

VILLAIN 59

Chapter 59 The Holy Church (1)

Belgrade, the Imperial Capital – The Emperor's Palace

The grand hall was filled with tension as representatives from the empire's most powerful factions convened, summoned in response to the recent upheavals shaking the empire's foundations.

The betrayal that had ignited the wrath of the noble houses and great guilds had been swiftly met with retribution. Yet, despite the empire's decisive response, the Ultras had managed to strike at one of the most secure locations in existence—the temple itself.

In this escalating cold war, the empire had retaliated, dispatching dozens of assassins from the feared Shadow Tribunal.

Now, before the imperial dais where Emperor Maekar sat, flanked by the heads of the great houses and the leaders of the guilds, stood Mist Umbra—the empire's deadliest assassin.

The news he delivered sent a ripple of shock through the chamber.

Seventy-one assassins—all ranked B-class and higher—had been sent to the Ultras' continent. Not a single one had returned.

In fact, contact had been lost the moment they crossed the Demon Sea.

Emperor Maekar exhaled slowly. Lately, he had heard nothing but bad news.

And it only continued.

As Mist stepped back, two new figures stepped forward: Leonidas Starlight and Iris Sunlight. Their expressions were grim, and the reports they carried were identical.

In both the eastern and southern Nightmare Lands, something was changing.

Nightmare Beasts were behaving erratically, launching relentless and unprecedented assaults along the empire's borders.

The frequency and intensity of these attacks had increased dramatically, posing a grave threat to the frontlines.

What unnerved the border sentinels most, however, was the impossible unity among the creatures. Nightmare Beasts that were naturally hostile to one another had begun attacking side by side, as if driven by a single will. This unnatural coordination made them exponentially harder to repel.

Leonidas' face darkened.

"We've managed to hold the lines so far, since no high-tier creatures have appeared. But with each attack, they grow stronger. And if the Fog... or one of the Nightmare Lords emerges—"

His expression grew even heavier.

"—then I can't guarantee the borders will hold."

His words weighed on the room like lead. Yet it was Iris who, as always, had the boldness to say what others merely thought.

The embers in his beard crackled softly, but his usual playful smirk was nowhere to be seen. Instead, his gaze was sharp, his tone direct.

"Let's stop pretending, Leonidas."

"The beast rampages, the endless raids, the temple incident... and the infiltration of the Imperial Palace itself."

"Are we truly supposed to believe this is all just a coincidence?"

A dry chuckle escaped him.

"Even a child wouldn't fall for that."

Maekar's brows furrowed.

"Are you suggesting the Ultras have somehow gained control over Nightmare Beasts? That's impossible."

A deep voice interrupted him.

"No... it's not."

The chamber fell silent.

All eyes turned toward the speaker—an aged yet imposing man, his long silver hair draping over broad shoulders, his eyes milky-white, devoid of pupils.

Bloodmader.

The director of the Temple stepped forward, accompanied by a short, white-aproned figure.

The latter wasted no time.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say they control them," he said. "But they've certainly found a way to manipulate them—inciting their rage, triggering these attacks."

Bloodmader gave a firm nod.

"He's right. I can confirm it."

The short man wasn't just anyone. He was Ashol Eduardo, one of the greatest scientific minds of the era. His words carried weight, and Bloodmader's confirmation only deepened the gravity of the situation.

Raising a device in his hand, Ashol activated a holographic display.

A massive, nightmarish creature appeared—a grotesque fusion of serpent and lizard.

A Class A Nightmare Beast—one of the deadliest entities to roam the Nightmare Lands.

Ashol stroked his beard, rotating the image to display the beast's corpse from different angles.

"Thanks to Bloodmader, who infiltrated the Eastern Nightmare Lands alone, we managed to recover this specimen. Now, take a good look. Do you notice anything unusual?"

As the attendees examined the image, realization dawned.

Maekar's gaze darkened.

"Those symbols... they're the same ones."

"Precisely."

The image zoomed in, highlighting a sigil inscribed onto the creature's flesh, its design intricate and utterly alien.

"This, ladies and gentlemen... is the catastrophe hanging over our heads."

Despite the ominous weight of his words, Ashol's fascination was evident.

"It's an evolved form of demonic contracts. A second-generation variant, if you will."

His voice grew more animated.

"This tiny sigil is unlike anything I've ever seen. It can manipulate aura, alter physical structure, even influence emotions! Can you imagine the implications?"

So enthralled was he by his discovery that he failed to notice Bloodmader's massive hand reaching for him—until it smacked him back to reality.

