

## VILLAIN 662

### Chapter 662: Black Order

As Frey and Snow moved swiftly through enemy territory, a long silence stretched between them.

Both were steadying their balance and strength even as they traveled.

To each of them, it all felt like a dream—a strange, unreal dream.

Neither had ever imagined they could slip a full Ultra encirclement this easily, even in such a depleted state. True, they hadn't been able to do much to their enemies—but by the same token, their enemies hadn't been able to do much to them. Once they focused on escape, they broke through cleanly.

Now the two of them were heading to a specific place... to meet one of the enemy.

"Uh... Frey, are you sure this isn't some kind of trap?" Snow asked, scowling, unconvinced by the idea of a parley.

Frey shook his head with a wry smile. "And if it is? Didn't we just walk out of a deathtrap with their full forces?"

"Can't argue with that... still, it reeks. Why would the enemy ask for a meeting now of all times?"

The Ultras usually chose the sword over words.

A summons like this was anything but normal.

But this was Mergo .. the peculiar Ultra lord who had long piqued Frey's curiosity.

"At the very least, that old man is different. He's always had a philosophy of his own—and for the first time, I found myself losing the exchange when I faced him before."

Frey remembered the desperate fight he once waged against a thousand men, only for Mergo to appear at the end.

It was one of the bleakest moments of his flight through Ulteras—perhaps the first time he truly lost control of himself and Nameless moved his body.

Though he wasn't certain, it felt less like Nameless seized him and more like he fought on reflex, without awareness.

He had survived that clash against Mergo .. who was stronger than him then .. but every so often Frey still recalled what the old man said:

"Whether it's me or him, we're both beasts made to destroy, not to mend... and one day, each of us will meet an end befitting what our hands have done."

Mergo's outlook had, in its way, influenced Frey's thinking.

In the Empire and among the Ultras alike, there were rampaging monsters who deserved to die someday .. and there were heroes as well.

Standing on one side or the other never excused what your hands did; the guilty would be held to account, sooner or later.

Frey, as he was now, believed that completely ..and he'd already accepted it. Whatever fate or punishment awaited him, he intended to shoulder it ..take it all. It was exactly what he deserved.

In just a single year ..since the pursuit through Ulteras with the Temple's elite students ..Frey had grown far more mature. His strength wasn't the only thing that had increased. And all of that, in a sense, began with his fight against Mergo.

So meeting that old man again held Frey's interest.

Snow, for his part, decided to go along and see what the enemy intended.

"Come to think of it ..did you come alone to pull me out?" Snow asked.

"No. Our friends from the Temple were with me, but I broke off as soon as I sensed you," Frey answered, recalling the instant he'd felt Snow's presence .. teleporting to him at once without a word and leaving the others behind.

"They'll probably be annoyed, but given the trap we ran into, this was the better call..."

Frey and Snow were the exceptions. They'd taken wounds and cuts during the breakout, but one could regenerate and the other carried a sanctified power that healed him on its own ..on top of both having enormous personal strength.

Bringing the others would only have been a hindrance.

"I already know where they are. The plan was to find you and go straight back, but the latest turn of events made me reconsider. We'll rejoin them once we finish what we have to do here."

Frey knew he'd kept them waiting longer than he should have. It would likely grate on more than a few .. especially Uriel, who truly wanted to support him. But so long as they were safe, that was what mattered.

"I see you still don't like relying on others," Snow said, calling out Frey's lone-wolf nature ..the habit that had him fighting alone again and again.

Frey shook his head. "Not true. I rely on you."

"That's good to hear. You, more than anyone, need to remember you can't change everything by yourself. No matter how strong you are, there will always be someone stronger."

Especially among the demons, who counted many world-shaking monsters.

"I know that already," Frey replied.

Against those greater foes, he'd have no choice but to join forces with Snow if they hoped to bring them down.

It was the only realistic option, given that Frey still hadn't broken into SSS-class. The System had stopped giving him quests and achievement points, leaving his current aptitude stalled at SS+. Breaking through to SSS would be impossible without shattering that cap.

Thinking on that, silence fell again as they ran.

There was too much to do, and the War of Darkness meant something different to the Empire than it did to the Ultras.

If the Ultras won, the war would end at once.

If the Empire won... that would only mean conquering the human front and opening the line against the demons. In other words, the war wouldn't end anytime soon for them. It felt like an eternal struggle that would drag on for many long years—just as the races above had suffered, fighting demons for millennia and still fighting to this day.

"It feels like this war will never end," Snow murmured.

Viewed that way, it was enough to make anyone despair.

"It always has," Frey said. "All we can do is adapt—like we always have."

He said it .. and then he stopped.

"We're here."

Standing atop a fairly high cliff, Frey swept his aura out over the open ground below.

This was the place Mergo had told him about.

"Looks like they're here too..."

