

VILLAIN 199

Chapter 199 A Hero and an Assassin

Silence swept the arena as the announcement echoed.

Both Snow and Dawn drew their swords.

Identical slender blades.

Snow would not be allowed to use Vermithor during the Victoriad—it was an event meant to showcase pure, raw skill. Using that blade would have been an unfair advantage.

In other words, the playing field was perfectly balanced.

Dawn took up his defensive stance, surprised when Snow made no move to attack. He simply held his blade in calm silence.

"What are you doing?"

He asked, frowning.

Snow smiled faintly, his golden eyes now shining with a radiant white glow.

"I want to fight you—with swords only."

Dawn's expression darkened the moment he heard those words.

In all their past training sessions, they had sparred hundreds of times using only swords, without elemental power.

In pure swordsmanship... Snow had never once defeated Dawn.

But Snow wasn't the same person anymore.

"Don't regret it later."

Swish!

Dawn vanished.

In the blink of an eye, he was already at Snow right side.

With a swift slash, he attacked—fast and with incredible finesse.

But in the final moment, Snow blocked it flawlessly.

Dawn instantly flowed into another set of strikes, each one launched from blind angles.

On the other side, Snow met each blow with such rapid, fluid movements that his sword arm seemed to multiply—like the limbs of an octopus.

They clashed in a whirlwind of steel...

The sharp clanging of metal against metal rang violently in the ears of the spectators, despite their numbers.

As Dawn pushed to his maximum speed, he pressured Snow relentlessly, trying to crack that perfect defense.

For a moment, it looked like he had the Empire's Hero completely on the ropes.

Strike after strike, parry after parry...

And after several minutes, something began to gnaw at Dawn's mind.

"Why... why can't I break through?"

Snow was fighting solely with his sword—just like Dawn.

No techniques, no elements... only pure swordsmanship.

And yet, despite that, he was managing to parry every strike Dawn threw at him... perfectly?

Unlike the tense and aggressive Dawn, Snow appeared composed, almost as if he were learning his body anew—discovering what it was now capable of.

Sparks flew with each clash of metal, the air charged with tension. After countless exchanges—

Slash!

Dawn leapt back instinctively, widening the distance between them.

He didn't quite grasp what had happened... until he reached for his neck.

Blood.

A shallow cut, barely a scratch—but Snow, amidst all that pressure, had found an opening. And he went for the kill.

He failed to land a fatal strike—but the injury proved just how close he'd come.

Reacting quickly, Dawn summoned a flame-cloud above his sword, enhancing his body with the earth element.

He had felt it. The danger radiating off Snow had subconsciously triggered his internal defense mechanism.

But that... had been a mistake.

Snow stepped forward with a faint smile.

"Are you sure about this? I was hoping for a longer duel."

Step by step, Snow's aura surged. A crushing force.

Dawn realized just how badly he'd messed up.

By calling upon his power, he had given Snow permission to do the same.

And in that realm... Snow was a monster.

"Damn it all..."

Dawn charged forward, unleashing a torrent of flames.

Snow calmly raised his hand, manipulating the fire Dawn had just cast and dispersing it effortlessly.

Dawn intensified his attacks, mixing his flames with advanced swordplay—flickering arcs of red flame slashing toward Snow from every direction.

Each one capable of cleaving steel.

And yet, Snow deflected them all. One after another.

Dawn's composure began to crack. His face revealed growing frustration.

Even he couldn't deny the rising thought in his head:

'What if I lose... to Snow?

To lose in a sword duel, of all things?'

It would be a blow to his pride—especially after the hundreds of sparring sessions they'd fought in the past, where Dawn had always held the upper hand.

The arena exploded several times under the sheer heat of Dawn's flames, trapping his opponent in a blazing inferno.

He gave it everything he had...

But Snow's face remained calm. His eyes glowing with a steady white light.

Snow hadn't even used his power—he was simply controlling Dawn's flames, repelling them every time.

And with his sword alone, he was still dominating.

As the exchanges continued, Snow gradually began to lose interest.

Then, at one point... flames danced along his blade as well.

He finally began to counterattack.

Step by step, Dawn found himself pushed back—Snow steadily advancing.

Their swords collided with relentless rhythm.

Before the eyes of over 300,000 spectators, they watched as Dawn was slowly, steadily forced to retreat.

Dawn was unleashing massive flames, enough to engulf the arena in a sea of red.

Meanwhile, Snow had barely wrapped his blade in fire.

And yet, the outcome was already clear.

Watching that clash unfold, I let out a long breath and sank deeper into my seat.

It's worse than I thought...

Dawn didn't even realize when he'd reached the edge of the arena—his back hitting the stone wall behind him.

Still trying to process it, he had no time to breathe.

One strike.

Two.

Three—

And with a final clash, his sword flew from his hands.

Snow placed his burning blade against Dawn's neck.

He could feel the heat of the steel searing into his skin as Snow gazed down at him.

"...The duel is over."

And in that moment, the arena erupted in deafening applause.

The roar of the crowd reached its peak.

On the other side, Maekar stared curiously at the white-haired young man.

He was only seventeen...

