

VILLAIN 661

Chapter 661: The Battle of the Madwood

The Battle of the Madwood

That was the name it would be given ..the clash where Frey and Snow stood against the Ultras.

The "Madwood" was so called because it was where the Blood Queen, Evelyn, spent most of her time and performed her vilest experiments. Misshapen humans were often sighted wandering that forest. Stranger still, it lay within one of the largest Highblood cities ..Shizklar.

The Ultras had set a meticulous trap to draw in Frey ..and to finish Snow along with him in one stroke.

The Empire's champions, its knights ..the Black Knight and the White .. found themselves encircled by the Ultras' full force. No one knew how those forces had massed so quickly, nor what had happened to the other fronts of the war. It didn't matter anymore. Frey and Snow were forced to fight once again.

Both had grown to a level that defied the Ultras' understanding, but, unfortunately for them, neither could fight at full power. Snow was still drained from his battle with Geppetto's champions and from Evelyn's restraints. Frey Starlight, too, had yet to fully replenish his aura after the fight with Zibar ..and worse, he had shared a portion of it with Snow so he could stand and fight at all.

With aura scarce and bodies worn down, neither could unleash everything.

Frey couldn't use Dark Ascension, which demanded a full reservoir of aura, and he could fire Nameless Judgement only once. As for Snow, entering The Anointed War State was impossible. The battle would be grueling.

It was the Ultras' one chance to kill them before it was too late.

And so the battle ignited ..hell itself.

The spell batteries never stopped; the sky was blanketed with thousands of shells raining over their heads. Gavid Lindemann and Mergo rushed in at once, V with them—and even Belith, the 18th-ranked demon, moved to join the assault.

The witch Beatrice was present as well, and she had prepared the field with thousands of pre-set incantations, making her the most dangerous opponent on that ground.

At one point in the fighting, back to back, Frey and Snow no longer knew what they were facing. They simply cut down anything that came within reach.

Even short of their full power, they still had more than enough to crush whatever stood before them ..especially Frey, after fusing Dark Sister with Balerion and wielding the Aura of the Black Hole, which made his strikes far deadlier than before.

In the thick of it, he met V face to face.

The Ultras' mimic had taken Frey's form, trying to copy him: Moonlight Sword in one hand, a claymore in the other, and the forms of Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow woven between.

At the sight, Frey could only laugh.

"Trying to copy me? Sorry .. but your build is a little outdated."

Channeling a torrent of Black Hole aura, Frey unleashed a colossal cut that swallowed V whole and sent him flying with ease.

"I'd love a proper duel, copycat .. but you brought far too many friends."

Outnumbered, Frey couldn't waste time on any single foe. He and Snow pushed forward together, carving a path and trying to break the Ultras' net.

As the minutes turned to hours, both took their share of wounds. Yet Frey's regeneration and Snow's holy vitality kept them going.

The worst threat was Beatrice's lattice of spells, springing from every angle as if she had foreseen their every attempt to escape. Worst of all, she remained far enough back that Frey couldn't shut her down with Anti-Magic.

One on one, none of the Ultras present could match Frey or Snow now. But by tightening the net and layering pressure, they began to grind the two down.

Time blurred ..seconds, minutes, then hours ..as the two were hunted through a Highblood city swarming with enemies.

Most of the Ultras threw themselves at the slaughter with fanatic resolve. What truly shifted the feel of the battlefield, though, was the hesitation radiating from a few of them .. especially Beatrice, who, despite launching thousands of spells, carried no killing intent toward them.

The other surprising hesitation came from Mirgo, the swordsman. Warriors like him could transmit their hearts through their blades. From V, Frey felt envy and spite. From Gavid .. boiling rage and hatred. But from Mergo's great Ushigatana came only one thing:

Curiosity.

His certainty deepened in the instant their blades crossed and Mergo leaned in, whispering something at his ear .. too quickly for anyone else to catch. Frey hurled him back with a vicious cut and ran on with Snow, but he kept one eye on the old lord, mind turning over the words.

The Ultras were strange.

