

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 701[1,736 words]

Rael was mid-toast when the Reagent seal came through the doors.

The hall saw the gray livery before it saw the man. Four hundred people rose by inches him, it's him, the chairman — and the orchestra scrambled for its fanfare.

Then the room registered, in one long deflating rustle, that what had entered was a lawyer.

Mr. Harrow walked to the foot of the stage without being invited. He opened his case on a table a waiter surrendered to him and spoke at the volume of a man who had learned that quiet reading forces a room to do its own listening.

"By instruction of the chairman of the Reagent Group, received this evening. Notice of termination." He lifted a single page. "The engagement for the launch campaign of the Reagent Group's forthcoming product line is hereby cancelled. Whole and entire. Effective upon this reading."

The silence was total. Even the enchanted constellations seemed to slow.

Marta reached the stage's edge in four steps. "Cancelled? On what grounds? We are partners. The announcement was this week. The whole city—"

"Grounds." Harrow consulted nothing. He had the sentence ready. "This engagement existed for one reason. Our chairman's regard for Miss Febyella Steinmeyer, its sole awardee, and his confidence in her direction of the work." He let that sit for exactly one breath.

"The chairman asked her to run a two-hundred-million-dollar campaign like a professional. Her choice of the Rydell Advertising House as sole executor was, frankly, barely acceptable. There were older firms. Better ones. He tolerated it, because she chose it."

Harrow's eyes moved to the stage. "Then, this evening, before four hundred witnesses, your house removed Miss Steinmeyer and installed someone else."

"Our chairman does not accept the arrangement. He considers it a slap across the Reagent Group's face. We gave Febyella Steinmeyer this award because we believed in her. Your family played games with her name instead. The contract is cancelled."

The hall's whisper was no longer weather. It was surf.

Rael had gone the color of the tablecloths. But Rael had spent hours with that contract, and somewhere behind the panic an abacus was still working. Feby watched from the side doors-in

Alex's coat, unnoticed by nearly everyone — as her uncle found his rescue and lunged for it in front of the entire city.

"The penalty!" He came down the steps too fast, dignity abandoned. "The cancellation clause. I read it. Clause eleven. Any party cancelling the engagement pays twenty-five percent of the contract's full value."

He rounded on the hall, ruin turning to triumph in real time.

"Fifty million dollars. The Reagent Group cancels, the Reagent Group pays. To this house. Tonight of all nights, before all of you as witnesses—"

"Yes," said Mr. Harrow.

Rael stopped.

"The clause is exactly as you describe. Our chairman drafted it personally, and he has instructed me to say the Reagent Group honors its contracts to the letter. The full penalty of fifty million dollars will be paid without dispute or delay." Harrow drew out a second page, unhurried. "To the contracted party."

"The Rydell Advertising House—" Rael began.

"Is not, and has never been, party to this contract." Harrow held the page up. No one past the third table could possibly read it. The entire hall leaned in anyway.

"The award was made to Febyella Steinmeyer. In her own name and person. Sole awardee. Non-transferable. The designation of any firm was a courtesy of hers, revocable at her sole discretion. There is no house on this paper, sir. There is a person."

He turned and found Feby by the side doors as though he had known where she was all along, and inclined his head a precise degree.

"Miss Steinmeyer. You hold a hundred-million-dollar development fund from the Reagent Group. Return it in good faith, and the fifty-million-dollar penalty will be paid you the same day."

Four hundred faces swung from the lawyer to the girl in the borrowed coat, and the mathematics of the evening finished itself in the open air, at speed, aloud.

The Rydells had deposed the girl in front of the whole city. The award had answered only to the girl.

The house they had just crowned Rael chairman of held nothing — no campaign, no penalty, no Reagent. A corpse re-inherited, twice in one week.

And fifty million dollars had just walked out of the family's grasp and into the pocket of the granddaughter they had spent the evening burying. Placed there deliberately. By a chairman nobody had ever seen, who had written her name into the paper as though he had known this exact night was coming.

"One further item." Harrow repacked his case with the serenity of a man whose evening had gone precisely to schedule. "The launch campaign will be re-awarded tomorrow to another licensed firm. Any house may submit a proposal."

Around the hall, quiet smiles broke out among people who had spent years working inside advertising houses. Tomorrow, the biggest campaign in the union was open

season.

Harrow bowed to no one in particular and left the way he had come.

The hall detonated softly. Not into noise — into motion. Four hundred guests turning to each other at once, and above the murmur, audible because the family had forgotten the stage-tile was still live, Marta Rydell's voice, stripped of every register she owned:

"Rael. Get down from there."

They tried, of course. In front of everyone, because there was nowhere private left to try.

Marta crossed the floor with her hands extended and thirty years of graciousness burning off her like fog. "Febyella. Child. There has been a terrible misunderstanding. The announcement was premature. Of course you remain head

of the house. You have always been head of the house."

Always. The word almost made Feby laugh. Twenty minutes ago they had announced her resignation to the city, with her standing in the coatroom.

"You said I stepped down." Her voice was very quiet, and the hall quieted further to

hold it. "You said I asked to. Before four hundred witnesses, Grandmother. Let it stand."

"The campaign—"

"Is gone. You heard him. It followed me, and you threw me away, so it

left. There's nothing left in that house to chair." She drew Alex's coat closer When she spoke again was not to Marta at all but to the room in the clear carrying voice of a woman trained in projection by an advertising staff.

"For the record, since my word was so freely spent tonight. I never promised anyone the chairman. I sent an invitation and told my family I could only try. Everything else said from that stage was said about me, without me. You were all witnesses. Kindly remain so."

She turned to go. Adeline caught her sleeve — actually caught it, fingers twisting the fabric.

"Fifty million," her mother breathed. "Febyella. Sweetheart. Family."

And then they were all around her. Rael half-fallen from the stage, tie crooked, arithmetic bright in his eyes.

Leon abandoning his dead applause mid-hall to close the distance. Marta's hands finding her shoulders like a claim being staked.

"Ten million each," Rael said. Just like that. Out loud, in front of everyone. "That's fair. That's family. The cancellation came through this house — we're part of it whether you like it or not. We triggered the clause. Without tonight, there is no penalty. You owe us that."

"You owe us," Leon echoed, and had the nerve to smile. "Ten each. You still keep ten. That's generous, cousin."

Feby stood very still inside the borrowed coat.

They had taken her firm two hours ago. They had spent her name from a stage. They had just watched the largest campaign in the union - her campaign, the one she had bled for, the one that could have built her whole life - burn to the waterline because they could not wait one evening to bury her.

And their first words to her afterward were a bill.

Her eyes went hot. She shook her head, slow, and kept shaking it, and the first tear got loose before she could stop it.

Not for the money. For the family she thought there was.

She searched them

—

· grandmother, uncle, cousin, mother — for one flicker of the thing she had come here still hoping for, and found four people dividing fifty million dollars by five.

"You destroyed it," she said. Her voice cracked once and she let it. "The biggest chance I will ever be handed. Tonight. And all you can see is your cut of the wreckage."

"Febyella "Adeline started.

Feby looked down at her mother's hand on her sleeve until it removed itself.

"Family," she said, "is always on my side. I was told that in an office on Corvane Street." She looked around at them Marta, Rael, Leon, Adeline and there was no triumph anywhere in her face, which was, Alex thought, the thing the broadsheets would never manage to

print about tonight. Only the tiredness of a person finishing a very

long sum and having the total come

out exactly as feared.

"The invitations were beautiful, though," she said. "Gold ink. My firm did them. Send

the bill to the new chairman."

The tram home was nearly empty. The amber pulse of the rail ran ahead of them through the dark, patient as arithmetic.

"Fifty million dollars," Feby said, to the window. "After I return the hundred million

first. Which I never even touched."

"Mm," Alex said.

"He cancelled it the moment they touched me. Not the moment they took the campaign- they never had the campaign. The moment they touched me." Her breath fogged the glass and faded.

"He wrote my name into that

contract like a door only I could walk

through. Harrow said he drafted the clause personally. A man I have never met built me an escape route through my own family, months of law with advance. Tonight he spent fifty million dollars and the biggest campaign in the union to use it. And I don't even know what his voice sounds like."

She turned from the window.

"Why, Alex? People don't do that. Not for coffee girls. Not for strangers. There's no version of this where a sealed scion of Fenmarch watches over me like — like—"

She stopped. The word she had almost said hung between them, unsaid,

enormous.

Alex's mouth opened. Closed. He looked at her the way he had looked at her across the counter on Corvane Street, a hundred mornings, saying nothing. "Alex." Her heart was hammering now, and she didn't know when it had started. "You're the only man I know. And after I met you, nothing has ever felt the same. So

tell me the truth."

The tram hummed. The rail light pulsed amber across his face.

"Are you the chairman of the Reagent Group?"

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 702[1,554 words]

"Are you the chairman of the Reagent Group?"

The tram hummed. Amber rail light crossed his face - once, twice. Feby watched him the way she'd learned to watch her family: for the flicker. The skipped beat. The

seam.