"Enough with your rambling. Get to the point."

Rubbing his aching back, Ashol grumbled.

"You brute! My words should be recorded for future generations!"

Seeing the murmurs spreading through the chamber, he relented.

Raising his hands in surrender, he delivered the core truth.

"These sigils... weren't made by humans."

"They're the work of demons. High-ranking ones ."

"That explains the sudden surge in power we've seen in certain individuals. Of course... that power comes at a price."

A silence stretched across the chamber.

"And if demons can empower humans..."

His voice dropped slightly.

"...then there's no reason they couldn't do the same to Nightmare Beasts."

"That would explain their berserk behavior. After all, demons and Nightmare Creatures came from the same place—the gates."

Bloodmader's voice rumbled through the hall.

"You all understand what this means, don't you?"

A grim hush fell over the chamber.

Expressions varied—some stunned, others deeply troubled. But Maekar simply lowered his head in thought.

Elsewhere, within the Starlight family's reserved seating, two women sat side by side.

"We're in serious trouble, aren't we?"

Ada's innocent question drew a heavy sigh from Carmen.

"You don't get it, Ada... This isn't just bad. This is the absolute worst-case scenario."

Ada glanced at her, puzzled. Carmen rarely sounded this agitated.

In truth, her frustration wasn't just about the dire situation... but because smoking was prohibited inside the royal hall.

Needing a distraction, she spoke more than usual.

"This meeting is a nightmare for Maekar. Let me give you a simple geography lesson."

Without waiting for a response, she continued.

"The empire sits dead center in the world.

"Surrounded by the Nightmare Lands. The Demon Sea. And the Ultras' continent."

"If the Ultras were our only enemy, we could focus on a single front. But no."

Ada wasn't oblivious—she understood. But Carmen wasn't done.

"If they've truly gained influence over the Nightmare Beasts, then this is the end."

"Attacks will come from all sides—north, south, east, west."

Nightmare creatures—millions of them.

Some... had no known way of being dealt with.

"Can you even comprehend the scale of this catastrophe? And that's without mentioning the Ultras. Not to mention the Four Lords—now led by a High-Ranking Demon."

As the harsh truth sank in, Ada's expression darkened further and further—until, finally, she let out a small, uneasy smile.

"So... we're screwed, aren't we?"

"Screwed?" Carmen scoffed. "This isn't even the real disaster."

She exhaled sharply.

"Forget the siege we're under. Even inside the empire, safety is an illusion. It's not just black and white, Ada—there's gray, too. I'm talking about the traitors."

Her lips curled into something that wasn't quite a smile.

"Simply put—inside and out..."

Her tone turned sharp, almost mocking.

"We've been screwed from every direction."

Ada remained silent as Carmen continued, voice laced with amusement.

"We're like a whore who suddenly found herself surrounded by dozens of ravenous goblins, all eager to violate her."

Ada pretended not to hear that last remark. Instead, she asked in an even tone—

"Then what's the solution?"

At that, Carmen paused. She leaned back, draping an arm over the chair, eyes drifting toward the ceiling in thought.

Then, after a moment—

She lifted a hand and pointed toward Emperor Maekar.

Ada blinked.

"The Emperor?"

"That's right."

Carmen's fingers clenched into a tight fist.

"There's only one solution to this mess."

Her voice was steady.

"Total war. We strike first. We hit them with everything we have before they even have the chance to retaliate."

She leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

"It's our only choice."

She spoke as if it were a simple thing. But Ada knew better.

"Total war..."

It was easy to say. But war... was the worst possible decision.

War wasn't just armies clashing on battlefields.

War consumed everything.

Money. Food. Resources. Lives—both civilian and military.

And worst of all... they didn't even know if they could win.

For the first time, Ada felt the crushing weight of the responsibility on Emperor Maekar's shoulders.

Some, like Iris and Bloodmader, demanded war.

Others vehemently opposed it.

"And what about you, Miss Carmen?" Ada finally asked.

Carmen snorted.

"Me? I'm all for war."

Ada frowned.

"Why?"

"Because the timing is perfect."

Carmen crossed her arms, a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"The Ultras' Four Lords may still be alive, but their leader? He's already dead."

Ada immediately understood who she meant.

"The Human Demon... Dragoth."

Carmen nodded.

"Your father—Abraham Starlight—killed him years ago. He lost his life in the process... but taking Dragoth down was a devastating blow to them."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Even if a High-Ranking Demon has taken his place... I doubt he's worse than Dragoth."

She sighed.

"In the end, though... the decision rests in one man's hands."