They were human too .. humans who had traded away their humanity and sold themselves to demons. Yet it wasn't right to brand them all the same. Many had never been given a choice, forced to shoulder the sins of their forebears.

Frey had known that truth for a long time, but he hadn't cared much.

What was right, in a place like this, was to seek a way through .. and save whatever could still be saved.

That's what a true hero would have done—but Frey never saw himself that way.

He entered this war intent on eradicating them, on ending their lives.

Yes, they weren't responsible for their forefathers' sins, and many had been forced onto this path long ago. But this was war, and in war everyone has their reasons. So long as they stood in his way and tried to kill him, Frey would never hesitate to cut them down without a blink.

Even if they were good men, even if they were fathers and sons ... that was, and still is, the principle Frey lives by.

He meant to kill them all, yet the Ultras, it seemed, did not fully return the sentiment. Most of them did try to kill the two of them, laying a deadly trap .. but others didn't even seem to be trying in earnest.

Because of that, Frey and Snow managed to carve a path through by force and break out of the encirclement after hours of nonstop fighting. The pursuit continued for a while, the Ultras dogging their heels—until, at last, the chase faltered as the pair drew too close to the allies Frey had left behind earlier.

After running for hours, they finally reached a place far enough to catch their breath. Both were heavily depleted, but beyond that, neither bore any injury worth mentioning.

As they drew breath, Snow Lionheart spoke first.

"What exactly just happened?"

Frey shook his head. "I don't know. Given all the preparations they made, I thought it would be far deadlier. But..."

Despite being surrounded, neither of them ever felt it was a true fight to the death.

"It was like a staged play, not a life-and-death battle," Snow said, and Frey agreed.

"The Ultras are acting strangely. From where I stand, they've already lost this war. They don't have anything left to put on the field."

Frey was right, and Snow nodded.

"The demons are the real enemy now ..the greater threat."

"The demons have always been the enemy .. from the very beginning," Frey replied, tightening a strap on his armor. "We only started recognizing their presence recently. They're far too strong, and there are few humans who can stand against them."

Snow agreed, and Frey asked the question that had been nagging at him.

"Given how strong you are now, it's hard to imagine you losing. Was your opponent Rank Thirteen?"

Snow was briefly surprised Frey knew it was Geppetto, but let it pass. "That's right. I ran into him on my way to link up with you. But I didn't lose to him .. I lost to something far worse."

Frey's expression hardened. "Stronger than a Rank Thirteen demon? Is there such a thing?"

"Yes. A real monster. He seemed like Geppetto's subordinate, but he was much stronger .. strong enough to beat me quickly, even after I triggered my strongest state."

Snow remembered the man. "His strikes were fast and brutally heavy. His aura control was absolute perfect .. in a way I've never seen. And he's definitely not a demon."

"One of Geppetto's corpses, then," Frey said, sinking into thought ...

a corpse stronger than Geppetto himself?

"Does something like that even exist?"

With all the intel he'd gathered, Frey couldn't recall anything like it. Geppetto did command several SSS-class fighters .. but all of them were weaker than he was. For one of them to surpass him ..and by Snow's account, by a lot .. boded ill.

"How strong is he, exactly?" Frey pressed.

Snow's answer was sobering. "We'll have to fight him together ..at the same time .. if we want a chance."

It landed like a weight. From that alone, it meant the man Snow spoke of was, at minimum, stronger than the half-power clone of Zibar that Frey had faced ..and that was no good news for them.

With an irritable sigh, Frey glanced up at the sky, darkening by the moment, the split moon stark over their heads, and chose to shelve it for now.

"For the moment... let's finish the Ultras properly."

Once they dealt with them, they could turn fully to the demons and the rest.

"Let's go," Frey said, and Snow frowned.

"Go where?" he asked, because the direction Frey took wasn't toward their companions, but the exact opposite.

"There's someone we need to meet. He's piqued my curiosity."

Frey told Snow about the odd, drunken old man who had leaned in during the melee and whispered a place to meet. That was the moment Frey understood the Ultras weren't trying to kill them all .. that their lives had never truly been on the line.

Lord Mergo .. half demon, half human, and wholly peculiar.

Meeting him would decide the fate of the Ultras.