Alex laughed.

Not a performed laugh. A real one, low and easy, and it reached his eyes — and that was what cracked her certainty.

Five years cataloguing liars, and not one of them had ever laughed like that.

"Feby." He turned to face her. "Three weeks ago I didn't legally exist. You fixed that. You, personally."

He drew out his identity tile, the battered gray one, and laid it flat on his palm. Nothing up my sleeve. "Issued twenty-two days ago. Provisional class. Guaranteed by the signature of one Febyella Steinmeyer, because no bank in this city would touch a man with no past. I can't open an account without your name under mine. I couldn't rent our flat. The chairman of the Reagent Group is a sealed registry, a vault, a hundred lawyers deep."

He tipped the tile toward her. "How does a chairman have no identity tile? You'd be looking at the first pauper in history to buy the biggest company in the union on a document his fiancée had to vouch for."

Put that way, her suspicion collapsed into what it was. Built on coincidence. Founded on nothing.

"I'm not the chairman," Alex said, gently.

The words came out smooth and whole, because he'd built them the way he built everything — out of true bricks. Every fact real. Only the total a lie.

Feby exhaled a breath she'd been holding since the banquet. "I'm sorry." She pressed her hands over her face and laughed, wet and unsteady.

"You must think I've gone mad. Everything bends around me lately, and you were the only fixed point I could accuse. Forget I said it. Please."

"Already have."

She leaned back and let the tram rock her, wrung out past questioning. So she didn't see it — he angled his face away, one small degree — the thing that crossed him and was gone.

Not relief. Something that cost more than relief.

She went to Reagent Tower the next morning with an envelope in her inner pocket. Early. Before her nerve could reconsider.

Beatrix received her at once. =

"Miss Steinmeyer." Beatrix's eyes found the envelope before they found her face. Her eyes always found the business first. "You look like a woman about to do something accounting will talk about for years."

Feby slid the envelope across the desk.

"The development fund. One hundred million, drawn to my name. It's whole - I never deposited it."

When the Rydell Advertising House staff needed back wages, she paid them from her own savings. Reagent's money wasn't for Rydell debts.

Beatrix opened the envelope. Verified the check. Same with the one she gave her last time. "I accepted the money."

She drew her pen and wrote. Unhurried strokes. The Reagent seal pressed into fresh wax. She turned the new check on the desk and slid it across with two fingers.

Fifty million dollars. Pay to Febyella Steinmeyer, her own name and person.

"The penalty, as read into the record last night. Return received in good faith; payment same day, as promised." A pause. "The chairman keeps his contracts to the letter, Miss Steinmeyer. It's his single most inconvenient quality."

Feby looked at the check. She didn't pick it up.

"I can't accept this."

"It isn't from me, so your objection is misaddressed. It's from the chairman. I'm merely the hand."

"Then tell the chairman—" She stopped. Gathered it. Laid it out flat, the voice of a woman getting through a confession before anyone could talk her out of it.

"Tell him the cancellation happened because of me. My family. My banquet. My name spent from a stage. I brought a circus into a two-hundred-million-dollar engagement and the engagement died of it. That's not his failure to compensate. That's mine to carry. The whole arrangement was unprofessional, and I let it be, because I wanted—"

Her jaw tightened. "Because I wanted things from those people that were never for sale. A professional would have kept her family a hundred miles from that contract. I didn't. So the penalty isn't owed to me. Not in any ledger that matters."

She pushed back the check. The way you return something borrowed.

"I have a post in this tower I haven't earned yet. That's already more than I know what to do with. I'd like to keep the job and skip the fortune, if it's all the same."

The silence stretched long enough for the rain to change its mind twice against the windows.

Beatrix Hargrove had spent twenty-two years watching people reach for money—elegantly, brutally, tearfully, through lawyers and through lovers. She had a complete taxonomy of the species.

She had no entry for this. Nobody refused money. Nobody ever had.

"I can't authorize a refusal," she said at last. "There's no procedure for it. I'll have to

put the question to the chairman himself." She reclaimed the check slowly. "Give me time, Miss Steinmeyer."

"Of course." At the door, Feby paused. "Miss Hargrove. Whoever he is — tell him thank you. For the door he built me. Even if I can't walk through this part of it."

When she'd gone, Beatrix sat with two checks and no taxonomy. Then she drew out her tile and began, for the first time in her career, a message she had no idea how to phrase.

Feby came out of Reagent Tower into thin noon sunlight, lighter by a hundred and fifty million dollars, feeling clean for the first time in a week.

They were waiting at the foot of the plaza steps. Right where the tower guards' eyes ended and the street began.

Rael and Leon. Unshaven, both — on Rydell men, a barometric reading. Rael's coat had been slept in. Leon saw her first, and his hand came up like a bailiff's.

"Forty million," Rael said, before she reached the pavement. No greeting. The velvet had burned off him overnight, and underneath was just teeth.

"Ten each — your grandmother, your mother, Leon, me. You keep ten. That was the family's position last night, it's the family's position now, and you are going to honor

it."

"Good morning, Uncle."

"Do you know what that banquet cost?" His voice cracked upward. "The Grand Aurelian is holding this family's name over a million-dollar bill. The full hall. The orchestra. Four hundred dinners for people who watched us butchered Unpaid Febyella, because there's nothing left to pay it with, and the manager is threatening courts by Friday. Your grandmother hasn't left her room. And you—" his finger found her "-you walked out of that hall with fifty million of Rydell blood money—"

"I don't have it."

"—and you will not stand there in a coat your dock-rat bought you and pretend— what?"

"I don't have the money." Slow. Even. The way you speak near a dog whose leash you can't see. "I returned it this morning. The fund and the penalty, both. I refused the fifty million. There's nothing to demand."

For a moment the street noise did all the talking.

Then Leon laughed — an ugly, disbelieving bark. "Returned it. Fifty million dollars. She returned it." He stepped closer, and in his eyes was something worse than contempt. Need.

"You think we're children? The whole city heard the lawyer. Same-day payment, to your name, the chairman keeps his contracts. There is no version of anyone on this earth handing back fifty million—"

"I did."

"You're lying." Rael's voice had gone

quiet, which was new, and worse.

"You've hidden it. Some account, some arrangement — that lawyer of yours that chairman of yours. You've been lying since the day yo

walked into our sitting room with that man, and now you'll tell me fifty million evaporated because of your conscience?"

He smiled with nothing in it. "Nobody is that clean, Febyella. Nobody."

"I am exactly that clean. It's the family disease. I got the recessive strain." She walked past them. Leon's hand twitched toward her sleeve and stopped there, on the plaza's edge, in view of the

tower - and she felt both their stares on her back the whole length of the street. Like weather about to change. "You'll hand it over," Rael called after her, past caring who heard. "One way or the other, girl. Family collects."

Rael Rydell stood in the noon light a long moment after she'd gone, finishing his arithmetic.

Then he walked to a public tile-booth — not his own tile; he'd learned that much

from a lifetime of contracts — and keyed a code he'd sworn, last time, never to use again.

The voice that answered didn't use

names. It never had. Not the first time either a quiet arrangement an alley, a lesson for a niece who needed one, back when the problem was small and the solution was four men and had gone wrong in ways nobody ever adequately explained to him.

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"It's me," Rael said. "The same commission as before. No-listen. Not like before.

Nothing polite this time. Double it. Ten men." He lowered his voice into the booth's warded hush.

"The girl has fifty million hidden somewhere and she's going to tell you where. I don't

care what condition her manners are in when she does. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere empty. Today."

A pause on the other end. A price, doubled to match the men.

"On delivery," Rael said. "Believe me. After today, the money's there."

He hung the receiver back on its hook with a steady hand, and went to lunch.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 703[1,444 words]

Across the city, Alex sat at the small table in his flat. His tea had gone cold. A magic book lay open in front of him.

All morning, he had been thinking about his decision. And every way he looked at it, the answer seemed right: he should leave her.

The engagement was only on paper. It was never real love.

And every day he stayed, he hurt her more. Or hurt himself for lying to her.

He had secretly paid 50 million dollars and arranged everything so she would be accepted and protected.

She didn't know. Last night on the tram, she almost guessed it. He lied to her face, with a smile and she believed him.

That scared him. He was becoming a good liar. He didn't want to become that kind of person.

So he made his list of reasons: She was safe now. She was rich. The contracts he wrote protected her. She didn't need him anymore. They were just strangers — a kind woman helped a stranger once, the stranger paid her back, and now everything

was even.

He repeated this to himself, again and again, alone in the flat — while her spare hairpin still sat on the windowsill, and the smell of her terrible cooking still hung in the walls.

By noon, he had almost stopped noticing how many times he needed to repeat it.

Tonight, he decided. He would cook dinner for her, for once. Then he would tell her he was leaving. Or maybe he wouldn't tell her at all—maybe he would just disappear after this last night together.

Everything was paid. Everything was done. It was time to go. After that, he would learn magic. It seemed interesting.