And yet... the overwhelming presence he radiated—

Snow Lionheart wasn't chosen as the Hero for nothing.

For a moment, Maekar wondered... was this what his great-grandfather, Kazis Valerion, used to look like?

For some reason, the Emperor didn't seem pleased by what he was witnessing.

As for me...

I was starting to get a headache just thinking about how powerful Snow had become.

There was a good reason why Vermithor was called the strongest of the Seven Swords—

It affected its wielder more than it did their enemies.

It was said that the holy aura stored within the blade was infinite.

The moment he touched the sword, a massive surge of aura burst into Snow's body, propelling his strength to the next level.

The only thing that young man had ever lacked... was sacred power.

And now that he had obtained it as well, it meant that his body would now heal almost instantly every time he got injured... not to mention the endless aura reservoir he now possessed.

In other words, even without actively wielding Vermithor, he was still benefiting from it—because the sword had become a part of him.

Put simply, an SSS-rank aura advantage no longer meant much if the opponent was Snow.

This... was a real headache.

I sank into a whirlpool of grim thoughts.

And while I remained lost in that mess of negativity—

Ivar reappeared atop the arena and announced the first student from the first-year group to advance to the semifinals.

Shortly afterward, the second match was declared:

Ghost Umbra vs. Ragna Claude

Familiar faces stepped into the ring.

Ghost looked the same as ever—his face devoid of emotion.

On the other hand, Ragna appeared unusually serious this time.

His black hair was messy, reflecting his current state of mind perfectly.

Wielding a massive spear, with a body twice the size of Ghost's...

The spear-bearer stared coldly at his opponent.

Very few people knew the truth behind the death of Isaac Claude... his father.

But one thing was certain—his death had a huge impact on the boy.

Just like the match between Snow and Dawn—

Ivar gave the signal, and the duel began instantly—no warning.

Gathering a large amount of fire aura at the tip of his spear...

Ragna charged forward in a straight line, aiming to strike Ghost's face.

The latter bent his body at an impossible angle, dodging the spear's edge aimed at his head.

"..."

Ghost stared silently at Ragna, who continued stabbing fiercely toward him.

His strikes were fast and powerful, but Ghost demonstrated incredible agility and nimbleness.

Normally, an assassin should lose the moment they're exposed—since they're at their strongest from the shadows.

But Ghost Umbra was an exception.

Even when revealed, he could still fight head-on against a spear-wielder like Ragna.

Ragna spun his spear like a fan in his hands and began swinging faster, launching fiery projectiles in Ghost's direction.

At one point in the battle, Ghost drew his daggers, using them to block Ragna's attacks.

And yet, Ragna's spear was utterly strange—despite the distance between them and the spear's limited reach—

Its tip managed to strike Ghost's body every single time.

"He can erase the distance between himself and his target..."

Ghost muttered as he continued analyzing his opponent.

On the other side, Ragna stabbed the ground—and as if by magic, dozens of spears erupted from beneath Ghost's feet, shooting upward.

Ghost leapt high into the air, evading every strike aimed at him with flawless precision.

Ragna tried to strike him mid-air, but it was no use. Even without touching the ground, Ghost moved with effortless efficiency.

"Why can't I land a hit on him!?"

Ragna cursed, unleashing wave after wave of destruction across the arena in an attempt to catch Ghost.

But calmly—almost silently—Ghost advanced, closing the distance between them in a blink.

Ragna's spear was fast. Unnaturally fast. It somehow erased the space between him and his target.

And with the added pressure of the ever-burning fire aura, his offense was relentless.

And yet... Ghost dodged everything.

"You're not going to land a hit on me with attacks like that."

His voice was cold—completely unfazed.

Veins bulged across Ragna's forehead, rage twisting his expression.

"What the hell did you just say, you smug bastard!?"

He roared as his strikes intensified, leaping toward Ghost.

Dozens of spears materialized around him, raining down like a storm upon Ghost's head.

But...

"I already told you. You're not going to hit me."

Slash!

Ghost's hands moved like serpents, slashing through Ragna's defense with terrifying precision.

"How do you expect to hit your opponent when you let your emotions rule your every move?"

The first thing an assassin like Ghost learns—

Isn't stealth.

Isn't how to wield a blade.

It's how to silence their emotions—how to suppress the very intent to kill.

Assassins like Ghost could read killing intent in a single glance.

And Ragna... he was an open book.

"Your rapid strikes, your techniques designed to ensure contact—I see through all of them."

Swish.

More gashes opened across Ragna's body.

"You bastard!!"

Ragna slammed his spear into the ground again, triggering a massive eruption of steel spears all around.

But Ghost was already above him.

"Letting your emotions drive your body however they please... that's what'll get you killed."

With both hands—

Ghost slashed at Ragna's neck from both sides.

A fatal blow.

But the arena's protective armor activated at the last moment, absorbing the strike.

Even so, the feedback from the clash knocked Ragna unconscious instantly.

Ghost landed cleanly, on his feet.

He turned and walked away—exiting the ring amid roaring applause.

He wasn't the son of the world's deadliest assassin for nothing.

And with that... the second semifinalist was revealed.