"They?" Snow asked, expecting only one person.

"Yeah. Three of them."

Apparently, Mergo hadn't come alone.

"Be careful. We don't know what they're about to pull," Snow warned.

"No need to worry—I'm already aware," Frey replied.

He dropped from the cliff, Snow following close behind.

Moments later, they reached their destination.

There, in a bowl of stone ringed by rocks and low ridges, the old man Mergo sat on a simple boulder, drinking from his flask. Beside him stood a girl in Victorian dress with a modest hat; her eyes were crimson, her skin startlingly pale.

Empyrean Maria.

On the other side waited a white-haired youth with a ruined face—whose sight made Frey's brow crease.

The ghoul Lawrence .. the very one Frey was sure he had beheaded.

At the sight of Frey, Lawrence nearly flew into a frenzy, but Mergo stopped him at once.

"Where are your manners, Lawrence? These gentlemen are our guests."

With a light, rapid series of taps, Mergo struck Lawrence's body and dropped him to the ground, half-paralyzed.

"Forgive my retainer's rudeness. He's... not entirely stable," Mergo said pleasantly.

Frey and Snow studied him in silence for a beat, then spoke.

"Mergo—this is the fourth time we've met face-to-face," Frey said, recalling their history, "and the first without our swords crossing."

The first had been during the pursuit, which ended with Frey losing control and Mergo withdrawing. The second time he lost control again and faced Mergo with three others. The third had been a token clash during the recent siege. This was the fourth.

"We do tend to fight," Mergo smiled. "It's what our natures demand, isn't it? You and I—we were made to destroy."

He took a pull from his flask and went on. "But the difference is that you've become a beast far beyond my measure, Frey Starlight. And you as well, Snow Lionheart—you both look alike to me."

"Enough empty talk. Say what you came to say .. we've no time to waste on you," Snow cut in, openly ready to fight. If this went poorly, he was prepared to kill them on the spot; all three were key Ultra combatants.

Mergo didn't so much as flinch at the hostility.

"Very well—let's be brief, then. Tell me: what do you think happens in this war from here?"

Frey answered without pause. "The Ultras will be annihilated in the next battle. You don't have a path to victory anymore."

Mergo nodded. "That's true... and completely wrong at the same time."

Toying with the flask, he continued, "You're not a fool, Frey Starlight. Think. Remember what you've seen. Remember who your enemies are .. and your allies. Does this war really look like a simple clash between the Empire and the Ultras?"

He asked the question ..and answered it himself. "That's a major mistake. This is a play, directed by people tugging strings from the shadows .. and your friend the prince is the clearest example."

He brought up Aegon out of nowhere.

"Everything that has happened, and everything that will happen, is being steered by them. And even if you refuse to look, you too are an actor in their theater, Frey Starlight. No matter how strong you are, you couldn't break the bounds of the script they're running .. yet the prince, weaker than you, did. Strange, isn't it?"

Of course it wasn't normal .. especially where the prince was concerned. Aegon Valerion was so opaque in motive that Frey had begun to wonder if the young man was even human. Frey had turned it over day and night and found no answer; the prince hid his hand too well.

"What are you driving at?" Frey asked, urging Mergo to get to the point.

At that moment, Maria stepped forward and spoke for the first time.

"What we want from you, Frey Starlight—and from you, Snow Lionheart .. is that you consider an alliance."

Both men blinked.

"An alliance? With whom .. you three?"

"Forgive my rudeness; I haven't introduced myself," the woman said with a slight bow. "My name is Maria. I belong, with Master Mergo, to a certain group .. you may call us an organization, if you like."

"The name is the Black Order. Our sole aim is to preserve as many Ultra lives as possible."

She gestured toward Mergo and their true stance.

"Like you, we despise what the demons are doing to our kind. We chose to fight—but in our own way."

"In your own way?" Snow scoffed. "By submitting to them and doing as they command?"

Maria nodded. "Yes. We had no choice."

"The demons are so strong that to them we're insects. Resistance meant extinction. So we chose to lower our heads and submit."

"And where did that get you? I don't see much result," Frey said.

"On the contrary, we've saved thousands—by working from the shadows, keeping out of the spotlight," Maria replied, "though we lost many in the attempt."

"All because we lacked the means to fight. For us humans, there was no chance. But recently... a glimmer of hope has appeared .. one that might be our salvation."

Mergo took over again. "And that hope is you .. Frey Starlight and Snow Lionheart. Human fighters who can stand against the strongest demons. You may be the only hope left. That's the conclusion I reached after watching long enough from afar—watching how you grew."

"What I offer you is a chance .. an alliance to save as many humans as possible, whether of the Empire or the Ultras, and to work with us the Black Order .. from the shadows to make it happen."

He extended his hand to them.

"Let's join forces .. against our common enemy."