The tram was half-empty when Febyella boarded it, which she would remember later as the first wrong thing.

The 11:40 to the east district was never half-empty. It was always shoulders and someone's shopping bag against her knee.

Now there was room to sit, and she sat, and she was tired enough to be grateful instead of suspicious.

The second wrong thing was the smell. Sweet, faintly, like a florist's shop. She thought: someone's perfume.

She thought: I'll be home in twenty minutes.

She thought nothing after that, because the sleeping magic took her between one lamppost and the next, gentle as a hand closing a book.

She woke to rope.

That was the whole of it at first — rope at her wrists, rope at her ankles, the particular ache of arms drawn back too long.

Then the room assembled itself around the rope: bare boards, one lantern on a crate, shutters nailed over the windows. And the people.

She counted them the way you count stairs in the dark, needing the number to be smaller than it was. Ten. Standing in a loose ring, unhurried, the way people stand when they have done a thing many times before.

"Simple day for everyone," said the one by the lantern. Flat voice. Gloved hands. "Fifty million dollars. An account, a box number, a name at a bank. You say it, we check it, you go home to your supper."

"I returned it." Her voice came out smaller than she ordered it to. "This morning. To the Reagent Group. Ask anyone in that tower - the clerks saw me—"

The slap came without anger, which made it worse. A workman's stroke. Her head snapped sideways and copper arrived in her mouth like a bill.

"Wrong answer," the flat voice said, patiently. "The man paying for this room says you have it. Men paying for rooms are rarely wrong. So we'll go again. We've got all day and night, and this house has no neighbors, miss. Fifty million. Where."

Feby breathed against the cord.

"I don't have it," she said again, and set her jaw.

Alex had cooked.

Badly — the flat smelled of ambition and scorched onions — but the table was set for two, and folded under his own cup, where he could reach it when the moment came, was everything he'd rehearsed since Beatrix's call that morning, down to the first sentence.

Feby. Sit down. Beatrix tells me fifty million dollars walked back into the tower today, and it had your handwriting on it. Tell me why.

He had told Beatrix to hold the money. I'll speak with her first, he'd said, as if it were a small thing, as if his hands hadn't been cold on the tile.

So he waited.

At noon he set the pot back on the stove to keep warm.

At one he stopped pretending to read.

She was never late. She came home for lunch the way trams came; you could set bread by her.

At half past one he messaged her tile. Undelivered. Not unread. Undelivered. At two the grid returned the phrase it reserved for smashed tiles and the deep marshes: recipient outside the grid.

There is a specific silence that arrives in a room when a person's tile goes dark. He made the call. Beatrix answered at once. Beatrix always answered at once.

"When did she leave the tower."

A beat she heard it in his voice; he heard her hear it. "Nine. She returned both drafts and left at nine; I watched her cross the plaza myself. Chairman, what—"

"She never came home. Her tile is

off the grid not silent, off. Smashed, or out past the marsh line. Five hours, Beatrix." His voice stayed level the way a blade stays level "The watch-tiles. The plaza cameras. Every eye the building owns - I want them pulled, and I want them pulled an hour ago."

"I'll call building security."

He agreed to wait. It was the hardest sentence he'd said all day.

He learned, in the next twenty minutes, that waiting has a texture. It tastes like cold

tea. It sounds like a pot lid ticking on a stove nobody has turned off. He washed her cup twice.

The tile buzzed. He had it against his ear before the second pulse.

"Sir." Beatrix's voice had changed registers — careful now, the voice she used for bad numbers.

"The gate guard remembers her. She came out at nine, and two men were waiting at the plaza's edge. Family the guard knew the older one's face from the papers. Heracle. They spoke, and then all three of them walked out of frame together."

Alex stood very still. Under the cup on the table, the folded speech sat where it

would go on sitting, unread, for days.

"Send someone to the uncle," he said. "Someone good. Someone who asks questions for a living."

The man Beatrix sent did ask questions for a living, and he was very good, and that was the mistake.

His name went unrecorded in most cities. He wore a grey coat that made witnesses forget his height, and he carried a leather folder that opened to whatever credentials a doorman needed to see.

By three o'clock he was sitting in the uncle's receiving room — a room with too much gilt and too few books — asking mild, patient questions about a niece's whereabouts.

And Rael, watching from behind the long window of the study, understood exactly what he was looking at.

Not a constable. Constables came in pairs and wiped their boots.

This was private money, moving fast, less than a day after the girl vanished — which meant someone with reach already knew, and there was only one man in the city with that kind of reach and that particular reason to care.

Rael did not panic.

Men who paid for kidnappings in advance rarely did.

He gave the grey coat tea, gave him nothing else, showed him out with apologies —

and then stood at the window for a long moment, turning the situation over the way

a jeweler turns a stone, looking for the angle that caught light.

Rael made a call to the chief he knew.

The fiancé. The crate-boy nobody. The stranger who'd appeared out of the fog and attached himself to fifty million dollars' worth of heiress. Who lived alone with her in an unwatched flat.

He was dictating the report to the Knight's Bench before the grey coat had reached the end of the street.

The knights came at dusk.

Alex heard them before the knock — four sets of boots don't try to be quiet on old stairs — and when he opened the door the corridor was full of white tabards and lamplight on steel.

"Alex, no family name registered." The sergeant read from a writ without looking up. "You are detained on information laid this afternoon, concerning the abduction of the

lady Febyella—"

"Abduction - Treported her

missing-" But no. He hadn't. He'd

called Beatrix, not the Bench. He'd sent private men through private channels, quiet money moving in the dark and from the outside the realization arrived like ice water

down the spine - from the outside that looked exactly like a man cleaning up after himself.

"—and you will come with us now."

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 704[1,546 words]

They came for Alex at dawn. Six knights of the City Watch, a warrant tile glowing

official blue, and a broad-shouldered sergeant who read the charge loud enough for every neighbor on the stairwell to hear it.

"Alexander Leonhart. Provisional registrant. You are detained on suspicion of the abduction of Febyella Steinmeyer."

Alex knew those shoulders. One week ago they had marched Feby out of a Knight Station lobby, her heels scraping tile, while an inspector buried the alley case behind them. Now the same man stood on his doorstep, performing justice for an audience.

Near the back stood Dax - the young knight who had biometricked Alex into existence on his first night in this world. Dax stared at the floor. He couldn't look at the man he'd given a name to. He knew what this was.

For one second, something moved behind Alex's eyes. The sergeant's hand drifted toward his baton. Then it was gone — filed, shelved — and what remained was a man in yesterday's coat studying six armed knights with the mild attention of an auditor.

Of course, Alex thought. Of course.

These men weren't an obstacle. They were a lead.

"May I put on my boots?"

The sergeant blinked, thrown by the tone. Nodded. Alex crouched by the door, laced one boot slow, and with his body shielding his hands, pressed four words into his tile. Sent them a half-second before a corporal snatched it away.

Knight Office. Framed. Come.

Somewhere in this city, Feby was locked in the dark, waiting for him — and he was letting six men put him in irons. His jaw ached from holding still. He held still anyway.

He stood. Offered his wrists. Let them take him — quiet, cooperative, memorizing each face on the way down the stairs the way other men memorize a debt.

The last time knights marched him into a station, he'd been nameless. No tile. No coin. Not one soul on the continent to answer for him.

That was weeks ago.

He was almost looking forward to the difference.

The interrogation room at the central Knight Office was a grander cousin of the one on Third Street. Same scarred table. Same lantern angled into the prisoner's eyes. Same smell of old fear soaked into stone.

But they didn't give him to duty-knights this time. They gave him to Inspector Thackeray.

She came in with a folder she never intended to open and sat down with the briskness of a woman who'd decided how this ended before the door closed. And Alex, watching her square her papers, felt the last piece of the week click into place.

The alley case. Reviewed and closed in a day. It's a Tuesday, Miss Steinmeyer. He'd stood on that pavement wondering who inside the Knights wanted it buried.

He'd stopped wondering.

"Let me save us a long day," Thackeray said, folding her hands. "A woman is missing. You're a ghost with a provisional tile who crawled out of an alley and attached himself to her rooms, her signature, her rising fortune. This morning she came into fifty million in front of the whole city. Tonight she vanished. Every court in the Arcanum State could draw this picture blind."

She leaned in, warm as a salesman. "So here's the only kindness you get today. Sign a confession - abduction, motive of gain — and I speak to the magistrate myself. Cooperation. Provisional status. Twenty years. You'd walk out younger than I am now."

"And if I don't sign?"

"Abduction with harm is a hanging offense." She said it comfortably, laying her best card face-up. "And it will be with harm by the time it reaches a courtroom. Evidence ripens in our cellars, Leonhart. You'll hang before winter."

"I didn't take her." His voice stayed level. "I've never harmed her. I was home from morning on."

"Stop lying." The sergeant, behind his shoulder.

"You know I didn't take her." He read her face the way he'd once read Rydell

contract clauses — line by line, striking the false ones. "Because you know who did. Five men in an alley. A paymaster's name in a folder. You slid that folder back across the counter and called it a Tuesday."

