if the possibility of defeat didn't exist.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of losing."

"Oh?"

At that moment, Ivar appeared between the two eager combatants.

After inspecting them, he confirmed:

"Your armor is equipped with the same system used during the Island trial, only much stronger. In case of a fatal injury, the armor will activate a protection mechanism capable of stopping attacks up to Rank S."

"Upon receiving potentially lethal damage, the armor will emit a disabling wave that knocks you unconscious—resulting in your loss. The match also ends if either of you surrenders, or is unable to continue. Understood?"

Both nodded simultaneously.

Satisfied, Ivar disappeared once more.

Seconds later, the signal was given.

"Let the first match begin!"