Thackeray's folded hands tightened.

"Shut your mouth." The briskness was gone. What was left was just the cellar. "You'll sign, or you'll die in this building. Provisionals die in this building all the time, Leonhart. No family. No questions. No one is coming for you."

Alex straightened in his chair. And smiled.

"I will not sign it."

Thackeray jerked her chin at the guards. "Teach this bastard a lesson."

Two men lunged. Alex didn't flinch. Didn't even blink. He sat perfectly still and let the first punch fly straight at his jaw.

The knuckles landed — and the room heard a wet, sickening crunch. Not from Alex. The attacker's fist shattered against his skin, every bone splintering at once. The man dropped, howling, cradling a hand that no longer had a shape.

The second guard swung an iron baton. The weapon rebounded mid-strike, like hitting a fortress wall, and whipped back into his own face. His nose broke with a sound like snapping kindling.

Thackeray scrambled up, chair screeching, and drew her wand. It flared once — then the magic backfired, tore the focus stick from her grip, and drove it straight into the bridge of her nose. She hit the wall, blood sheeting down her chin, staring at Alex the way people stare at a fire that's noticed them.

No one is coming for you, she'd said.

Outside, heavy boots sprinted down the corridor - far too many, far too fast, for a knight's quarters at this hour.

At the front desk, a cold, flat voice gave an order. It never rose. It never needed saying twice. Doors opened in sequence, each one more senior than the last, and then the interrogation room's lock turned from the outside - which was not a thing interrogation room locks did.

Beatrix Hargrove walked in with two Reagent lawyers, a records-clerk carrying a case of sealed tiles, and — half a step behind her, in a dress coat he'd clearly thrown on in a corridor - the Knight-Commander of New Avalon himself.

Beatrix's eyes found Alex first. Found the guard's ruined hand. Found the blood on the inspector's face. Something crossed her expression that made Thackeray step back from the table before a single word was spoken.

"Commander, Beatrix didn't turn

around. "The Reagent Group employs Febyella Steinmeyer as Head Supervisor of its new product division. Her abduction was reported to your office at two o'clock today, with a formal request for the plaza, watch-tile records. Your office replied that the records were lost. Tonight, instead of a search, you arrested her fiancé - on an anonymous tip, I'm told. The one man in this city who spent the night trying to make your knights do their jobs."

She set a single tile on the scarred table. It lit with the Reagent seal.

"The chairman has taken personal interest. He is watching how this is handled — minute by minute. And I'm instructed to remind you, in whatever spirit you find most motivating, that half the grid your watch-lanterns run on is Reagent tile. Under contracts. Which come up for renewal."

The Commander went the gray of his own coat. "Madam Hargrove, I assure you, the moment the report—"

"The records, Commander. Three sets. Lost in one day, from one afternoon." Her voice never rose. It narrowed, like water finding a crack. "Records don't lose themselves in triplicate. Someone signed them out. Find the seal, and you find the person your office should have arrested tonight."

The Commander turned — and the requisition ledger was already coming through the door.

It was carried by a rumpled desk sergeant from Third Street named Walsh, who'd been summoned at dawn to certify the losses, had spent two hours refusing to certify anything, and now held the open ledger out to his Commander with the weary satisfaction of a man whose stubbornness had finally found employment. A Reagent lawyer's finger came down under the line.

The seal on all three withdrawals was Inspector Thackeray's.

What followed had a terrible municipal efficiency. Thackeray went from inspector to suspect in the time it took the Commander to cross the room.

And the broad-shouldered sergeant broke before the cell door even closed — he'd always been the boots, never the spine.

"Rael Rydell," the sergeant said. "He's

-

-

he

had us since the inspector runs it, she handles the paper, I just pays quarterly, has for years. Little things Licenses. A complaint gone missing. The alley thing, she closed that one herself." His voice cracked toward a whine. "We didn't know he'd actually take the girl. We thought it was family business. He said it was family business."

Beatrix stood listening with her arms folded, and the temperature around her dropped a degree per sentence.

"Commander, The recording clicked

off. "Two things happen in the next hour, and the Reagent Group's entire attention rests on both. First - Rael Rydell in custody, now. Second" her gaze went through the cell bars at Thackeray, and there was nothing corporate left in it "-every knight on that man's payroll faces the tribunal. The inspector first. Publicly. If even one of them is quietly retired to the countryside, the chairman will want to know why. And Commander - you do not want the chairman asking you why."

"Before midnight," the Commander said.

And meant it with his whole career.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 705[1,386 words]

The knock came at nine, and it wasn't a knock. It was the front doors of Rydell House hitting the wall hard enough to crack a hinge.

Rael was in the study with the ledgers. He heard boots on the entry marble- eight men, maybe ten, moving in the drilled rhythm that meant warrant. Four seconds to decide who he was going to be.

He chose grief.

By the time the first knight reached the study door, he was on his feet, dressing gown half-tied, face already arranged. "What in the name of the Nine—" He let his voice crack. "Is it Febyella? Have you found her? Tell me you've found her."

"Rael Rydell." The Commander himself, gauntlets on, holding a folded warrant like something he didn't want to touch. "You're under arrest."

"Arrest." He said the word like it was foreign to him. Behind the knights, his mother appeared in her nightclothes, one hand pressed to the wall beneath the portraits - four generations of Rydells in oil and gilt, all of them watching. "My niece is missing, Commander. I reported it. My sister's only child. And you come into my mother's house in the middle of the night like we're common—"

"Turn around, please."

"I want my lawyer. I want your superior. I want the name of every man in this hall, because when the Circuit hears how the Order treats a grieving family-" The irons closed on his wrists. He made himself sob, once, ragged, perfectly pitched. "Mother. Send for Advocate Hesh. It's a mistake."

His mother said nothing at all.

They walked him out through the entry hall and down the front steps, and he kept the performance going—the shaking shoulders, the wounded dignity — and it was good. Very good. It might have carried him all the way to a warm cell and a warmer lawyer.

At the foot of the stairs, he stopped. "I want to speak with Inspector Thackeray."

The knight looked down at him. "She and her people have been arrested."

Behind Rael's eyes, the cold engine that ran the Rydell fortune fired once. It returned a single answer: run.

He wrenched sideways, tore free, and bolted - dressing gown flying, bare feet slapping marble. Three steps. Five. Seven.

He didn't make ten.

The knights caught him at the edge of the stairs. A gauntleted fist found the small of his back, and something in him cracked. A knee took his left leg. The bone gave and the leg folded the wrong way. An armored boot came down on the right knee from behind, and then he had no legs at all.

He fell face-first, and they weren't finished. A boot drove his head into the edge of the top step. Once. Twice. Blood ran in a dark rope across the pale marble.

Four seconds. That was all it took.

From somewhere deep in the house, his mother screamed — raw, endless. She would hear those two stomps for the rest of her life.

The official report would call it forcible restraint of a fleeing suspect on stairs.

The broken thing on the marble said something else.

The interview room was private. The Commander, his own career already smoking behind him, had dispensed with several regulations at once. No scribe. No paperwork. Just Rael, grey-white on a stretcher with his legs splinted and the healer's draught wearing thin — and two men across from him, asking questions that officially did not exist.

"I have nothing to say." His teeth were chattering. He made them stop. "Lawyer. Healer. In that order. Or the other order. Now."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know what you're "

"Where is Febyella?"

"I am her uncle. I have been searching for her." Sweat beaded on his forehead. "You crippled a grieving man on his own steps. You should be hunting the kidnapper. Not me."

For two hours, the only sounds were the drip of water from a rag, the creak of the stretcher, and his ragged breathing. He didn't scream anymore. He just lay there, eyes half-lidded, calculating.

Then one of the knights set a small black recorder-tile on the scarred table. Click.

"Play it," the older knight said.

A hiss, then the sergeant's voice — tired, defeated, almost bored. East desk took their cut every quarter. Standard split. Thackeray signed off personally on the seventh. The girl was just another package.

A thick folder landed beside the tile. Thackeray's blood-red seal glared from the cover like a fresh wound.

Rael's eyes locked on it. His broken lips twitched. His gaze went from the seal to the knights and back again, and his jaw worked on nothing. Every wall he'd built, and the Watch had been standing inside them the whole time.

The younger knight leaned in. "Still think you've got something to bargain with, Rydell?"

His chest rose. Fell. A long, wheezing breath left him, and when he finally spoke, the voice belonged to a man twice his age.

"Fine." He swallowed blood. "Fine. Yes. I hired them. Ten men. Same broker as the alley job. I'll give you the code." His head lolled. His eyes found the ceiling beams. "I told them to hold her. Just hold her until she gave up the money. Nobody was supposed to "

The sentence stopped. Everyone in the room saw the next word coming. Everyone watched him swallow it whole.

A single tear slid from his good eye. Pain or rage - impossible to say. "Nobody was supposed to touch her. Not like that."

He wet his lips. "It was my commission. Mine alone. My mother knew nothing." And then the merchant surfaced one last time, dead-eyed, still calculating on two shattered legs. "Now get me a healer. And my lawyer."

The tile recorded all of it. Seal, timestamp, witnesses.

The Commander exhaled for the first time in six hours. "The broker code. You'll call

it now, supervised. You'll order her release — immediate, unharmed. If she walks out of wherever she is on her own two feet, the magistrate hears about your cooperation."

They brought the booth-tile to the stretcher. Rael keyed the code with a steady hand.

Alex, silent against the wall through all of it, noted the steadiness. Filed it. A man with nothing left doesn't have steady hands.

The flat voice answered on the second pulse.

"It's me," Rael said. "Listen carefully. The situation has changed. New instructions regarding the girl. Follow them exactly."

"Go."

And Rael Rydell looked up from the stretcher -past the lawyers, straight at the Commander — and smiled with all the blood gone from his face and nothing left in it but the last piece on his board.

"My freedom for her life. I'm in Watch custody. Until I walk out of this building-released, cleared, in writing she stays where she is. If anyone comes near that house if I'm charged, if I'm even moved to another cell: kill her." His eyes never left Alex. "Confirm."

"Confirmed," said the flat voice. The line closed.

The room detonated. The Commander shouting. A lawyer lunging for the tile. The recorder still burning uselessly on. And through all of it, Rael lay back on his shattered legs and his recorded confession and laughed — thin, wheezing, genuinely relieved.

"You see it now." He said it to the ceiling, to the room, to the one man in it who hadn't moved. "You can't touch me. Convict me, she dies. Hold me, she dies. The only door out of this for your precious girl is the one that opens for me first. The laugh trailed into a wet cough. "So somebody fetch the magistrate, and

let's discuss my release like reasonable men. I know how this city works. I've been paying for it for years."

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The Commander was already shouting about tracing the booth-pulse, about cordons, about the eastern marshes. The lawyers were shouting about hostage protocols. The room filled with the noise of an institution discovering it had been checkmated by a man on a stretcher.

The apartment was dark when Beatrix brought the report.

"It's a dead end," she said to Alex.

"Not yet." Alex didn't look up. "The Rydell house. His daughter. His son. His mother.

Can your people take them?"

Beatrix went still.

"Take them. Hold them. Torture them. Make it hurt. Then send word to Rydell's cell

— and we'll see if he wants to die together." A pause, quiet as a ledger closing. "I'll pay whatever it costs."

The silence stretched. Then: "The Regent Group keeps people for dirty problems. I'll move them now."

"Thank you," Alex said, like a man ordering dinner.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 706[1,149 words]

The Commander walked Rael Rydell out of the Knight Office himself. Dawn light cut across the steps. Six knights formed a corridor of white tabards. Rael's legs were still splinted. He moved like a man who had already won.

"We will see you home," the Commander said.

Rael smiled with blood still dried in the corner of his mouth. "You should. And Febyella will be returned tomorrow morning. Clean. Unharmmed. As agreed."

The Commander did not answer. He only nodded to the waiting flyer. When the vehicle lifted and cleared the courtyard wall, the Commander turned, tile already at his ear.

"I have sent him home. Exactly as instructed."

Beatrix's voice came back flat. "Thank you. We take it from here."

Rael laughed the entire flight. The sound bounced off the flyer's glass. Fifty million. That was the number. She would hand it over, or the girl stayed buried.

He had the city by the throat again. The knights had folded. The chairman's people had folded. Everyone folded eventually.

The flyer set down on the front drive of Rydell House. Rael stepped out into the dark. No lights burned in the windows. He limped up the steps, still smiling.

"Mother. Leon. Daughter. Why is no one welcoming me?"

Two shapes peeled from the shadows on either side of the door. Hard hands locked around his upper arms. The grip was professional-no wasted force, no room to twist.

A low voice spoke near his left ear. "Tell us where you put Febyella Steinmeyer. Talk now and you walk away with only bruises."

Rael's smile died. "Who are you? You think this works? Touch me and she dies. My men have orders. One wrong move and the girl stops breathing. You understand that?"

The bigger of the two men answered without heat. "Fine. Silence works too. Talking would only make the next part easier for you."

"I will never-"

A third man stepped in from the dark and pressed a strip of heavy tape across Rael's mouth in one clean motion. The adhesive burned. Rael tried to shout. Only a muffled animal sound came out.

They dragged him through the front hall and into the living room.

The lights were already on.

Marta Rydell sat in a high-backed wooden chair. Leon sat in the one beside her. A young woman-Rael's daughter-occupied the third. Thick tape bound their wrists to the armrests, their ankles to the legs, their chests to the backs. Their eyes were wide and wet. None of them spoke when Rael was forced to his knees in the center of the carpet.

The big man stood in front of the three chairs and addressed the room as if delivering a formal report.

"This man kidnapped Febyella Steinmeyer. He refuses to say where she is. He thinks that makes him clever."

He snapped his fingers once.

Three more men stepped out from behind the chairs. Each carried a heavy iron nail and a short-handled hammer. They worked without conversation.

One nail was set against the soft underside of Marta's right forearm, just above the wrist where the tape left a thin strip of skin. The hammer rose and fell.

The sound was wet and final.

Marta's scream tore through the tape on her own mouth. Leon's body jerked hard enough to rock the chair. The daughter's eyes rolled white.

"Father—please—just tell them!" Leon's voice cracked on the second word. "Tell them where she is!"

Rael stared. The tape over his mouth turned every protest into a strangled grunt. He lunged against the hands holding him. They did not move.

The big man said, "Continue."

The second nail went into Leon's прав right arm. The third into the daughter's Three screams braided together and filled the high ceiling. Blood ran in thin lines down the wood and dripped onto the carpet that had once been cleaned for four hundred guests.

Rael's vision tunneled. He could not look away from his mother's face. The tape turned her words into wet noise, but her eyes were clear. They begged.

The men did not pause. They moved to the left arms. Three more nails. Three more hammers. The sound of iron driving into wood and bone was smaller the second time, because the screaming was louder.

When the last nail was seated, the big man nodded toward a side table. One of his people picked up a set of heavy pliers.

"Fingernails next. All of them. Start altogether."

Marta's voice finally broke free of the tape in ragged pieces. "Rael—please—I raised you-tell them-tell them-"

Leon was crying openly now, the way a grown man cries when the last door closes. "Father, they're going to take every nail. Just say the address. Just one street. Please."

The daughter's words came out high and broken. "Father-please-I don't want this -make it stop-"

The pliers closed on the first
fingernail. The wet crack that
followed was quiet compared with
the sound that left Marta's throat,
One by one the nails ca
free

Blood welled and ran. The men
worked methodically, left to right, no hurry. By the time they finished their hands, the carpet under their chair was dark.

They started on Leon.

Rael's body shook so hard the men holding him had to tighten their grip. He made desperate noises against the tape. His eyes found the big man's face and stayed there, begging.

The big man watched him for a long moment. Then he smiled without warmth.

"Ah. You understand now."

He gestured. The two men forced Rael's arms straight out. Fresh nails appeared. The first was set against the soft flesh of his right forearm. The hammer rose.

Rael's muffled scream was different from the others. Higher. Rawer.

The second nail followed. Then the pliers came for his own fingernails. One. Two Three. The pain arrived in clean, separate waves. Each larger than the last. Blood ran down sleeves eves of

his wrist and soaked than in

the dressing gown he had worn out of the Knight Office only an hour earlier.

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When the last fingernail tore free, Rael's eyes were streaming. He stared at the big

man and made the only sound the tape allowed a broken, continuous moan that shaped itself into words only he could hear.

I will tell you. I will tell you where she is. Just stop.

The big man crouched so their faces were level. He peeled the tape from Rael's

mouth in one slow pull. Skin came with it.

Rael's voice was wrecked. "I will tell you. The house—east of the marsh line—the

old mill road-third turning-I will give you the exact—"

The big man put a finger to Rael's lips.

"We don't care where Febyella is."

Rael blinked. Blood ran into his eye.

"We were never here for the location," the man continued. "We are here to take you

apart. All of you. Until there is nothing left that remembers how to scream."

He stood and nodded to the man with the pliers.

"Teeth next. One by one. Until the set is empty."

The first molar came free with a sound like wet wood splitting. Rael's body arched.

The scream that left him had no words left in it at all.

In the high chairs, three people watched and could not look away.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 707[1,896 words]

The marsh road ended a mile short of the farmhouse. Alex walked the rest alone.

It was three in the morning. Still full dark. No moon. Only the weak glow of a few lanterns from the house itself. He walked straight down the middle of the causeway in his old street coat, hands loose at his sides. Anyone looking could see him coming from a long way off.

Six Reagent security men waited back where the road ended. Their orders were clear and hard: nobody follows, nobody circles, nobody even stands up until Alex signals or the sun comes up. Whichever comes first.

Rael's last order had been exact. If anyone came near that house — kill her. A group of men would get her killed. A raid would get her killed. Knights on the road would get her killed.

But one man, alone, unarmed, walking up the open road in the dark like he had simply gotten lost that was different. That was a visitor.

They saw him from far away, just like he wanted. By the time he reached the yard, the farmhouse had already changed. Two men stood on the porch with iron-tipped staves. Three more drifted out to the sides. The rest stayed behind the boarded windows. Professional spacing. Dockyard muscle mixed with two men who looked better than muscle.

The flat-voiced man came out last, slow and calm. He looked Alex up and down the way a man prices a pair of used boots.

"Private property, get out form this place."

"I know," Alex said. "I'm here about your wages."

That hit them. Nothing moved, but the air changed. Ten hired men who had spent a day and a night waiting for money that never came.

"Your boss is already in a Watch cell," Alex said quietly, stopping at the center of the yard. He lifted both empty hands, turning slowly so every armed man could see. "Legs broken. Arms broken. Face caved in. His full confession is recorded, sealed, and timed.

The fortune he promised you? It was never his. He's been living off his niece's inheritance for four years, and that well ran dry months ago.

You're not kidnappers anymore. You're now accomplices in a planned execution. Capital crimes. Hanging offenses for every last one of you."

He let the words sit for one breath.

"Or I pay you double his price, in bearer notes, now. By morning you are ten men who were never here. That's the offer."

The flat-voiced man studied him for a long time. Behind the boards someone shifted. A floorboard creaked.

"Double," the man said. "Carried by one skinny fellow in a secondhand coat, walking alone into a house with ten of us." He stepped down one porch step.

"Here's my counter-offer," the man drawled. "We relieve you of those notes immediately. We keep the girl, because leverage is leverage. And we keep you as well-someone who knows this much about our client's cell could be very useful." He offered a smile that only moved the lower half of his face. "You miscalculated." "No," Alex said, unflinching. "You did. Because the only choice you have left is which way you'd prefer to die."

The first stave came at his head. Alex was already gone. His palm touched the man's shoulder as he passed. The man sat down hard in the mud and stayed there, staring at his own legs like they belonged to someone else. Bone had cracked. He could not stand.

The second and third men came together, trained, coordinated. Alex went through the space between them like smoke. One folded across the water trough with a wet crack of ribs. The other slammed into the porch rail hard enough to splinter wood and leave blood on the boards. Neither of them was sure afterward what had hit them or where.

"Too weak," Alex said. Not angry. Just measuring them, like a foreman checking bad wood.

The two better men came off the flanks. One of them was a mage. Alex felt the mana gather before the man's hands finished the sigil — a hard, bright coil of force meant to break bones from twenty feet away. This was the moment the men behind the boarded windows would argue about for the rest of their lives, because Alex did not dodge it.

He put out his hand and took it.

The bolt hit his palm and died. The light drained out of it like water into dry sand. For half a second the whole yard could see the power running the wrong way — out of the spell, out of the air, out of the mage, into the still man in the secondhand coat.

Out of nowhere, a flying sword appeared— a streak of lethal silver. It punched through the mage's chest with a wet crunch and drove him violently backward, nailing him to the wall. The sword vibrated there, holding him upright like a macabre banner.

The rest went the way

math goes.

When Alex stepped onto the porch, the yard was deathly quiet. A battlefield of broken men littered the ground. Ribs shattered. Shoulders popped out of joint. One man's leg was bent backward at the knee. Dark blood pooled in the mud. It was impossible to tell who was still breathing and who had already crossed over.

The flat-voiced man had backed into the doorway with a knife out. His calm was finally cracking.

"Stop — stop there. She's inside. One more step and I—" The man didn't even finish his sentence before he dropped dead on the floor.

A few witnesses wasted no time. They sprinted for the back door. One yelled as he ran,

"She's all yours! We are not getting paid to die! Take her — no double pay needed!"

Some were intelligent enough to realize the man they were facing was no ordinary opponent.

Alex didn't bother chasing the runners. Instead, he called the Regent Group's security team to assist Febyella.

He still had to keep his distance from her.

Feby heard the yard go quiet — heard it end, sound by sound, in ninety impossible seconds — and sat in the silence after it bargaining with a hope so dangerous she would not let it finish forming.

Boots came up the porch steps. Many boots, orderly, unhurried. The kitchen door opened.

The hope finished forming anyway — and then broke apart into confusion, because the doorway was not filled with anyone she knew.

Men in Reagent gray. Four of them, then six, moving through the wrecked house with the drilled economy of a unit that had cleared rooms before, and at their head a broad, unhurried man whose badge she had seen once across a tower lobby, on the day a security chief slapped a Thorne and threw three Rydells onto the marble.

"Miss Steinmeyer." Reeve crouched to her eye level before he touched anything, and held up his badge where she could read it. "Reagent Group security. We've come to take you home."

Her mouth worked. A night and a day of eleven words, and now none at all. "Why—" she managed. "How did you — why would the Reagent Group—"

"You're the Head Supervisor of the Reagent Group, miss." Reeve said it as though it explained gravity, and began on the cords with a folding knife, gentle and exact. "The Group protects its people. Standing order, from the very top: any Reagent employee in danger gets everything the Group has. You've had it since the hour you went missing - you just couldn't see it from in here."

The cords gave. Hands that were not the hands she had been half-dreaming of caught her wrists before they fell, and a healer in gray was already there with a warm-light tile, tilting her chin with professional tenderness, hissing softly at the left side of her face.

They wrapped her in a blanket — Reagent gray, clean, smelling of nothing — and it settled on her shoulders where, some distant part of her noted, a street-rack coat had learned to live, and the wrongness of that was the first thing that made her eyes sting.

They walked her out through the house. Through the yard.

She stopped walking in the middle of it.

The lanterns showed her the shapes in the mud, arranged the way a storm arranges

things. Men who did not move. Men who moved and wished they didn't.

Something pinned upright against the wall that she looked at for exactly half a second and then never looked at again for the rest of her life.

"Your men did this," she said.

"No, miss." Reeve's voice didn't change. "It was finished before we arrived. We were held at the road until the signal came."

"Held by whom? Signaled by whom?" She turned to look at him. "Someone walked

in here first. Alone. Who?"

"Whoever it was," he said, "they left you the easy part of the night, miss. Flyer's waiting. Healer says you fly lying down."

They carried her down the causeway on a stretcher she kept insisting she didn't need. And once — only once turning her head against the wind she thought she saw, far out along, the black edge of the marsh where the grid died, a single figure walking the other way, coat moving, hands in pockets, unhurried, as though the night belonged to him and he was merely letting it operate.

She blinked, and the marsh was empty.

By the time the flyer lifted, she had filed it — with everything else, in the drawer that no longer closed properly — and slept.

At Rydell House, the healers arrived one hour after the hammers stopped.

They were the best in the Arcanum

State the kind whose waiting lists

—

-

ran to seasons, collected from their beds by polite men in gray with unlimited letters of credit and they. worked through the night on four people taped to furniture, because the instructions were précise: alive, whole, presentable. Nails drawn and wounds closed without scars.

Bones knit. Fingernails regrown with a salve that cost more per jar than the carpet it dripped on. Rael's mouth rebuilt tooth by tooth by a grafting-mage who asked no questions because he had been paid, separately and generously, not to have any.

By morning there was no evidence on any of the four bodies that the night had ever happened.

The healers could close the skin. They could not close the night.

Marta's hands, perfect and unmarked, never stopped their small tremor again; she

wore gloves indoors for the rest of her life. Leon flinched at hammers, at carpenters, at applause. Wilhelmina stopped speaking above a murmur.

And Rael — Rael woke every night at the hour the pliers had started, in whatever room they kept him in, for as long as they kept him anywhere.

Before the gray men left, the big one stood the four of them in a row in the ruined

living room — healed, trembling, immaculate — and delivered the terms in the voice of a clerk reading office hours.

"You are alive because it is useful. You will stay alive under one condition. Each of you will seek out Febyella Steinmeyer, and each of you will obtain her forgiveness freely given, in her own words."

"All four. If even one of you fails, all of you die. If any of you flees the city, all of you die. If any of you speaks of tonight, to the Watch, to a healer, to a priest, to a pillow

— all of you die, and it will take longer than tonight did. The Reagent Group will make certain of it."

He put on his hat. "The Group thanks you for your cooperation."

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 708[1,243 words]

The knock came the day after the ultimatum — soft, uncertain, the kind Feby almost mistook for pipes settling in the walls.

She opened the door expecting a healer's follow-up, maybe a Reagent courier. Instead: her grandmother, her mother, Leon, and Wilhelmina, dressed too plain for any of them, holding a single shoebox tied with string between them like something they'd rehearsed holding.

Nobody spoke. Marta's gloved hands trembled at her sides. Leon's eyes wouldn't land anywhere. Wilhelmina hung a half-step behind the others, smaller than Feby remembered.

"Febyella." Marta's voice had none of the banquet stage left in it. "May we come in? Just to speak. We won't stay."

Feby's hand found the doorframe. She thought, seriously, about shutting it in their faces.

Behind her, Alex stood three steps into the kitchen, a cup halfway to his mouth, watching her decide — saying nothing, because this wasn't a choice anyone got to make for her twice.

She stepped aside.

They crowded onto the small settee, too many bodies for the room. Adeline set the shoebox on the table and untied the string with fingers that wouldn't stay still.

"I found these clearing out the study." Her voice cracked. "I didn't know we still had them."

Photographs. Dozens, loose, edges gone soft with handling. A round-faced girl, maybe four, asleep against a man's shoulder - her father, young, laughing at something out of frame.

The same girl older, gap-toothed, a paper crown sliding off her head. Marta, decades younger, crouched at a garden's edge, that same small hand caught in hers.

"You don't remember the garden." Something old crept into Marta's voice, something that predated the banquet, the settee, the four locked years. "You were three. You'd bury your father's cufflinks in the flowerbed and cry when we couldn't find them. He indulged you terribly. We all did, then."

"I remember none of this." But Feby had already picked up the photograph. Her thumb had already found its edge — the careful way you hold something you don't want to admit matters.

"You were the whole house's favorite once." Adeline's voice broke around it.

"Before everything went the way it went. I know you don't believe that. Some days I hardly believe it myself, looking at what we became. But it's true. There was a version of us that loved you plainly - before your father died and the money got tight and everyone got frightened and ugly about it."

Her hand pressed to her mouth. "I've spent days trying to find the day we stopped being that family. I can't find it. It just thinned. Like something left out too long."

"Nothing truly terrible ever happened to you here." Marta's certainty was the worst part — that old register bleeding back in even now.

"You always had a roof. Food on the table. We were hard on you, God knows we were hard on you, but children survive hard. What almost killed you was a stranger with a hammer. Not this family. Don't let one week erase twenty-two years of a home, Febyella. We're not monsters. We were only ever small."

It wasn't entirely true, and Feby could have built the counter-evidence herself, one photograph at a time: herself at nine, sitting on the floor at family dinners because nobody thought to add a chair.

Herself at fifteen, told by this same grandmother that she ate too much for a girl who contributed nothing.

Four years of grief flattened, by this telling, into unfortunate weather instead of what it was a design.

Her uncle had ordered her kidnapping for the money. By the time the ransom became a real problem, the rest of the family had already made themselves scarce.

But she was also, undeniably, the girl in the garden. Laughing. Her hand in her grandmother's.

Leon spoke first, voice completely raw. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know what my father did to you. It's unforgivable. He should rot in prison for this. No one does that to another person. Febyella, please — forgive us. None of us knew he was this kind of monster."

Wilhelmina didn't manage words at all. She just cried — silent, flat, the exhausted crying of someone who'd already cried everything she had and was doing it again because grief doesn't ask permission. It hit Feby harder than every rehearsed sentence combined.

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Feby looked around the room - her mother, gray with grief that looked, unbearably, real; her grandmother gloved hands folded like a woman at her own funeral; Leon, hollowed out;

Wilhelmina, wrecked and silent- and felt the old argument rise one final time, clean and true they had built this evening to get something from her, the way they'd built every evening for four years.

"Febyella, we only ask that you forgive us." Marta's voice trembled with something that might have been sincerity. "You may not be able to forgive your uncle Rael - but we made no mistakes here. Please, forgive us."

Adeline reached for her hand. "Febyella, you've always been the strong one. Please -forgive people as weak as us."

"I forgive—" Feby started, tears finally breaking loose.

Alex's voice cut through the room before she could finish. "Before you hand over your forgiveness, don't you think it's time to end four years of this? Ask them to return what's rightfully yours."

Four heads snapped toward him. If looks could kill, Alex would have died a dozen times over in that instant.

He shrugged, unbothered. "That's your call to make, Febyella. I'm only giving advice."

Something in Feby steadied. She nodded slowly. "Alex is right. I want what my father left me."

"But," Marta said, too quickly, "there's nothing left."

"Then let's start with honesty." Alex pulled a folded document from his jacket. "Febyella already has the paperwork from the Reagent Group. It states clearly that she's owed roughly thirty-five million dollars."

All four faces drained of color.

"That money — Rael took it," Marta said. "He made terrible investments, wasted everything. We don't know anything about it. It was all him."

"Really?" Alex arched an eyebrow. "Because this document states that Rael received ten million. You and Adeline received ten million each. Leon and Wilhelmina received two and a half million apiece. Febyella — the actual inheritor - received nothing."

The four of them went white.

They understood, all at once: if Febyella didn't forgive them now, they were finished. And Feby's face, pale a moment ago, flushed hot with something closer to fury than

grief.

Whatever this had been — whatever performance of shared memory and old photographs was meant to buy her forgiveness — Alex had just torn it apart with a single sheet of paper.

Marta and the others dropped to their knees and crowded toward her.

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Ket

"Feby, please. We didn't want any of this. Rael scammed us too - all of us. He said he'd invest the money and double it so that when you came of age we could give it back to you twofold. The business failed. We

lost everything with it." Marta's composure cracked for the first time all evening.

"It's true," Adeline said. "My share went to him too. He promised to double it. It's gone."

Leon and Wilhelmina nodded, echoing weakly: "Yes. Yes that's exactly what happened."

Alex exhaled

Slowly and looked back down at the paper. "Rael's money went into the business - that part's true. But Marta's went into a house renovation. Adeline's went to a younger man. Leon's went to sports

Wilhelmina's went to parties

and jewelry. There's a full accounting here, if anyone wants to explain which of you actually lost money in 'business.'"

Four faces went the color of chalk, staring at Alex like they wanted him dead.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 709[1,326 words]

Alex didn't raise his voice. He never needed to.

"Febyella." Something in the flatness of it made even Marta go still. "You mustn't forgive them. Not for this. Not tonight."

"Give them an inch now, and they'll spend the rest of your life proving you were right

to give it — and wrong to think it meant anything changed. Let them answer first. Let them pay for what they took before you decide whether to carry it for them."

Nobody in the room breathed.

Then Marta broke - no dignity left to spend, no register left to retreat into.

She went down on her knees in front of her granddaughter, gloved hands closing over Feby's, and the others followed like the gesture was contagious.

Adeline pressed her face to the back of Feby's hand.

Leon kept saying sorry, sorry, sorry, the word worn smooth.

Wilhelmina just held on, shaking, silent.

Their lives depended on one word from her.

Feby stood rigid in the middle of it, breathing carefully. She did not sit back down. "This is his doing." Marta didn't look at Alex. She looked at Feby, which was worse.

"Do you understand what's happening in this room? A man with no name, no House, no family of his own has spent weeks turning you against the only blood you have left. He produces documents like a magistrate. He decides — out loud - whether you're allowed to forgive your own grandmother. Look at yourself. You were about to say the word, and he stopped it in your throat like he owns it."

"He doesn't want you to have a family, sweetheart." Adeline's hands tightened.

"Of course he doesn't. If you have us, you don't need him quite so badly, do you? Send him away. Just for tonight. Come home, and let us be a family again without him standing over your shoulder telling you who to trust."

"This is family business, Febyella." Leon found his old confidence in the new argument, the way a man finds his footing on ground he recognizes.

"We're begging you. Not him. You. He doesn't come."

"Your father—" Adeline's voice cracked, not performance this time. Or not only.

"Before he died, he made me promise. Don't let our daughter grow up without family. He wanted the two houses mended. That was the last thing he ever asked of me, and I've failed it every year since. I'm asking you now - let me keep just this one promise before I die too."

Feby's face crumpled. Four years of Rydell cruelty had never once cracked her. This did — straight through, to the small handful of true things she had left of her father, and the wish that any of it could still be honored.

"All right." Her voice came out very small. "I'll come. Just for tonight."

She turned toward the kitchen, already trying to arrange the next hour so it wouldn't cost him anything. "Alex can stay here. This is his home too, I want him to—"

"Sweetheart." Adeline's voice cut in, gentle and immovable. "It's already too much, giving a roof to a man who is nobody. We're being honest, the way you asked us to be tonight. Let the flat go for one night. Let all of it go. Come home."

"We'll find you someone properly suited." Marta rose, dry-eyed again, the matriarch reassembling in real time.

"You're Head Supervisor of the Reagent Group. You could have any name in this city standing at your door within a week, if you weren't spending your evenings defending a man who unloads crates. He's not building your future, Febyella. He's the reason it's taking so long to arrive."

Alex looked at her.

She didn't look back — not for longer than a heartbeat. Not he stays. Not I'm not leaving without him. Not even a private word meant only for him.

She looked at her mother's hands around hers, her grandmother upright and waiting by the door, and she said nothing at all.

Not agreement. Not refusal. A silence with no edges — the silence of a woman asked to choose and finding her mouth wouldn't do either.

He watched her not choose him. Something in his chest closed like a ledger finally balancing to zero. There was nothing left here that needed him to stay.

He reached into his coat and drew out a small tile — not his identity tile, its twin.

The one from Third Street, kept ever since in the pocket closest to his ribs, for reasons he'd never once let himself examine.

FEBYELLA STEINMEYER, SPONSOR. ALEXANDER LEONHART, PROVISIONAL — BOUND, BETROTHAL CLASS.

Her seal. Still faintly warm with the wax of a night she'd pressed her thumb to it in a cold station lobby

and told a bored sergeant this e

is going to be my husband

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without once checking whether it was true yet.

He turned it over once. Nobody moved.

Then he did to it what he'd once done to a mage's killing spell in a farmhouse yard opened his hand and let it come apart.

The binding drained out of the little stone like light leaving a dying coal, until nothing was left but an ordinary gray chip.

A woman had staked her whole name on a stranger, and now it weighed less than a coin.

"There." He said it quietly, to no one in particular. "Debt cleared."

He set it on the table among the photographs- a man laying down a bill, paid in full — and didn't look at her again on his way to the door. He'd already spent exactly as long looking at her as he meant to let it cost him.

He found Beatrix at the tower past midnight. Two weeks, and she'd never once been anywhere else when he actually needed her.

"I want to move to the Empire."

"Not possible. Not from anyone I've ever known." She didn't even look up. "The best you'll manage is the next country over."

"That works. How do I get there?"

"Easy." She pulled a slim map-tile from her desk and let it bloom to light between them. "We're the United States of Magic, Chairman. Arcanum's one state among many. New Avalon's the capital."

"And the next country?"

"The Dominion of Beasts." Her finger traced a border south and east, into territory drawn in a wilder hand.

"Sister states. Open crossing, papers in order." She looked up. "It touches the Empire's own border, past what the maps call the Feral Line Nobody I trust has walked further than that and come back to draw the rest."

"I want to be there."

"I can help you." The map dimmed. "We had a post there once — Anders Ford,

Dominion side. Sold magical items to the locals. Collapsed last year, competitors ate it alive."

She studied him a long moment. "I've been meaning to reopen it. One city, one

small branch. Gives you an official reason to be there. From that, you build whatever comes next."

"I'll take it," Alex said, before the offer finished settling in the air.

Beatrix nodded. "Tomorrow morning. First airplane out."

The next day, Febyella returned from the mansion to an empty apartment.

No one was waiting for her.

The silence felt the same as it had before Alex — that familiar, heavy emptiness. But after him, it cut deeper.

The space where he used to sit, the faint trace of his presence still clinging to the air, made the loneliness sharper, more painful.

She stood in the middle of the room for a long time, unsure whether what she was doing was right or wrong. All she knew was that the quiet no longer felt neutral. It felt like something had been taken from her.

Far away, Alex finally stepped out of the airplane into the Dominion of Beasts.

He stopped short.

Above him, the sky was alive - great winged beasts soared in slow, powerful arcs, their shadows sweeping across the ground.

On the streets below, creatures of every size and shape moved freely among the people, some padding along the roads as if they belonged there, others watching with intelligent, glowing eyes.

The air itself felt different, thick with wild magic and the scent of something ancient.

This was no longer the world he knew.

This was something new.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 710[1,170 words]

The airport wasn't a terminal. It was a stone platform open to the sky — and before Alex caught the smell of wild magic Beatrix had promised him, a shadow slid across the tarmac, three full seconds ahead of the sound.

He looked up. Wings longer than the runway banked once over the rooftops and vanished, unhurried, like a hawk over a field it already owned.

Nobody else looked up.

A woman walked past with a fox-sized creature draped over her shoulder like a scarf. Six eyes blinked at him, one after another, as they crossed paths. A cart rattled by — something ox-shaped and beetle-plated, hauling crates, answering its handler in clicks that weren't quite a language.

This city was built around something Alex didn't have a name for yet. He figured he'd have one by nightfall.

Beatrix's directions took him through the merchant quarter and down into streets that got older with every block - buildings sagging, signage faded, the crowd thinning to nothing. Willowmere, the locals called it. The tail end of the old caravan road, where it dead-ended into the Feral Line. Cheap rent. He'd learn why.

He found the shop by the hole it left in the street.

Every other storefront on the block had something alive chained in the window- advertisement, service, both. His had nothing. Boarded glass. A sign hanging by one chain — REAGENT Branch - swinging just enough to mark time like a clock nobody had bothered to stop.

The spare key waited exactly where Beatrix said it would, under a loose paving stone by the back door. That told him everything about how quietly this branch had actually died.

He let himself in.

Dust. A payment-tile gone dark. Shelves stripped to bare wood. In the back room, ledgers had gone soft with damp, the last column of numbers trailing off mid-row- like whoever was writing them had stood up one day and never come back to finish.

A voice cut in from the alley door. "You're not supposed to be in there."

A woman stood in the frame, sixty-some, sleeves shoved to the elbow, a crate braced on one hip. She looked him over the way this whole city seemed to — already three conclusions ahead of him.

"I own it," Alex said. "As of this morning."

"That's what the last two said." She set the crate down hard. "Hargrove's men. Walked in, poked around, did the math on rebuilding a name Hargrove spent a year burying — and decided it wasn't worth the trouble." A humorless almost-smile. "You'll last a week."

Alex did not know that.

The reagent group had been struggling for two years.

Maybe at one point the Beatrix family, her uncle for sure, had even considered taking over the shop or selling it off-but after a closer look they found nothing left that was worth the trouble.

"I'm not Hargrove's people."

"Then you're worse. You're new." The almost-smile again. "Monica. Ran the counter here six years, before it went under. Noodle stall's mine now, next door - if you're hungry and not picky."

That's when he heard it. A sound from the yard out back-low, wet, barely there. Breathing through something broken.

Monica's face changed. "Leave that be. It bites."

He went anyway.

Chained to a post in the weed-choked yard was something that might have once been magnificent — a massive dog, shoulder-high, with a heavy frame and fangs like carved bone.

Half its bristled fur had gone the gray-black of old ash. It lay on its side in a hollow worn into the dirt, breathing the shallow way of a creature that had stopped expecting anyone to come.

"Cinder hound," Monica said, not coming any closer. "Guard-beast. Belonged to the branch, back when the branch could feed it. Hargrove's people cut the supply contract, and the manager just " She stopped herself there. "Nobody's had coin for a beast-heater. Nobody's had coin for anything, this past year."

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Alex crouched at the edge of the chain's reach. The hound's eye rolled toward him, dull past the energy it would take to even threaten him. He didn't think about it. Didn't ask permission. He reached into his coat, drew the roll of silver needles that had opened over a thousand hospital beds and one dying king's chamber he never spoke of, and found the matted place over the animal's heart by feel alone.

Needle by needle, his hands moved without needing his mind, feeding his inner

force down each sliver of silver — slow, steady, the way you'd bleed pressure from a cracked pipe without bursting it. He half expected nothing. Technically, he was still finding out.

The gray-black drained out of the hound's fur like ink pulled from

water

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not

t fading, draining, down through the needles and out along. its chain scarred leg, while his own energy poured in behind it to fill the space. The breathing under his palm shifted. Labored, then a heartbeat again.

The hound surged up so fast the needles flew loose and the chain snapped taut, nearly taking Alex off his feet. Monica dropped the crate.

"That's" Her hand flew to her mouth. "That's not - beast-mending doesn't work that fast. Not even contracted healers work that fast, and they charge like it's a coronation."

"Long story," Alex said. True enough. He was a God's Hand back in Estoria.

The hound shoved its scarred head into his shoulder hard enough to nearly knock him flat. For the first time since he'd stepped off that plane, Alex laughed.

Monica just stared — the way you'd stare at a number that refused to add up. Then, slowly, her expression shifted into something else.

"You said you own this place."

"I do."

"Then you're going to need a counter girl who already knows where the bodies are buried." She said it like she'd been angling for this deal a year and only just realized it was on the table.

"Because if word gets out there's a healer in Willowmere who can do—" she waved at the hound, now leaning its full weight into Alex's leg like it never planned to move again "—that, Kell and Bush are going to have a very bad month."

"I'm not opening a clinic for beasts," Alex said flatly. "Humans, maybe. Beasts? Definitely not."

He hadn't come here for that. He needed a way into the Empire - which meant staying quiet, gathering information, blending into the wallpaper. In Willowmere, he'd already heard, even asking the wrong question about Empire routes could get a man disappeared.

"Who knows," Monica said and walked away.

Alex looked around the ruined shop — dead ledgers, stripped shelves, that sign still swinging on its last chain out front — and something settled into place that had nothing to do with magic.

If this place was going to be his cover, it needed to look lived-in. He'd need help for that.

He'd barely started on the back rooms when the door creaked open again.

Monica walked in first. Behind her, an old woman carried a fox draped across her arms like a heavy, limp child.

"Healer," the old woman said, voice cracking, "please help my friend."

Alex rolled his eyes.

Which part of "I'm not healing beasts" had these people missed?